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Transnationality, Trauma and Emotional Estrangement in Jhumpa Lahiri's Selected Short Fiction

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Abstract

Aim: *The purpose of the present research article is to explore the interrelated themes of transnationality, trauma, and emotional estrangement in Jhumpa Lahiri's acclaimed short fiction, with a special focus on Interpreter of Maladies and Mrs. Sen's. Lahiri masterfully and intricately captures the psychological and emotional complexities faced by diasporic individuals who navigate multiple cultural landscapes.*

Approach and Methodology: *This study adopts qualitative approach based on close textual reading of selected short stories to depict fractured and ruptured identities, disrupted and destabilized relationships, and the nuanced complexities of intercultural existence. The research relies on secondary sources from literary criticism, scholarly articles, and peer-reviewed journals. MLA 9th edition citation style is followed throughout.*

Outcome: *The analysis reveals that characters such as Mrs. Das and Mrs. Sen embody the deep psychological conflict between cultural heritage and the pressures of assimilation. Mrs. Das, though ethnically Indian, experiences a profound sense of estrangement in her role as an Indian-American tourist, while Mrs. Sen, as a recent immigrant, struggles with emotional detachment from her immediate environment in America*

Conclusion: *In both Interpreter of Maladies and Mrs. Sen's, Jhumpa Lahiri poignantly explores the emotional toll of cultural displacement. Her narratives illuminate the silent, often invisible wounds inflicted by migration, where the idea of home becomes ironically fragmented and personal identity remains suspended between two worlds.*

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Lahiri, born in London and brought up in the United States, represents a transnational generation shaped by multicultural influences. Like other diasporic writers such as V.S. Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, Anita Desai, Kiran Desai, and Nirad C. Chaudhuri, she portrays characters caught between the conflicting demands of their ancestral roots and adopted homelands. Her characters often experience deep nostalgia, and wrestles with feelings of loss as they handle the challenges of displacement and attempt at assimilation in unfamiliar cultural settings. In her debut short story collection, Lahiri interrogates the identity of culturally displaced Indians, portraying them as individuals "mourning for the homeland left behind" (Shalini 77).

Her collection *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) explores the tensions between Indian and Western values, with particular attention to the subtle psychological struggles of immigrant families. *Mrs. Sen's* and the title story *Interpreter of Maladies* provide penetrating insights into the sense of *not-belonging*, emotional stagnation, and isolation experienced by *South Asian immigrants* in America. Her *first* collection of short fiction, Interpreter *of Maladies*, bagged 2000 Pulitzer Prize for fiction. The anthology is possessed of the core stories like '*A Temporary Matter,' Interpreter of Maladies,' 'Mrs. Sen's, 'The Blessed House,' and 'The Third and Final Continent*,' showcasing mainly the themes of 'diaspora, communication breakdown, cultural identity, emotional isolation.' Her next collection of short fiction is 2008 *Unaccustomed Earth*, structured into two parts: part I- consisting of *five* independent short stories, and part II-including *three* interconnected stories about Hema and Kaushik. The most notable stories of the collection are-'*Unaccustomed Earth,' 'Only Goodness,' and 'Hema and Kaushik' (a trilogy consisting of 'Once in a Lifetime,' 'Year's End,' and 'Going Ashore,')*. This collection highlights thematic concerns such as generational gaps, dislocation, love, loss, and cross-cultural experiences. Lahiri's recent short story collection, originally published in Italian in 2022 as *Racconti Romani* (*Roman Stories*), was translated into English in 2023 by Jhumpa Lahiri and Todd Portnowitz. The stories explore themes of urban alienation, identity in contemporary Rome, and quiet discontent, reflecting Lahiri's creative reinvention as a writer in the Italian language.

There is no denying the fact that global migration has intensified cultural interactions but also it has caused increased alienation and identity crises among immigrants. In literature, this condition is often expressed through themes of *displacement*, *emotional disconnection*, and *cultural trauma*, especially in diasporic narratives. Jhumpa Lahiri, a significant voice in contemporary Indian-American literature, articulates these internal and external dislocations with remarkable sensitivity. Her Pulitzer Prize-winning short fiction collection *Interpreter of Maladies* captures the

intricate dynamics of diasporic identity, emotional isolation, and fractured communication. Through subtle character portrayals and evocative prose, Lahiri explores the lives of Indian immigrants and expatriates caught in the web of cultural estrangement and personal misconnection. This paper presents a critical interpretation of the key stories, emphasizing Lahiri's thematic concerns with *displacement, gendered silence, emotional distance,* and cultural trauma while embedding long quotations to deepen textual engagement.

Character analysis involves both *descriptive and psychological exploration*, highlighting the salient traits of literary figures along with the causes of their behavioural deviations and the resolutions offered within the narrative. The most apparent theme across the stories is that of cultural displacement. Lahiri's characters often straddle two worlds—India and America—without fully belonging to either. This is especially true in stories like *Interpreter of Maladies* and "*Mrs. Sen's*" etc. In the case of Jhumpa Lahiri's short story *"Interpreter of Maladies"*, character analysis brings into focus both national and transnational figures. These characters are aptly referred to as "transplants" by Domenico Starnone in the preface to the collection (*Preface*, Starnone). Lahiri, a celebrated diasporic writer, places her characters under a critical lens, revealing the complexities of identity, alienation, and cultural dislocation.

Mr. Kapasi, next to the central figures—Mr. and Mrs. Das-- in *Interpreter of Maladies*, dominates the narrative, even as transnational character leaves a significant imprint on the storyline. He emerges as a *multifaceted character*, whose life is marked by economic hardship, emotional dissatisfaction, and subdued aspirations. Burdened by the responsibilities of a larger-than-desired family and a loveless marriage, Mr. Kapasi carries the prickly weight of unmet expectations and emotional isolation. Mr. Kapasi, himself a displaced soul trapped in a loveless marriage, momentarily fantasizes a connection with Mrs. Das. However, the moment is fleeting and dissolves into disillusionment, and reveals the fragility of emotional connections in a culturally dislocated context. Her confession is less a plea for help and more an *'emotional outburst born of cultural confusion and personal emptiness'.* Lahiri writes, "She did not like it when her children fussed. She did not like playing tour guide. She did not like India" (Lahiri 65).

Initially employed as a school teacher, his earnings were insufficient to sustain his family. Tragedy compounds his struggles when one of his children dies of typhoid due to lack of adequate resources—a trauma that adds emotional depth and psychological complexity to his character. He resides in eastern India, in the state of Odisha, near the tourist locations of Puri and Konark. He seems to be a polyglot because of having skill of

communicating, " if given the opportunity, in English, French, Russian, Portuguese, and Italian, not to mention Hindi, Bengali, Orissi, and Gujarati" (Lahiri 52).

His linguistic heritage becomes his unexpected asset; as the son of Gujarati parents, Mr. Kapasi is fluent in Gujarati. This proficiency leads to a second job offer from a local doctor who needed someone to interpret for his Gujarati-speaking patients—an opportunity that pays him double what he earned as a teacher. Thus, Mr. Kapasi becomes the "interpreter of maladies," a symbolic role that not only defines his livelihood but also reflects his emotional detachment and passive engagement with the world around him. This is revealed during a conversation with the American-born Das family *en route* to the Sun Temple, as Mr. Kapasi casually shares the details of his week. The following exchange not only explains his dual identity as a guide and an interpreter but also metaphorically positions him as a silent witness to the emotional and cultural maladies of others, including his own, "You're a doctor?" "I am not a doctor. I work with one. As an interpreter." "What does a doctor need an interpreter?" "He has a number of Gujarati patients. My father was Gujarati, but many people do not speak Gujarati in this area, including the doctor. And so, the doctor asked me to work in his office, interpreting what the patients say." (Lahiri 50)

Mr. Kapasi's profession as an interpreter, though practical and necessary, is not held in high regard by his wife, who considers it beneath their dignity. Despite her cold indifference and emotional distance, he is compelled to continue in the role out of financial necessity and familial responsibility. In addition to Gujarati, Mr. Kapasi is also proficient in Bengali, English, and French—a reflection of his intellectual capacity and exposure. On Fridays and Sundays, he *supplements* his income by working as a tour guide and part-time driver, escorting visitors to popular tourist destinations in Odisha, particularly the Sun Temple at Konark. In *Interpreter of Maladies*, he offers a tour to an Indian-American diasporic family, comprising Mr. Das (referred to as Raj by his wife), Mrs. Das (called Mina by her husband), and their three children: two boys, Ronny and Bobby, and a girl, Tina. The family's foreignized behaviour and cultural detachment highlight the theme of dislocation and identity, which Lahiri explores through the interactions between Mr. Kapasi and the Das family during their journey to Konark.

As the story opens, the Das family is seen standing in front of Hotel Sandy Villa, looking for a taxi to visit the Sun Temple at Konark. Early on, the readers witness the couple arguing over a minor issue—taking their daughter Tina to the restroom. Mrs. Das, assertive and commanding, instructs her husband to take Tina, but he refuses by claiming that he has already bathed her, suggesting that the responsibility now lies with his wife. This petty squabble hints at a lack of partnership and maturity in their relationship.

As the journey progresses, Mr. Das is portrayed as emotionally distant and self-absorbed. He remains preoccupied with his camera, more engaged in capturing tourist moments than in interacting meaningfully with his family. He exhibits little emotional connection or responsibility toward his children, letting them misbehave or wander, and largely ignoring both his wife and Mr. Kapasi. As the author certifies his emotional and cultural detachment, "Mr. Das absorbed by his tour book, so it seemed like a private conversation between Mr. Kapasi and Mrs. Das" (Lahiri 50). His detachment from both his family and cultural roots reflects the shallow, surface-level engagement that defines many transnational identities portrayed in Lahiri's work.

Mr. Das's apathetic demeanour and lack of emotional awareness present him as an indifferent patriarch, someone who neither asserts nor nurtures. His character serves as a contrast to the emotional complexity of both Mr. Kapasi and Mrs. Das, highlighting the emotional estrangement and disconnection prevalent within diasporic families. In summary we may say that Mr. Das is emotionally detached, self-absorbed and avoids responsibility. He showcases shallow engagement with both culture and family and serves as a foil to deeper characters like Mrs. Das and Mr. Kapasi.

The story revolves around Mr. and Mrs. Das, a second-generation Indian-American couple on a tour in India with their children, and Mr. Kapasi, their local guide. Beneath the tourist-like detachment lies an undercurrent of cultural displacement. Mrs. Das, although *ethnically* Indian, is *culturally* Western and feels no emotional or spiritual connection to India. Her marriage is sterile, and she confesses an extramarital affair with indifference, and seeks absolution from Mr. Kapasi, who becomes a surrogate interpreter of emotional suffering

Mrs. Das, referred to as Mina by her husband, is best understood as a representation of psychological trauma, deeply rooted in emotional estrangement, marital dissatisfaction, and diasporic dislocation. Though she appears superficially casual and indifferent, her inner world is marked by guilt, detachment, and a profound sense of disconnection—from her children, her husband, and even herself. Throughout the narrative, Mrs. Das exhibits emotional apathy, showing little affection for her family and remaining distant during their interactions. Her confession of infidelity to Mr. Kapasi is not a plea for forgiveness or empathy, but rather an act of *emotional catharsis*—an attempt to unburden a secret that she has carried for eight years. She admits that not even her friends or her husband know about her affair, suggesting a prolonged emotional isolation. Her trauma is not driven by *cultural conflict* alone but is more personal, psychological, and marital.

She chooses Mr. Kapasi, a near-stranger, as her confessor or as her tool, hoping that he might understand her pain or offer some form of insight. However, Mr. Kapasi fails to grasp her metaphoric language and emotional depth, leading to further disappointment. The conversation between the two in the taxi, while her husband takes the children sightseeing, reveals the extent of her internal suffering. The following powerful confession encapsulates her psychological numbness and crisis of identity. Her "urge to throw everything away" is symbolic of her desire to escape the burdens of a life built on secrets and emotional voids. Mrs. Das ultimately represents a woman trapped between roles that she never fully embraced, and her trauma manifests not through dramatic breakdown but through quiet disconnection and suppressed despair:

> About what I've just told you. About my secret, (Bobby is not Raj's son), about how terrible it makes me feel. I feel terrible looking at my children, and at Raj, always terrible. I have terrible urges, Mr. Kapasi, to throw things away. One day I had the urges to throw everything I own out the window, the television, the children, everything. Don't you think it's unhealthy? (Lahiri 65)

Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* is not merely a *collection of diasporic tales* but a powerful meditation on human vulnerability and the failures of communication. Set between India and the United States, the stories are populated by characters who negotiate dual identities and emotional complexities. Lahiri's minimalist style evokes a profound sense of loss and yearning beneath the ordinary surface of immigrant lives. The diasporic thematic preoccupation is evident throughout the collection, which provides a prism through which we can view the emotional and cultural negotiations of displaced individuals. In an interview with Lulia Leyda Lahiri herself notes, "For immigrants, the challenges of exile, of assimilation, of cultural miscommunication, are all heightened by the simple struggle to feel heard and understood. This is the loneliness that interests me."

In the title story, *"Interpreter of Maladies,"* Mr. Kapasi, a tour guide and medical interpreter, misreads Mrs. Das's emotional outpouring as intimacy. He fantasizes about a meaningful connection, only to be disappointed. The gap between their expectations reveals a chasm of unfulfilled emotional needs. The following excerpt encapsulates the failure of interpretation—not only in a linguistic sense but also emotional. The "interpreter" cannot decode the emotional maladies that he witnesses, just as Mrs. Das cannot articulate the source of her turmoil, "The interpreter cannot decode the emotional maladies he witnesses, just as Mrs. Das struggles to articulate her internal unrest. When asked whether it is pain or guilt she feels, she quietly admits she does not know, and turned to look at the camera. The noise of the monkeys grew louder. "(Lahiri 66)

In Jhumpa Lahiri's short story *"Mrs. Sen's"*, the eponymous character, Mrs. Sen, emerges as the central figure whose emotional and psychological journey defines the narrative. Although the story is told primarily through the perspective of Eliot, a young American boy whom she babysits, it is Mrs. Sen's internal struggle and cultural dislocation that anchor the plot. Her experiences of isolation, longing for home, and difficulty assimilating into American society portray the psychological trauma that many immigrants endure in unfamiliar cultural settings.

Mrs. Sen is depicted as a newly arrived Indian immigrant, brought to the United States by her husband, a mathematics professor at an American university. Living in a university apartment, far from her homeland and cultural network, she finds herself emotionally estranged. As a childless housewife, her loneliness intensifies, and she attempts to mitigate her sense of boredom and isolation by babysitting Eliot, the son of a working American couple. Eliot, though a child, becomes a quiet observer of Mrs. Sen's psyche, picking up on her subtle cues of sadness, nostalgia, and frustration.

Mrs. Sen serves as one of Lahiri's most compelling representations of diasporic alienation. Her trauma is intricately tied to her cultural displacement and the stark contrast between her life in India and the United States. Her conversations with Eliot often reveal her deep sense of loss and longing. She frequently reminisces about communal rituals, shared customs, and a lifestyle grounded in collective care. Such elements are largely absent in her new environment. One of the most evocative expressions of her nostalgia emerges when she recalls the community gatherings in India. The following scene metaphorically highlights the vibrant collective spirit of her native culture, in stark contrast to the individualistic ethos that she encounters in America, "Mrs. Sen recalls how, during weddings or significant celebrations in her family, her mother would notify neighborhood women in the evening to bring similar blades. They would then gather in a large circle on the rooftop, chatting and laughing while slicing vast amounts—up to fifty kilos—of vegetables throughout the night" (Lahiri 115).

Mrs. Sen articulates the difference between Indian and American ways of life through her reflections on how people respond to emotional expressions and everyday needs. In India, especially in cities like Calcutta, she notes that one does not need technology to stay connected; emotional expressions alone are enough to summon community support. Her attempt to preserve her Indian identity through food and traditions is touching. The following excerpt reveals her deep-seated isolation, her clinging to culinary rituals as a form of psychological survival, and her alienation in a culture where community interaction is limited. Through the following statement, Mrs. Sen communicates both the economic limitations and the rich emotional connectedness

of her native society. In contrast, her experience in America feels isolating and cold, where communication is formalized and emotional needs often go unnoticed, "In Calcutta, Mrs. Sen explains, one doesn't need a telephone to reach others—just raising one's voice slightly, whether in joy or sorrow, is enough to draw the attention and support of an entire neighborhood and even part of another" (Lahiri 116).

Lahiri further emphasizes the cultural dissonance by invoking the Indian dictum *"Atithi Devo Bhava"* (the guest is equivalent to God), and she thereby underscores the traditional Indian reverence for hospitality in stark contrast to Western individualism. She suggests that Indian culture never allows guests or even acquaintances to leave without being offered hospitality. In contrast, such healthy practices are rarely adopted in Western culture—something that comes as a great shock to those who value love, care, and the collective good. Each evening, Eliot's mother routinely returns from her office to pick him up from Mrs. Sen's, and it is Mrs. Sen who never lets her leave without offering a snack or refreshment. For loving and caring Indians like Mrs. Sen, guests or even casual acquaintances are never regarded as a burden. The statement made here gets it underscored, "…but Mrs. Sen would not allow it. Each evening, she insisted that his mother sit on the sofa, where she was served something to eat: a glass of pink yogurt with rose syrup, breaded mincemeat with raisins, a bowl of semolina halvah" (Lahiri 118).

The term "transnationals" typically refers to individuals or communities whose identities, activities, and affiliations span across national borders. The irony of transnationals lies in the fact that while they seek prosperity and freedom in the West, they often encounter emotional exile, cultural dissonance, and longing for their homeland. In literary or cultural studies—especially in the context of diasporic literature like Jhumpa Lahiri's — "transnationals" often describes people who maintain ties to more than one country (e.g., immigrants who still engage with their home culture), and navigate multiple cultural norms simultaneously, with the experiences of hybrid identities shaped by both their native and host countries. In the context of Lahiri, characters like Mr. Kapasi or Mrs. Sen can be viewed as *transnational figures* because they physically reside in the U.S. but emotionally and culturally remain tied to India, and **s**truggle with assimilation and cultural preservation, illustrating the tensions between Eastern collectivism and Western individualism. As transnationals, Lahiri's characters often wrestle with the pull of their homeland's values—such as *Atithi Devo Bhava*—while adjusting to the norms of their adopted Western environments. Readers explore the irony of transnationals through the nostalgic reminiscences of the protagonist. Even today, countless Indians migrate to the West, particularly to the USA or UK, under the illusion

of better future prospects. However, when confronted with an alien cultural landscape, these imagined prospects are often shattered. Despite living in a seemingly charming American milieu, the protagonist appears anguished and emotionally suffocated. *Mrs. Sen's* explores the isolated life of an Indian housewife in America, where she struggles with language, food customs, and emotional connection. Her only friend is the young boy Eliot, whom she babysits. Her yearning for her native land, especially the absence of the social network she left behind, dominates her life, "Everything is there" (Lahiri 113).

Even the smallest tinge of homeland—especially news from Calcutta—fills Mrs. Sen with immense delight. When she receives an aerogramme from Calcutta bearing the joyful news of a baby girl born to her sister, her happiness knows no bounds. Eliot seems to sense her delight while she was reading the letter word for word, her voice and articulations getting louder and louder and seemingly sifting to key. The following description makes it clearer: "She was reading the contents of the letter, word by word. As she read, her voice grew louder and seemed to shift in key. Though she stood plainly before him, Eliot had the sensation that Mrs. Sen was no longer present in the room with the pear-colored carpet" (Lahiri 122).

She is possessed of a large number of saris of varying colours, shapes and sizes and designs. She used to wear them in Calcutta but in America she might have been Americanized which she seems not to love at all. The sight of her various saris makes her nostalgic and dissatisfied. She shares her catastrophic condition with her babysit, Eliot. Her Calcutta relationships think about her living a queen's life and highly technological social stature. Their demands of sending picture and scenes of her extant living standard tortures her beyond the proper limit. The following discussion pictures the whole of her sad and tragic scenario, "'Send pictures,' they write. 'Send pictures of your new life.' What pictures can I send?" she sat, exhausted, on the sofa of the bed, where there was now barely room for her. "They think I live the life of a queen, Eliot." She looked around the blank walls of room. "They think I press buttons and the house is clean. They think I live in a palace." (Lahiri 125)

In a sociological sense, *Cultural Trauma* refers to collective suffering tied to displacement, colonization, or identity loss. In the story, "*Interpreter of Maladies,"* Mrs. Das, though Indian by descent, is fully Americanized. Her alienation is not caused by migration or culture shock, but rather by emotional disconnection and a crisis of identity within her domestic life. So, she is not a victim of cultural trauma in the sociological sense, but her *diasporic identity* (Indian ethnicity & American upbringing) contributes to her emotional void and lack of rootedness. She lacks the cultural tools or familial support that might have helped her to process guilt and isolation. Mrs. Das represents

psychological trauma more than cultural trauma, though her diasporic identity deepens her emotional estrangement.

Similarly in the story, "*Mrs. Sen's*," the trauma depicted is more cultural than psychological, as it arises primarily from displacement, disconnection from tradition, and the struggle to adapt to a foreign cultural landscape. In this moment, Mrs. Sen's trauma manifests through the absence of familiar culinary practices, particularly the unavailability of fresh whole fish, which for her is not just a food item but a vital symbol of cultural continuity and comfort. In India, especially in her native Calcutta, fish is a deeply rooted element of daily life—ingrained in rituals, routines, and identity. Her nostalgic reference to eating fish "first thing in the morning, last thing before bed, as a snack after school" (Lahiri 123) signals the profound cultural immersion in food practices that defined her earlier life. However, in America, where access to fresh fish is limited and sporadic ("sometimes there was no whole fish available for weeks at a time"), she experiences a painful disconnection from a core aspect of her cultural identity. This deprivation is not merely about food—it's about the loss of everyday familiarity, the absence of shared cultural rituals, and the emotional emptiness of exile.

Her struggle to recreate the culinary environment of Calcutta in an alien land becomes a symbolic expression of cultural trauma—a form of mourning for the past and resistance against the cultural erasure that diaspora often brings. The kitchen, once a space of creativity and belonging, becomes a site of isolation, where even something as ordinary as preparing a meal turns into an emotional and cultural challenge.

Mrs. Sen feels profoundly lonely in America, deeply missing her native land, which was filled with vibrant sensory experiences. Unlike Calcutta, where every sound, smell, and interaction carried familiarity and warmth, she finds no such neighborhood in America. Her longing for home overwhelms her to the point of nostalgia and emotional breakdown, leading her to tears. Though she tells Eliot, her babysitting charge, to get ready to go home, she gets so lost in her emotions that she forgets about him and his readiness. Eliot, unnoticed, returns to the living room, "where he found her on the sofa, weeping. Her face was in her hands and tears dripped through her fingers" (Lahiri 125). This moment reveals the emotional cost of dislocation and the cultural isolation she suffers as a transnational woman caught between two worlds.

This study is relevant in the context of *global migration*, where cross-cultural experiences are increasingly common. It adds to existing scholarship on diasporic identity, and shows how personal relationships are strained not just by distance but by cultural disorientation. In a world shaped by mobility, Lahiri's stories are powerful commentaries on the psychological cost of displacement.

In both *Interpreter of Maladies* and *Mrs. Sen's*, Jhumpa Lahiri masterfully reveals the emotional consequences of cultural displacement. Her stories expose the silent, often unseen wounds of migration—where the sense of home becomes fragmented and identity hangs in suspension. Through characters caught between memory and reality, Lahiri shows that the true cost of diaspora lies not only in geographical separation but in the slow erosion of emotional connection and belonging. Her short fiction resonates with the quiet ache of longing, making the reader feel the weight of what it means to live between worlds.

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