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In-Between Spaces: Diasporic Trauma and the Negotiation of Feminist Identity in Jhumpa Lahiri's Select Works

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Abstract: Jhumpa Lahiri, with *Interpreter of Maladies* and *The Namesake*, has established herself as a masterful storyteller and a prominent figure in world literature. Her works portray the complexities of cultural dislocation, making her a celebrated author in contemporary literature. Jhumpa Lahiri's stories explore themes of immigration, marital issues, motherhood, and the emergence of new women. Her narratives depict Indian immigrants grappling with cultural identity and belonging in the United States. Lahiri explores the complexities of marriage, revealing the tensions and disillusionments that accompany it. Motherhood is shown as a transformative yet challenging experience. Her female characters reflect the struggles and successes of women as they forge new paths, striking a balance between tradition and modernity. Through detailed storytelling, Lahiri illuminates the human condition, capturing the nuances of identity, relationships, and cultural dislocation. Her works provide deep insights into the immigrant experience and women's lives. This paper explores the multifaceted roles of women in contemporary literature, examining their experiences as immigrants, mothers, and wives. By analysing these representations, it seeks to illuminate the complexities and evolution of feminist thought, ultimately contributing to a nuanced understanding of the intersections between social justice and feminist validation.

Keywords: Diaspora; Feminist Identity; Motherhood; Marital Discord; Culture

Introduction

In literature and art, diasporic consciousness is often explored through themes of exile, memory, and the search for identity, reflecting the unique experiences of those who live between cultures. It also encompasses ideas such as exilic existence, a sense of loss, a consciousness of being an outsider, yearning for one's homeland, the burden of exile, dispossession, and relocation, along with the challenges of maintaining cultural ties while adapting to new environments. The lives of immigrants do not have straight lines. They live centuries of history in a lifetime and have several lives and roles. They experience a sense of alienation in the host countries. Despite their attempts at acculturation, they remain at the periphery and are treated as others. This consciousness can foster a rich dialogue about cultural exchange and the formation of hybrid identities, enriching both the individual and the broader society. Diasporic consciousness often involves managing multiple identities and the tension between adapting to the host culture and preserving one's original cultural identity. Migrants, says Salman Rushdie, "...straddle two cultures... fall between two stools" and they suffer "a triple disruption" comprising the loss of roots, the linguistic and social dislocation. (Rushdie, 279)

Jhumpa Lahiri is a highly acclaimed author whose works often explore themes related to cross-cultural pollination, particularly focusing on the experiences of Indian immigrants in the United States. Her narratives examine the intricate issues of identity and delve into the complexities of belonging and the cultural dislocation that many encounter as they try to balance their cultural roots with their new surroundings. Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* begins with a date, 1968, and takes the reader back in time to examine the tension between past and present—the novel deals with International migration, as characters move between events in Kolkata, Boston, and New York City. The novel explores the nuances involved without being caught between two conflicting cultures, characterised by their highly distinct religious, social, and ideological differences. It also explores significant issues of integration, assimilation and cultural identity. The diaspora depicted in this novel reveals that voluntary migration induced in them a sense of the 'other' in the host country, primarily due to cultural disorientation. Jhumpa Lahiri has used food, clothing, language and rituals to explore cultural diversification.

Do yourself a favour. Before it is too late, without thinking too much about it first, pack a pillow and a blanket and see as much of the world as you can. You will not regret it. One day it will be too late." (Lahiri 16)

And what about you, Gogol? Do you want to be called by another name? (Lahiri 59)

In her Pulitzer Prize-winning collection *Interpreter of Maladies*, Lahiri showcases a series of stories that highlight the struggles and the challenges faced by characters who find themselves caught between two cultures. The protagonists often grapple with the expectations of their Indian background while attempting to integrate and assimilate

into American society. This conflict provides a fertile ground for exploring the nuances of cultural identity, as characters experience both the comfort of their roots and the challenges of adaptation to a new environment. Lahiri's novel *The Namesake* further exemplifies cross-cultural pollination through the life and experiences of Gogol Ganguli, the son of Bengali immigrants. The narrative highlights the generational gap between Gogol and his parents, showcasing how cultural values and identities change over time. Gogol's conflict with his name and heritage serves as a broader reflection on the immigrant experience, which also reflects a more nuanced commentary on their struggles for identity, emphasising the challenges of balancing one's cultural background with the aspiration to belong to a new society. Moreover, Lahiri's writing style often reflects her themes of cross-cultural Interaction and challenging stereotypes. Her prose is characterised by a keen observation of the subtleties and nuances in human relationships, interwoven with cultural references that highlight the characters' backgrounds. This fusion of cultural aspects not only enriches her storytelling but also encourages readers to explore the complexities and intricacies of feminist identity in a multicultural world. For Lahiri, "Every visit was an emotional see-saw across continents and cultures." (204). Lahiri is an Indian by ancestry, British by birth, and American by immigration. She targets the Western audience by deliberately portraying the Indian American life. She also admits,

I learnt to observe things as an outsider, and yet I knew that, as different Calcutta is from Rhode Island, I belonged there in some fundamental way, in the way I did not seem to belong in the U.S. (The Times of India, 13th April 2000).

Jhumpa Lahiri's short stories delve into the complexities of marital relationships, particularly in the context of Indian immigrants in the United States. Lahiri's novels frequently depict communication breakdowns in relationships, where couples struggle to convey their emotions, desires, and needs, leading to misunderstandings, emotional distance, and conflict. This ineffective communication often results in unfulfilled expectations and strained relationships. In her stories, Lahiri skilfully portrays the complexities of human relationships, highlighting the challenges of communication and the consequences of its breakdown. She explores the painful consequences of infidelity and betrayal in relationships, often prompting her characters to confront the repercussions of their actions. This introspection can lead to a deeper understanding – a self-discovery of oneself and one's relationships. In essence, Lahiri's stories shed light on the complexities of human relationships, revealing the hurt and self-discovery that can follow infidelity.

Lahiri's stories often highlight the complexities of cultural and generational differences in relationships, where couples and families navigate varying backgrounds, expectations, and values. These differences can lead to conflicts and challenges, particularly when traditional values clash with modern expectations. In her works, Lahiri sheds light on the intricacies of cultural identity, family dynamics, and the struggles of adapting to new environments. Lahiri's stories often emphasise the significance of emotional intimacy and connection in relationships, revealing the challenges of forming and maintaining deep emotional bonds. When characters

struggle to connect, they may experience feelings of isolation, disconnection, and emotional distance. This theme emphasises the importance of empathy, understanding, and effective communication in cultivating and sustaining meaningful relationships. Lahiri's stories beautifully capture the messy, intricate dance of human relationships, revealing the tender moments, painful struggles, and profound insights that shape our connections with others.

According to A.J. Sebastian:

Lahiri, as the omniscient observer, applies the predicament of her characters to interpret the maladies gnawing at their immigrant life. She also attempts to navigate the complexities of culture and diaspora in each situation. Her stories, thereby, provide a powerful healing touch to immigrants caught in alienation, exile and isolation. (Sebastian 8)

Diasporic Trauma as Immigrant

In *Mrs. Sen's*, we witness the emotional turmoil and sense of insecurity that immigrants often experience. The character of Mrs. Sen is portrayed as powerless, navigating an unfamiliar society while being married to a husband who does not fully grasp her emotional needs and desires. She longs for Calcutta but feels trapped, like a bird in a golden cage, because her husband is unable to accompany her, and she cannot imagine going back alone. The narrative does not provide specific names for the protagonist; instead, she is referred to by her surname or title, indicating a more universal representation of her character. Lahiri thinks: "...for immigrants, the challenges of exile, the loneliness, the constant sense of alienation and the knowledge of longing for the lost world are more explicit and distressing than for their children". (An Interview with Jhumpa Lahiri by Arun Aguiar)

The trauma of cultural dislocation, along with intense feelings of loneliness and estrangement experienced by Indian immigrants in America, are significant issues explored by Lahiri as she addresses the challenges faced by immigrants in foreign lands. Her portrayal of the immigrant experience is deeply authentic, reflecting her desire to discover a sense of belonging amidst the complexities of cultural alienation. This collection by Jhumpa Lahiri can also be viewed as a feminist exploration when readers closely examine the situation of Mrs. Das, who feels trapped like a caged bird within her family ties. Although she is married, she leads a life filled with romantic ideals. However, over time, her existence becomes less romantic and succumbs to feelings of boredom and emptiness. What Mrs. Das shares with Mr. Kapasi relates to her search for relief from her suffering. However, this effort proves ineffective, as the interpreter fails to acknowledge her pain and questions both its validity and significance.

I am tired of feeling so terrible all the time. Eight years, Mr. Kapasi, I have been in pain for eight years. I was hoping you could help me feel better, say the right thing. Suggest some kind of remedy. (Lahiri, Interpreter of Maladies: 65).

The Treatment of Bibi Haldar revolves around a woman facing her struggles. The story presents a feminine perspective, showcasing women's capabilities in a society where men often take on an escapist role, while women emerge as courageous

individuals. Bibi experiences deep feelings of depression, lamenting her physical and emotional disadvantages, which she attributes to her identity as a woman. This narrative highlights the challenges faced by a woman dealing with the consequences of her disability within society.

For her service, Bibi received no income but was given meals, provisions, and sufficient meters of cotton at every October holiday to replenish her wardrobe at an inexpensive tailor. At night, she slept on a folding camp cot in the cousin's place downstairs. (Lahiri: Interpreter of Maladies:159)

Bibi Haldar is a character who upholds her individuality despite numerous challenges. When viewed through a feminist lens in the context of Jhumpa Lahiri's fiction, it reveals certain aspects of post-modern feminism, particularly concerning a woman's inner freedom and self-discovery.

Lahiri's *The Namesake* explores the complexities of Bengali immigrant life in the US, revealing deep cultural schisms and the hybrid existence of diasporic communities torn between ethnic ties and new identities. It explores the generational differences within the diasporic community. She addresses the challenges faced by the second generation of diaspora as they assimilate into the host culture, highlighting the dilemmas, conflicts, and uncertainties that arise in the minds of young individuals regarding their adjustments, adaptations, and integration into their new country. The character of Ashima exemplifies the impact of double marginalisation, patriarchal dominance, and the struggle for gender equality. She exhibits traditional feminine behaviours. Ashima's concerns about adapting to a new environment after the birth of her child highlight her maternal instincts. However, she manages to overcome her challenges and adapt to the new culture primarily for the benefit of her children.

... being a foreigner, Ashima is beginning to realise, is a sort of lifelong pregnancy-a perpetual wait, a constant burden, a continuous feeling out of sorts. It is an ongoing responsibility, a parenthesis in what had once been ordinary life, only to discover that the previous life has vanished, replaced by something more complicated and demanding" (Lahiri 50)

Moushumi is a quintessential postmodern girl who navigates and challenges foreign cultures more effectively than men. She exemplifies the thoroughly Americanised perspective of a second-generation female immigrant. She enjoys the freedom to choose a career and profession that aligns with her interests. Moushumi even has the opportunity to pursue a double major in French.

At Brown, her rebellion had taken an academic nature. At her parents' insistence, she had majored in chemistry, for they were hopeful she would follow in her father's footsteps. Without telling them, she had pursued a double major in French. Immersing herself in a third language, a third culture ... without expectation of any kind. (Lahiri 214)

Lahiri's novel, *The Namesake*, exemplifies the perpetual dilemma and ongoing struggle faced by immigrants as they strive to maintain their identities. Lahiri's works explore various dimensions of modern women's emotions, showcasing a fully

developed feminine sensibility alongside feminist perspectives. Unlike many other women writers, Lahiri is bold and straightforward, presenting a realistic approach to themes such as love, sex, desire, and relationships between men and women. As a post-modern writer, she establishes a new tradition in Indo-English literature. She addresses critical feminine issues related to oppression, alienation, class, and the human psyche as essential components of identity. This enables readers to engage with her texts from both postcolonial and feminist perspectives.

Marital difficulties

In *Interpreter of Maladies*, Lahiri's poignant short stories capture the fragile moments of marriage, where communication falters, including the diligent narration of infidelity, set against the backdrop of cultural displacement. With subtlety and depth, she portrays the intricate struggles of relationships and the difficulties of navigating love, loss, and identity in a foreign land, where the familiar comforts of home are distant memories. Lahiri's stories in *Interpreter of Maladies* reveal the intimate struggles of couples.

Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* collection includes stories like *A Temporary Matter* and *Sexy* that discuss marital challenges, such as communication breakdowns, intimacy issues, and infidelity. Through these stories, Lahiri provides a nuanced exploration of the complexities and difficulties that can arise in relationships, offering a thoughtful portrayal of the human experience. With empathy and nuance, she brings to life the complexities and vulnerabilities that make us human.

In Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*, marital difficulties are a recurring theme. For example, in the story "A Temporary Matter," the strained relationship between Shoba and Shukumar is evident through emotional disconnection, a lack of communication, infidelity, and trust issues. These challenges highlight the complexities of marriage and relationships in the Indian diaspora experience. "They sat facing each other on sofas in the living room, the dim glow of candles flickering between them" (Lahiri 5). This highlights the emotional distance and disconnection between Shoba and Shukumar, illustrating the marital difficulties they face. "He knew that he had to tell her certain things, things he had never told her, things she had never asked him to tell. (Lahiri 12). "This illustrates Shukumar's realisation that he needs to communicate with Shoba about their relationship and their feelings. "She wept, and he wept too, for the things they had never shared, for the years they had wasted" (Lahiri 19). It shows the emotional release and regret that Shoba and Shukumar experience as they confront their marital difficulties. Lahiri's portrayal of the complexities and challenges of marriage highlights the themes of communication, intimacy, and emotional connection. Shoba and Shukumar's relationship unravels after a stillbirth, leading to emotional disconnection and avoidance, but they find solace in nightly conversations during power cuts.

He wondered what Shoba would tell him in the dark. The worst possibilities had an affair. That she did not respect him for being thirty-five and still a student.... I cheated on my college Oriental Civilisation exam....It had happened over fifteen years ago. He felt a sense of relief now that he had told her. (Lahiri 16-17).

In *Sexy*, Miranda's affair with Dev underscores marital problems. The story focuses on infidelity and its effects, contrasting Miranda's relationship with Dev against her husband's neglect, thus emphasising dissatisfaction. The story touches on cultural differences and their impact on relationship dynamics. Dev was unhappy with his marriage, but he never considered leaving it. The woman he was involved with was seen as the source of another woman's misery.

He seemed to be lingering, waiting, along with the saleswoman, for her to say something. She stared at some bottles, some short, others tall, arranged on an oval tray, like a family posing for a photograph." (Lahiri Page 86)

Dev is clear with Miranda about his marriage but shows little guilt, calmly pursuing her while signalling a temporary availability due to his wife's departure, suggesting he is experienced in such situations. They are for my wife.' He uttered the words slowly, holding Miranda's gaze. She is going to India for a few weeks. (Lahiri 88)

Lahiri's characters, particularly women, grapple with the complexities of cultural identity, torn between traditional Indian values and the influences of modern America. This internal conflict often strains their marriages, as they struggle to balance between heritage and assimilation. In *The Namesake*, Ashima and Ashoke's experiences illustrate the challenges of preserving cultural roots while adapting to a new environment, highlighting the tensions that can arise in intercultural relationships. It illustrates marital issues through the relationship of Ashima and Ashoke Ganguli, focusing on the cultural differences within the immigrant experience. Their relationship is characterised by a lack of communication, resulting in emotional distance and misunderstandings. The novel explores the complexities of marriage, cultural identity, and notions of belonging. For Ashima, the marriage has been a gradual adjustment, a series of small concessions and compromises.

Ashima has accepted that there is no one to sweep the floor, do the dishes, wash clothes, shop for groceries, or prepare a meal on days she is tired, homesick, or cross. (Lahiri 32)

Motherhood

In Jhumpa Lahiri's works, motherhood is a complex theme. Her female characters, like Ashima in *The Namesake*, struggle to balance traditional Indian values with American parenting styles. Mothers are often depicted as guardians of cultural heritage, working to pass down Bengali customs and values to their children. This is evident in the way Ashima and other mothers in Lahiri's stories work to maintain connections to their Bengali heritage.

Without a single grandparent, parent, uncle, or aunt at her side, the baby's birth, like most everything else in America, feels somehow haphazard, only half true. As she strokes and suckles and studies her son, she cannot help but pity him. She has never known of a person entering the world so alone, so deprived. (Lahiri 16)

Ashima's experience as a mother in a foreign country is marked by feelings of loneliness and a deep-seated desire for familial support. Her maternal concerns and

instincts are evident, showcasing the difficulties of navigating motherhood in an unfamiliar environment.

Mrs. Das's character in *Interpreter of Maladies* portrays the complexities of motherhood, highlighting her struggles with maternal responsibilities, emotional disconnection, and guilt. Her distant relationship with her children and her confession of an affair reveal the challenges of motherhood, marked by emotional burdens, secrets, and disconnection. Her experience contrasts with traditional expectations, emphasising the difficulties of navigating maternal roles and the emotional struggles that can occur within families. "Leave me alone," Mrs. Das said, blowing on her nail and turning her body slightly. "You are making me mess up," (Lahiri 16)

This highlights her frustration and disconnection from her children. Mrs. Das's character embodies the challenges of navigating cultural identity and motherhood, as her Americanized upbringing clashes with traditional Indian values. This cultural divide influences her approach to motherhood, highlighting the struggle to balance personal desires with maternal responsibilities.

In *Unaccustomed Earth* by Jhumpa Lahiri, the theme of motherhood is vividly explored through Ruma's character, highlighting her struggles with longing for maternal guidance after her mother's passing, navigating cultural expectations, and balancing traditional Bengali values with her American lifestyle. Additionally, her journey is marked by self-doubt and questions of identity, both as a mother and as an individual, reflecting the complex emotional landscape she navigates. Ruma's experiences showcase the complexities of motherhood, cultural identity, and intergenerational relationships. "She was a mother now, and in certain ways this was a liberation" (Lahiri). This highlights Ruma's perspective on motherhood and its impact on her life.

Her stories, like *The Namesake*, *Interpreter of Maladies*, and *Unaccustomed Earth*, offer nuanced portrayals of mothers navigating these challenges. These works collectively highlight Lahiri's deep exploration of the Indian diaspora experience and the complex identities of those facing life between two cultures. These stories offer nuanced portrayals of mothers as they navigate these challenges. Jhumpa Lahiri's works explore the complexities of motherhood among Indian immigrant women, touching on themes such as balancing traditional values with modern influences, sacrificing personal identity for the sake of family, intergenerational relationships and cultural transmission, and the emotional struggles and joys of motherhood.

New Women

Jhumpa Lahiri's novels feature "New Women" characters who break away from traditional expectations, seeking independence, self-discovery, and empowerment. These characters navigate multiple cultural contexts, blending Indian and Western influences to forge their own identities and redefine what it means to be a woman. Examples can be seen in works like *The Namesake* and *Unaccustomed Earth*, where characters like Moushumi embody this new woman archetype, grappling with identity, family, and cultural expectations. In Lahiri's novel *The Namesake*, the emergence of new

female characters is evident in the portrayal of Ashima Ganguli and Moushumi. These characters navigate traditional Indian values and modern American influences, showcasing their struggles and growth. We find Aspects of New Women in *The Namesake* in the characters of Ashima Ganguli and Moushumi Gogol. In this novel, Ashima Ganguli evolves from a traditional homemaker to an independent individual after her husband's death, finding self-discovery through her new job at the local library, symbolising her transition towards self-discovery and financial freedom. As Gogol's wife, Moushumi represents a modern, well-educated woman with her own identity. However, her extramarital affair leads to the breakdown of their marriage, showcasing the challenges of balancing cultural norms with personal aspirations. Both Ashima and Moushumi struggle to define themselves amidst the cultural, familial, and societal expectations that surround them. These characters blend traditional Indian values with modern Western influences, creating new identities and experiences that reflect a unique blend of cultures. Ashima's journey towards independence and Moushumi's pursuit of self-expression showcase their struggles for autonomy and self-definition.

She believed that he would be incapable of hurting her as Graham had. After years of clandestine relationships, it felt refreshing to court in a fishbowl, with the support of her parents from the very start, and the inevitability of an unquestioned future, of marriage, drawing them along. However, the familiarity that had once drawn her to him has begun to keep her at bay. Though she knows it is not his fault, she cannot help but associate him, at times, with a sense of resignation, with the very life she has resisted, has struggled so mightily to leave behind. (Lahiri's IM:122)

Moushumi's character represents a new generation of women who are caught between traditional expectations and modern aspirations, struggling to reconcile their own identity with societal expectations. Her relationship with Gogol and her affair with Dimitri showcase her inner turmoil and struggle to balance her own identity with the expectations of those around her while pursuing personal desires. Ruma's character in *Unaccustomed Earth* by Jhumpa Lahiri represents the new generation of women caught between traditional expectations and modern desires.

Growing up, her mother's example—moving to a foreign place for the sake of marriage, caring exclusively for children and a household—had served as a warning, a path to avoid. However, this was now Ruma's life. (Lahiri 11)

This emphasises Ruma's difficulty in balancing her identity with the expectations of others, particularly her mother, who represented traditional Bengali values. Ruma's role as a stay-at-home mother and wife reflects the compromises she has made, while her inner conflict highlights her desire for independence and self-definition. Lahiri's female characters challenge traditional gender roles and redefine their identities, showcasing their strength and resilience in the face of societal pressures. Characters such as Moushumi in *The Namesake* and Ruma in *Unaccustomed Earth* navigate intricate relationships and cultural expectations, striving to create their paths and assert their individuality. They defy traditional expectations, forging their own identities and carving out their paths. Through their struggles and rebellions, they discover new

aspects of themselves, showcasing strength and resilience, each with their struggles and experiences, emphasising the diversity and complexity of women's lives.

Conclusion

The feminist author opposed male dominance, addressing societal taboos and prejudices. She depicts how women in general endure subjugation, facing discrimination as repressive subjects and gender-based oppression. This intersectional challenge made it especially hard for women to assert power within a patriarchal society. In conclusion, Jhumpa Lahiri's works demonstrate cross-cultural interconnectedness through their exploration of the immigrant experience, identity, and the interplay between different cultural influences. Her stories offer profound insights into the challenges faced by female protagonists as they navigate multiple cultural environments. Jhumpa Lahiri, while undoubtedly a feminist writer, also possesses a broad humanistic perspective. Her works reflect the challenging circumstances faced by contemporary Indian women, which she portrays with remarkable artistic skill and originality.

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