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Interpreting Maladies: The Necessity of Being Rooted and Being the Root

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When one arrives in a new land, one has a sense of wonder and adventure at the sight and feel of a landscape so different from what one has been accustomed to; there is also a sense of isolation and fear ; and an intense nostalgia is a buffer to which many retreat. (Uma Parameshwaran)

'Diaspora', derived from the Greek word *diaspeirein*, etymologically means "to scatter" or "to disperse". The term is applied to the dispersion of a set of people from their place of birth to another land. Although Indians have been migrating to different parts of the world since ancient times for trade and religious propagations, the large-scale migration and settlement began with the colonial rule in India when labour emigration was enforced by the colonizers. Since then, Indians have been migrating and settling in foreign lands for various personal and political reasons. Accordingly, in the present day, the term diaspora signifies "contemporary situations that involve the experiences of migration, expatriate workers, refugees, exiles, immigrants and ethnic communities" (Pandey 20).

The experiences of these people of Indian diaspora are an amalgam of both constructive and astringent experiences.

Their experiences range from trauma to felicitations, from nostalgia to amnesia. They have assimilated with the host society as well as insulated themselves. The impact they have made as well as the influence they have received in a multicultural society has either made a good reputation and brought pride to their nation or left them feeling marginalized and given them a fractured psyche (Pandey 32).

This conflict of culture, of identity, of belongingness accounts for the desperate attempts of the Indian emigrants to hold on to their traditional values, culture and most importantly, their family which ensure them that, in a far distant place, there is a "home" and "homeland" awaiting to accept and guard their sentiments.

In her debut work of fiction *Interpreter of Maladies*, which won the Pulitzer Prize in 2000, Jhumpa Lahiri, the U.K born, Rhode Island raised Indian, vividly captures the nostalgic memories and maladies of people from 'Bengal, Boston and Beyond'. Among the nine stories in this collection, seven stories attempt to explore the fears and trauma of Indian immigrants in America who oscillate between cultural polarities. These people struggle to hold firm their 'centre' - their family and values - in the Western society which constantly contradicts and challenges the culture they had once inherited from their forefathers. The other two stories are set in Bengal and probes into the predicament of two hapless Bengali women, one of whom is an orphan and the other, cut off from her family owing to political reasons.

To love and to be loved is elementary to human mind just as food, clothing and shelter are to the body. Family emerges as a powerful nexus in Indian society simply because it ensures the existence of somebody who needs to be loved and who reciprocates the love. All

nine stories in Lahiri's collection present characters who consciously or unconsciously crave for an adherence to a strong and stable root – a nation, a culture, a religion or a family– while longing to nourish and support a dependent soul within the familial institution; an intense desire for being rooted and being the root.

Rootlessness, is a search for home and homeland, a quest for true identity and culture. Diasporic studies in the postcolonial context have expressed serious concerns with regard to these aspects, with special emphasis on the predicament of the expatriates who were uprooted from their homeland owing to various inevitable reasons. The partition of Bengal in 1905, its annulment and reunion in 1911, the partition for a second time in 1947 and the Bangladesh liberation from Pakistan in 1971 are some of the events that forced a sense of rootlessness and being uprooted among the inhabitants of this region, most of them culminating in new places as refugees. "Within the field of diaspora, migration, and immigration studies, refugees are classified as individuals who have been granted political asylum within a host country due to being the target of persecution, state violence, retaliatory civil strife, political repression, or unlawful imprisonment or torture within one's country of origin" (Brazier 29).

Boori Ma, in "A Real Durwan", is a refugee from East Bengal who was deported to Calcutta following the Bengal Partition on religious lines in 1947. A sweeper of stairwell in the "host country", she remembers with pain that "the turmoil had separated her from a husband, four daughters, a two-story brick house, a rosewood *almari*, and a number of coffer boxes whose skeleton keys she still wore, along with her life savings, tied to the free end of her sari" (Lahiri 71). Above all, it had separated her from her "country of origin" where she had spent more than sixty years of her life.

Fear and anxiety, love and concern, empathy and understanding among people with similar roots pervade in the story "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine". Set in Boston the story has as its backdrop the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971 with Mr. Pirzada, a lecturer in Botany at the University of Dacca, being sent to America by the government of Pakistan to study the foliage of New England. It is during his stay in Boston that civil war breaks in Pakistan, the East demanding autonomy from the West. "In March, Dacca had been invaded, torched, and shelled by the Pakistani army. Teachers were dragged onto streets and shot, women dragged into barracks and raped. By the end of the summer, three hundred thousand people were said to have died" (Lahiri 23).

Mr. Pirzada's position is double worse for he has to acclimatize to the geography, culture, food and language in the "new world" while all the time desperately being concerned about the safety of his family members who were likely to be "members of the drifting, clamouring crowd that had flashed at intervals on the [TV] screen" (Lahiri 32). The rigorous attempts to uproot and separate people on religious and other grounds appear futile when Lilia, the 10 year old narrator, observes that at the time of crisis her father and mother, who were Indians, and Mr. Pirzada, a Pakistani, all appeared to be "a single person, sharing a single meal, a single body, a single silence, and a single fear" (Lahiri 41).

Cultural dislocation and attempts for negotiation are central to the diasporic subjects in defining the concept of home and home identity. However, in their attempt to adapt themselves to the host culture while retaining their own tradition, they develop a double identity and find themselves trapped between two cultures. The expatriates' desperate attempts to

become accustomed to a new culture often render them distressed with a grieving and guilty heart at their inability to uphold their culture and values.

“Interpreter of Maladies”, the title story which won an O.Henry Award for Best American short stories, is centred around an Indian American family on vacation in India. Mr.Kapasi, the tourist guide whom they hire, is an interpreter of maladies in a doctor’s office, interpreting the ailments of Gujarati patients to the doctor who was unfamiliar with their language. A self-educated man who could handle English, French, Russian, Portuguese and Italian along with Hindi, Bengali, Orissi and Gujarati, Mr.Kapasi as a tour guide and an interpreter, emerges as a cultural mediator. His infatuation for Mrs.Das and his desire to establish an enduring relationship with her reveal the hidden aspiration of people who cross cultural and national boundaries in search of better prospects in life, ignorant of the fact that “the shifting world and the shifting mind implicate an emotional, cultural and psychological identification with difference, distance and dislocation” (Zhang 55).

When immigrants find themselves entangled in cultural conflicts they often resort to their cultural roots for direction. Mrs.Das’ confession to Mr.Kapasi about her infidelity may be read as her dependence on Indian roots for a remedy from her predicament. “It means that I’m tired of feeling so terrible all the time. Eight years, Mr.Kapasi, I’ve been in pain eight years. I was hoping you could help me feel better, say the right thing. Suggest some kind of remedy” (Lahiri 65). The confession, however, comes as a shock to Mr.Kapasi, for he could never imagine an Indian woman being disloyal to her husband and going to the extent of rearing somebody else’s child within the family. Mr.Kapasi, the interpreter of maladies, rightly observes that it is not pain, but guilt that she has been suffering from.

“Sexy” too is a similar tale of love and betrayal. It is about the miserable liaisons of two Indian couples in America. Laxmi’s cousin’s husband is involved in an extramarital relationship with an English woman, whereas her English friend Miranda is drawn into a passionate affair with a married Indian man named Dev. The volatility of family values and loyalty in a Western society emerges as a dominant theme in this story. Apart from a sense of national uprootedness, the immigrants often become victims of cultural uprootedness as well, which manifest itself most severely in familial bonding, destroying the warmth and sense of security while being rooted in a family. Miranda’s attempts to imagine the native land of Dev and her desire to comprehend the cultural values there ultimately render her guilty for being partly responsible for betraying his wife. `

Immigrant Indian women, whose identity is already obscured in their patriarchal family, is even more frustrated in a foreign land where she has to confront, the trauma of dislocation and isolation along with racism and gender discrimination. “Mrs.Sen’s” throws light into the inner landscape of an Indian woman in America longing to return to her “home” which to her, purely means India, her place of origin. A childless and lonely wife of a professor, she is all the time craving for the busy life in India where she would be always surrounded by her relatives, all laughing and chatting as they do the household chores, wearing attractive sarees and gleaming ornaments whenever there is a gathering or celebration, and always lending strength and support in times of need. “At home that is all you have to do. Not every body has a telephone. But just raise your voice a bit, or express grief or joy of any kind, and one whole neighbourhood and half of another has come to share the news, to help with arrangements” (Lahiri 116).

The silence and solitude in the new land seem to be quite stifling for Mrs. Sen. Her incessant attempts to master driving, her practice of sitting on newspapers spread on the floor for chopping vegetables, her craving to taste fish from the seaside, her joy on receiving letters from her relatives, and her frustration at lack of occasions for wearing sarees piled up in the drawers evince the intense pain experienced by a typical Indian emigrant woman. In a strange land, surrounded by strange faces, being rooted means a lot to the diasporic subject.

Cultural uprootedness is often permeated by religious uprootedness. The sense of religious insecurity is quite evident in the words of Sanjay in "This Blessed House", who is disturbed at his wife Twinkle's inclination for Christian idols which she discovers with delight from within their new house in Hartford. "We're not Christian," Sanjeev said. Lately he had begun noticing the need to state the obvious to Twinkle" (Lahiri 137).

"The Third and Final Continent", is a record of the experiences of an Indian who travels all the way from India to London and from there to America until he finally settles there. Through this final story in the collection, Lahiri seems to suggest that though haunted by nostalgic memories it is inevitable for the diasporic community to acclimatize the mannerisms, food habit, accommodation, language and culture of the land where they intend to spend a major or entire phase of their lives.

While political, cultural and religious rootlessness form the backdrop of all the seven stories discussed above, "The Temporary Matter" and "The Treatment of Bibi Haldar" delineates the psyche of three victims of fate who desperately yearn to *be the root* to someone, a desire to weave dreams around somebody whose life is inextricably bound to theirs. In the case of Shobha and Shukumar it is their inability to accept the loss of their child at birth that disrupts the cadence of their life leading to estrangement and final separation of the couple. While Bibi Haldar's strange ailment is due to her lonely life with nobody to love or need her.

Each day she unloaded her countless privations upon us, until it became unendurably apparent that Bibi wanted a man. She wanted to be spoken for, protected, placed on her path in life. Like the rest of us, she wanted to serve suppers, and scold servants, and set aside money in her *almari* to have her eyebrows threaded every three weeks at the Chinese beauty parlor (Lahiri 160).

No wonder, she recovers from her strange ailment once a child, though illegitimate, is born to her. She no longer complains of her loneliness or predicament, for her life becomes totally centered on her son.

Whether it is maladies consequent to "rehomeing", as in the case of the diasporic community, or a case of total loss of those who render meaning to the concept of home, it is always a sense of nostalgia, cultural values and anticipation woven around one's family that propels his/her life ahead. The maladies of Jhumpa Lahiri's characters assert this necessity of *being rooted* and *being the root*, the absence of which perturbs the individual and annihilates the warmth of a stable family.

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