



Diaspora, belongingness and nostalgia in Jhumpa Lahiri's interpreter of maladies

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Abstract

The present paper analyzes the representation of diaspora, belongingness, and nostalgia experienced as the central theme by the characters in the story "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine" from the collection of short stories Interpreter of Maladies by Indian American author Jhumpa Lahiri. It focuses on the ideas of diaspora, belongingness, and sentimental affection of Indian immigrants toward homeland while they are adjusting with flora and fauna of American phenomena. Diaspora, belongingness, and nostalgia are important concepts in the discourse of diaspora studies. In this context, it tries to figure out how Jhumpa Lahiri has portrayed the picture of Indian immigrants' experience of belongings and nostalgia to the homeland. The study begins with a description of the concepts as a theoretical framework of diaspora, belongingness, and nostalgia and how that has been represented along with displacement, cultural clash, identity, and alienation in the story. It analyzes the rhetoric of Indian immigrants such as cultural roots, memories, social behavior and norms which reflect the belongings to the homeland. These different norms make the Indian diaspora as a distinct ethnic social group in the United States. It concludes by giving how Indian immigrants still are affiliated to their homeland while they are residents of America.

Keywords: diaspora, belongingness, nostalgia, sentimental, ethnic and homeland

Introduction

The study examines the representation of Indian immigrant's belongings in terms of social, cultural, political, and their nostalgic affiliation to the homeland in Jhumpa Lahiri's certain short stories from the Interpreter of Maladies (1999)^[5] which is her the debut collection of short stories. The collection has written in peculiar style by presenting varied forms of narrative styles, different characters, and protagonists in each story, set in various places crossing territories, nevertheless, she presents it as a whole picture by representing recurring motifs and issues of the Indian diaspora resided in the United States. The alienation, cultural clash, displacement, struggle for settlement, identity crisis, and lack of communication among married couples are the major issues of immigrants that have been described throughout the stories. However, the present study examines the belongingness and nostalgic affiliation of Indian diaspora toward the homeland in the stories of "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine" from the collection of the Interpreter of Maladies.

Nilanjana Sudeshna Lahiri born on 11 July 1967 in England to Bengali parents, mother Tapatī and father Amar, who were the first-generation immigrants to the UK from Calcutta, India. Before settling in America, they had stayed in London for years when Jhumpa was a kid. Jhumpa's father, a university librarian, moved to the United States and settled in the city of South Kingstown, Rhode Island at that time she was only two years old. Her mother has worked as a school teacher. Now she is known as Jhumpa Lahiri is an American born Indian author who has started her career as a writer rather than simply a dedicated academician. She has portrayed a beautiful combined picture of Indian immigrants who have immigrated after the 1960s to the United States. They are Indians by their color, language, social behavior, dress, food habits, postures, and roots. They have been

meticulously striving to acquire the sensibility and commingle phenomena of American society, particularly by the second generation who has been born and brought up in America are called American born confused desi. Bahri (2013, 40)^[2] points out "If the 'mainstream' reader encounters the lives of others in these stories, the characters in these stories encounter mainstream American lives with no less a sense of otherness. The mutuality of this transaction demands recognition". Not only the characters encountered American lives but also, they became a significant portion of it and disturb the centrality of the Western phenomena that had been constructed in binary oppositions such as the West and East.

"The term diaspora", long used only to describe the dispersion of Jewish people throughout the world, has in the last 30 years elicited unprecedented interest, attracting the attention not only of the academic world but also of the media" (Bruneau, Michel; 2012:123)^[1]. A diaspora is referred to involuntary dispersed mass from its origin land to others, remarkably the banishment of Jews from the land of Israel and the exile of Greeks after the collapse of Constantinople^[1]. Diaspora is not a new phenomenon it has an old history but its connotations have been changed over the centuries and it has become a domain in which included a different form of immigrated mass who have moved from the original land to somewhere else in the world to find good luck in term of finance, living standard, safety, business, and education, etc. Diaspora means to scatter in Greek, but today we use the term to describe a community of people who live outside their shared country of origin or ancestry but maintain active connections with it. This term has included both immigrants and their successors. However, some people have lost their connection to their

¹ Constantinople was the capital city of Roman empire

origin land, others could maintain a good attachment to the land which their predecessors have been left long ago. William Safran (1991) has said six-point model to understand diaspora such as dispersal from the original land, holding of collective memory, myth, biased assimilation which will never be completed, in the host community, hope to return to original land, a recreation of homeland and endlessly reopen linkages with original land. Thus, the debate has started to qualify the criteria of diaspora and some scholars have widened up its criteria to incorporate its various connotations. "Some scholars offering wide, inclusivist definitions that contain 'immigrant, expatriate, refugee, sojourn, guest worker, exile community, overseas community and ethnic community in the semantic domain of transmigration'" (Tololian 1991: 4 5 quoted in Jain 2010:05).

Belongingness is a substantial component and dimension in the study of the diaspora which reflects an innate and profound meaning of diaspora. According to Roy Baumeister and Mark Leary (1995), "all human beings need a certain minimum quantity of regular, satisfying social interactions. The inability to meet this need results in loneliness, mental distress, and a strong desire to form new relationships" (Quoted in Hirsch, 1943) ^[3]. Indian diaspora community is struggling to get settled in the United States in which they are fatigued being lonely in a home, no dialogue with surrounded people and no social interaction that lead to isolating them into misery, depression and trauma.

"When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine" is a story of homesickness, longing to the home country and its internal political anarchy fueled up for Bangladesh sovereignty from West Pakistan rule. In this civil war, thousands of its citizens including teachers, women and innocents had been killed. The story begins with the entry of ten years of girl, Lilia who is the narrator of this story, born to the Indian immigrants. Lilia's parents had come from Calcutta to the United States and they settled there but they too much sentimentally connected to the homeland. Calcutta was a birthplace of Lilia's parents that signified by circling a small silver star. Lilia once had visited Calcutta but she does not have any memory about it. "As you see, Lilia, it is a different country, a different color," my father said. Pakistan was yellow, not orange. I noticed that there were two distinct parts to it, one much larger than the other, separated by an expanse of Indian territory (Lahiri 1999:26)". It shows Lilia's parents' affiliation with India. Lilia is observing the routine life of her parents and Mr. Pirzada, a compatriot who had come to the United States for research on the foliage of England for this he had been awarded a fellowship by Pakistan government. But the fellowship was not so generous when it was converted into dollars. So, he used to stay in a graduate student's dormitory and he was in need of help. On the other hand, Lilia's family was looking for compatriot so they used to search the familiar surname of their part of the world in the university directory. They discovered Pirzada who came from Asia, East Pakistan now Bangladesh, India's neighboring country. He was invited by Lilia's family to visit their home and he continues coming home for dinner, received well hospitality. But he was too much engaged with the affair of political anarchy, the civil war was going on in his home country in which his family including seven daughters and wife left behind in Dhaka.

On the other hand, Lilia's father was in trauma since he is gone away from his country and its social, cultural and

political belongings. He was deprived, isolated, disconnected from his familiar world. To get escape from the deprivation and to be connected with the home country's belongings he invites Mr. Pirzada his home daily for dinner where they usually talk about India and its politics, India's independence story and history. They also discuss on going the civil war between Bangladesh and Pakistan.

Lilia is a narrator and observer of this story. Since Mr. Pirzada coming Lilia's home he accustomed to Lilia. However, Lilia is born and brought up in America she is not too familiar with Indian customs, social norms and history. She knew about American history, culture and politics. However, she perceived the information, knowledge about India, Pakistan and Bangladesh from the long deliberation of her father and Mr. Pirzada. Her father had asked her, what exactly is your teacher teaching you? Are you aware of Indian history? These questions are reflecting that how much Lilia's father belongs to the home country. Lilia's father and Mr. Pirzada are daily watching Indian national news on tv to be informed about what is happening there. Mr. Pirzada is worrying and missing his daughters and wife. So, he writes letters weekly to his family in Dhaka but he never gets a reply from them due to post and other communicating systems were collapsed in the wake of civil war. Therefore, he was worried about his family, remembering them.

Mr. Pirzada, Lilia's father and her mother watch news about Indian people, the civil war in Dhaka and political issues on TV while they having dinner. After having dinner, they joked, narrating stories, sharing political matters instead to discuss the progress of Mr. Pirzada's research book about the foliage of England and her father's nomination for tenure. Meanwhile, they send to Lilia upstairs to complete homework and somehow, she listens to them what they are talking about. They were listening Kishore Kumar's melodies, laughing, playing scrabble on the coffee table, and arguing long up to the midnight about the spellings of English words. This whole scenario and in a way they are missing India and its culture that shows how much they are attached belonged toward the homeland and its phenomena. Lilia says, "I wanted to join them, wanted, above all, to console Mr. Pirzada somehow. But apart from eating a piece of candy for the sake of his family and praying for their safety, there was nothing I could do" (Lahiri 1999:34).

The motif of this story is to bring into our attention the belonging, trauma, depression, displacement and isolation of immigrants who have been displaced from their familiar world and how they are living in an unfamiliar world being far away from their family, nation and culture. The immigrant's misery and worrying have appeared through their daily lives, dialogue, social behavior, culture and connection among them that have been observed by Lilia. Lilia's father, mother and Mr. Pirzada seem to have been come from a family, the same country, culture and society, despite, the fact that they have come from different religions and Asian subcontinents. "Mr. Pirzada is Bengali, but he is a Muslim," my father informed me. "Therefore, he lives in East Pakistan, not India (Lahiri 1999:26). There was inherently a connection among them since they have come from Bengali lineage. "Mr. Pirzada and my parents spoke the same language, laughed at the same jokes, looked more or less the same. They ate pickled mangoes with their meals, ate rice every night for supper with their hands (Lahiri 1999:26). It is a picture of belonging to India and its culture.

They are enjoying having the company among them. They were sentimentally connected to the homeland and its memories. Mr. Pirzada talks to Lilia's father about the things happening in their home country but he never talks about his writing the thesis on the foliage of England for that he was there. He always engages with the memories of his daughters and wife. "I (Lilia) imagined Mr. Pirzada's daughters rising from sleep, tying ribbons in their hair, anticipating breakfast, preparing for school. Our meals, our actions, were only a shadow of what had already happened there, a lagging ghost of where Mr. Pirzada really belonged" (Lahiri 1999:31). Lilia imagines the misery, depression of Mr. Pirzada through that he was going. So, Lilia prays for his family should be safe and happy by having candy in the mouth.

After spending stipulated time, Mr. Pirzada back to Bangladesh and he posted a letter to say thanks to Lilia and her parents for their hospitality. Mr. Pirzada and Lilia's parents were not relatives but they just belonged to the same country, roots and culture so they have developed a kind of egalitarian relationship outside India in the unfamiliar world in which they have been experienced deprivation, isolation and trauma. To some extent, they have escaped from the feeling of trauma, deprivation and strangeness being come together. "To celebrate the good news my mother prepared a special dinner that evening... but I did not feel like celebrating" (Lahiri 1999:42). Lilia didn't feel that is something special, it was common for her. This feeling of Lilia explained that she does not belong to the home country of her parents as much as her parents are. She has born and brought up in American and she likes America. Lahiri has explained the dichotomy between the first and second generation of Indian immigrants. "Though I had not seen him for months, it was only then that I felt Mr. Pirzada's absence. It was only then, raising my water glass in his name, that I knew what it meant to miss someone who was so many miles and hours away, just as he had missed his wife and daughters for so many months" (Lahiri 1999:42). Finally, Lilia understood the pain and trauma of dispersed people from the birthplace to somewhere in the world.

Conclusion

The study has shown that how Indian immigrants are attached to the homeland even though they are far away from the homeland. To be in touch with Indian culture, people and social norms including food habits, music, the dress they have developed egalitarian relationships among Indians. It is a story of the first generation of Indian immigrants who want to be connected through practicing Indian culture, norms and listening to music and watching programs and news on the telecast. Through that to the same extent, they have strived to get a release from such pressure of trauma, deprivation and alienation in the stranger land. Simultaneously, Jhumpa Lahiri has presented the contrast picture of Indian immigrants between the first and second generations. The first generation is fondly attached to the home country while the second generation does not attach toward India and its culture as much as their parents are. Instead of that, more or less they are accustomed to American phenomena.

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