

Searching for Home: A Reader Response of Jhumpa Lahiri's "Interpreter of Maladies"

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Abstract

Jhumpa Lahiri was able to share with the world her first book, a collection of nine stories, *Interpreter of Maladies*, published in 1999. Brought up in America as well as her Indian heritage make her a genuinely interpreter of themes such as, cultural multiplicity, memory of homeland, the search for identity and the sense of belonging. Lahiri received the Pulitzer Prize in 2000 for *Interpreter of Maladies*. Ever since *Interpreter of Maladies* was published, she has been variously proclaimed to an “American writer” and “an Indian American author”. Her writings are described as “diaspora fiction” by many Indian scholars and “immigrant fiction” by American critics. Thus, it can be said that Lahiri’s fiction is a unique addition to the existing Asian American Literature.

This paper focuses on the various concepts of home. It exposes the sense of home from different perspectives as it appears in several short stories. The study relates the sense of home to literature in relation to human relationships and to the sense of place. We pose several questions in our efforts to study the sense of home in Jhumpa Lahiri’s selected short stories: Does psychological home have any significance in the well-being? – How does making a physical surrounding “home-like” benefit someone? And how does an immigrant make a house a home? What is the difference between physical and spiritual sense of home? All these questions will be examined through the analysis of Lahiri’s “A Temporary Matter”, “When Mr. Pirzada came to Dine”, and “Mrs. Sens”. In conclusion, the paper aims to show to what extent Jhumpa Lahiri succeeds in conceptualizing the sense of home in diverse ways and how she skillfully allows her characters and her readers to glimpse small perceptions into human nature while presenting familiar, everyday events in life.

Keywords: Jhumpa Lahiri, *Interpreter of Maladies*, the sense of home, identity, collective memory.

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Introduction

Jhumpa Lahiri was born in London in 1967 and raised in Rhode Island, in the United States of America. She is of Indian descent and her parents were born in India. Ever since childhood, Lahiri often accompanied her parents back to India, in the state of West Bengal. Being an immigrant herself, she deeply felt the importance of family bonds which tie people to their homelands. This rendered her a perfect interpreter of a cultural multiplicity, faithful enough to deal with Indian culture and tradition in realistic terms. Lahiri made a splendid literary debut with her first short story collection, *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), which won the Pulitzer and the PEN/Hemingway Award in 2000. Being the first South Asian to win such a prize, Lahiri has joined the best company of such distinguished winners of Pulitzer as Steinbeck, Norman Mailer, Saul Bellow, Ernest Hemingway and John Updike.

Lahiri claims that her stories in *Interpreter of Maladies* are “stories of Bengal, Boston and Beyond”. They reflect the problems of immigrants in the migrated land such as, alienation, the sense of displacement, exile, difficult relationships and problems about communication. Her characters vary from Indians and Indian émigrés to American-born Indians. Through her recurrent themes and motifs Lahiri reveals her estimable understanding of multiculturalism, sense of belonging and searching for home. Like her characters, she feels as if cut off from the mainstream. Her mind yearns for her “Imaginary homeland”. Actually, immigrants live in America but they still belong to their “home”. They are caught between the strict traditions they have inherited and the baffling New World they must meet every day (Sarangi, 2005, p.143). Just after winning the Pulitzer Prize, Lahiri admits, “I went to Calcutta... neither as a tourist nor as a former resident- a valuable position, I think as a writer I learned to observe things as an outsider and yet I also know that as different as Calcutta is from Rhode Island. I belong there in some fundamental way, in the ways I didn’t seem to belong in the United States” (Melwani, 2000, p.1).

Lahiri writes about how nostalgia produces disappointment in the minds of the Indian immigrants, and how they find themselves crumpled under the burden of isolation and rootlessness. There is a sense of loss of their cultural identity; therefore, the need for a real sense of home, which is the very core of this study. The paper deals with the diverse and dynamic meaning of home as shaped by many factors including the personal, physical, social and cultural. The interest of this paper is to expose a better understanding for the sense of home and to analyze it in relation to selected short stories of Lahiri’s *Interpreter of Maladies*.

In the first part of the study, a focus on home meanings enables us to examine Lahiri’s short stories clearly. Home signifies not only a physical place but also represents a center of activities, source of identity, belonging from the past, a goal for personal and social development, an abstract state of being, and a legal concept (Fox, 2007; Moore, 2000). At the same time, issues of homelessness and migration contribute to how we understand the concept of home. In the second, we consider how the concept of home is experienced by different characters in selected short stories by Jhumpa Lahiri in her collection “*Interpreter of Maladies*”. These stories show that while the concept of home possesses a deep significance as a space where habitual and thoughtfully created life goes on, there are many ways in this concept is dynamic and vigorous.

Generally speaking, “Home” is difficult to define as it has many characteristics and levels of meaning. It is not the same for every person. Many questions are to be raised: what ‘home’ represents for individuals of different personal, social, physical and cultural qualities? What creates the feeling of ‘home’? Is ‘home’ the place one lives, or is ‘home’ another place connected to his/her history, heritage, friends, family or country? Is ‘home’ defined by an internal response to place or by external circumstances? Therefore, “ The concept of home is of value as it uniquely encompasses the social, psychological and cultural aspects of domestic living including key processes and goal-making, which dwelling does not” (Dovey, 1985, p.39).

Some people think that home can reflect a context of dwelling that is dependent on walls, but it can also reflect a context of experience completely free of physical determinations, as when one speaks of home in reference to a state of mind. Others see that home can reflect a place of one’s own, or a place of shared belonging. The advantage of this is that the concept of home is not a fixed product, but a dynamic place (Guiliani, et al., 1988). Home can be a safe, secure comfort region, or a place of trouble and anxiety. In addition, home can be lodged in one’s subjective life as a place of memories. In some cases, home is a place of unconditional love where one is accepted for who he/she is. In other words, it is a place where the bonds between spouses, child and parent, brother and sister are reinforced, along with extended family members and close friends.

Significant life events, both sad and happy, learning experiences, and celebrations of varying type and magnitude, all occur at home. These are the bases for our memories of home and its importance to us, serving to saturate the notion with a sense of permanence and continuity over time.

If we look the word “home” up in Webster’s Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary we discover that it means one’s place of residence, or the focus of one’s domestic attention. The adjective phrase “at home” is defined as relaxed and comfortable, or in harmony with the surroundings. In all forms, there is a mention of either a directed focus on or an emotional experience of, one’s surrounding (Sigmon, Whitcomb, & Snyder, 2002)

It is universally recognized that the home is "physically, psychologically, and socially constructed in both 'real' and 'ideal' forms)" (Sommerville, 1997, p. 226). Many psychology theorists perceive that the function of a home is to provide shelter, which is attained by most individuals in the formation of a house or dwelling. Unlike this physical point of view, F.A Lewin sees that “the house is where we live, but the home is for the soul” (p. 356). That is, home is the non-physical aspects of a residence which occurs in a person’s psyche. Home then, is much more than a shelter, it stands for security and a social life. J.D Porteous (1976) identifies home as a secure refuge that provides the space and time for its occupant’s to emphasize their identity. For others, the concept of home represents “a center of activities, source of identity, belonging from the past, a goal for personal and social development, an abstract state of being, and a legal concept” (Moore, 2007).

On the other hand, Webster’s Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary defines a “house” as “a building that serves as living quarters for one or a few families”. As such, it is noticed that house and home have been differentiated with respect to the purely

physical aspects and emotional aspects of one's surroundings. While house is essential to establishing the meaning of home, yet it is not synonymous with home. A person can buy a house, fill it with his possessions and does not feel that he is at home, while another may do the same and feel quite at home. We pose several questions in our efforts to understand the various concepts of home in Jhumpa Lahiri's "A Temporary Matter", "When Mr. Pirzada came to Dine" and "Mrs. Sens": Does psychological home have any significance in the well-being? – How does making a physical surrounding "home-like" benefit someone? And how does an immigrant make a house a home? What is the difference between physical and spiritual sense of home? Home, then, is much more than shelter and it is not synonymous with house.

Regarding Lahiri's short stories, they are characterized by having self-contained plots and characters, yet they are unified in ways that bind the whole collection together as a complete entity. To begin with, her first short story "A Temporary Matter" is one of the important stories that centers on marriage and relationships. The setting is in Boston, a house on a "quiet tree-lined street, within walking distance of a row of brick-faced stores and a trolley stop, where Shoba and Shukumar had lived for three years." Lahiri has chosen a third-person omniscient narrative structure. In this way, she can present her characters from an outsider's point of view. It tells the story of the husband, Shukumar and Shoba, the wife, a young South Asian couple who have drifted apart after losing their newly born child.

The bad incident of the birth of a stillborn baby has created a gap between the mourned couple and now they live under one roof but only as strangers. They have become "experts at avoiding each other in their three bedroom house, spending as much time on separate floors as possible" (Lahiri, 4). At this point, "home" as the center of family relationships and personal identity was deteriorated by this incident. For Shoba, her pregnancy was what she needed to define her identity and purpose in life. With losing this new born baby, she loses her personal identity represented by "home". Accordingly, she stays away from the house as much as she can. She used to be an attentive housekeeper and enthusiastic cook, but the house seems to remind her of her loss. As for Shukumar, he has withdrawn from the world and seldom leaves the house. He stays in bed half the day, unable to exert the energy and concentration to make progress on his dissertation. Shukumar sees that Shoba treats the house as if it were a hotel and would eat cereal for dinner if he did not cook. Both of them forget the love which they have for each other. They no longer looked forward to weekends, never looked into each other's eyes and lost touch with one another in their relationship.

A mutant loss of electricity in the neighborhood for a week causes the separated couple to use the cover of darkness to exchange "secrets". Surprisingly, an intimacy develops between them during the one hour electricity cuts. It was only when the electric lights are off that they are able to tell each other truths in the dark that they had previously hidden as they eat dinner together. These secrets escalate from day one's revelations of innocent early dating mishaps to the final night when she announces she is leaving him and he responds by telling her about his moments holding their stillborn son. Although he means to assert himself and hurt her by describing the dead child, his confession seems to bring them together in sharing sorrow in a way that they "wept together, for the things they know new" (Lahiri, 22).

From the psychological point of view, this decline in the physical qualities of the dwelling accompanies the death of the interpersonal relationship. As the married couple descended into crisis, the centrality of home and its importance across both physical and emotional elements are increasingly threatened. This shift in meaning impacted on loss experienced and the subsequent conversion into feelings of grief and conflict. As a result “home” becomes the symbol of isolation, anguish and breakdown.

Lahiri uses a variety of small details to evoke the immense change that has taken place since the stillbirth of their son as well as the great neglect in which their own relationship as a couple has fallen since that tragedy. That is, the melancholy and alienation that haunts this house has become a refuge for the broken couple. A sense of home, warmth and relaxation is lost. Consequently, a sense of homelessness has prevailed. In broad terms, the meaning of home is made vivid and intense by contrasting it with homelessness.

As Dovey (1985) suggests, without homelessness, one would not be concerned with what home means. The importance of home is brought in opposition of disruption, loss, disorder, and trauma in people’s lives. This is applied to Shukumar and Shoba’s case. They represent a struggling married couple in the story. Shoba is unable to deal with her disappointment and grief at losing her baby, projecting her anger and frustration onto her husband because he was absent at the time of her labor. Her increasing workload and her search for an assertion of independence and identity determination extends the marital disharmony. In their case, it is possible to be homeless and at home at the same time as home has more to do with a state of mind and an emotional engagement than it has to do with a fixed place. Exchanging feelings of love and mutual understanding add extra meaning for “home” of which they are totally deprived. Mallett (2004) as well as Brah (1996) agree that “home is the lived experiences of locality. Being at home involves the immersion of a self in a locality”.

It is observed that yearning for “home” has taken a different path for each one of them. In grief, Shoba stays away from the house as much as she could, whereas Shukumar had withdrawn himself from the world and seldom leaves the house. This indicates that each one of them is looking for a real sense of “home” in his own individual way. “The sense of sharing, security, trust, marriage as a bond for life...care taker, protector and head- all are lost” (Varalakshmi, 182). That is, the whole situation is momentary lacking security, promise, happiness and future. For both of them, this “home” is a temporary home as their love is temporary as it fades by the third anniversary itself, their hopes of parenthood are temporary, their marriage itself seems temporary for “she needed some time alone”. Finally, getting close to each other and sharing feelings of anguish and pain create an atmosphere of maturity and sensitivity which heal a great of the wounds and bring the couple to a common sense of “home”. To sum up, “home” in “A Temporary Matter” acquires a new meaning, which is the center of deep, shattering and shocking moments for this married couple.

Lahiri’s expression of the sense of home continues in “When Mr. Pirzada came to Dine” (1999). The story is narrated by the Indian-American girl, Lilia who is looking back at events that happened when she was ten. The story is based upon the time of

Indo-Pakistan conflict in 1971. Lilia's parents, originally from India, miss their homelands and to ease their homesickness, they "trail their fingers . . . through the columns of the university directory, circling surnames familiar to their part of the world." This is how they found Mr. Pirzada, the main protagonist, who left his family in Dacca for a fellowship in Boston to study the foliage of New England. He suffers from the agony of separation from his family, wife and seven daughters who are in the homeland Dacca. Throughout the story, he was always anxious about the safety of his family during this war. As for Lilia's parents, although they are "genuinely proud of the fact" that Lilia was born in America, her parents still miss their home. Their desperation to invite someone from their homeland is derived from a feeling of being not – at – home. That is why they feel a sense of community in the company of Mr. Pirzada.

Lilia's parents come to America to give her the chance to receive a good education without facing the difficulties of life in India. Being an American – born child, she has a simple idea of homeland and is certainly bewildered by the idea of "home" that her parents and Mr. Pirzada have. We see Mr. Pirzada and Lilia's parents watching the events about war revealed on television each evening as they eat their dinner together: "Lentils with fried onions, green beans with coconut, fish cooked with raisins in a yogurt sauce...plate of lemon wedges... and chili peppers... which they liked to snap open and crush into their food" (Lahiri, 30). In the diasporic life, food is the bridge between the old world and new world, the homeland and the present land, the past and present time, and engaged its functions as the tool of nostalgia (Wulandari, 1). In other words, food is clearly an important part of the culture that binds them to homeland. For immigrants, food becomes associated with their identity. It induces a sense of belonging in a foreign land.

After the continual visits of Mr. Pirzada to their house, Lilia begins to understand how different her home life is from the home lives of her classmates. She realizes that the history she learns in school is not as relevant to her as it is to other students. "The absence of Indian history on the school syllabus makes it harder for a second generation child, born and bred in the U.S., to understand the political affairs in her parents' homeland, and thus, widens the generation gap (Ann Tan, 232). However, she tunes into Mr. Pirzada's anxiety about the fate of his family, and prays that Mr. Pirzada's family was safe and sound. Lilia had never prayed for anything before, had never been taught or told to, but she decided to share with her family this sense of belonging. While sharing the daily rituals of meals carefully prepared by her Bengali mother, Lilia clearly remembers "the three of them operating as if they were a single person, sharing a single meal, a single body, a single silence and a single fear" (Lahiri,41). Significantly, this sameness has stimulated her feeling of belonging to a same land and culture. It is noticed that although Lilia's parents and Mr. Pirzada are from different places, yet each of them calls different nations "home". Hence, "home" is not only determined by geographical or political aspects but also by emotional space and sense of belonging. In spite of all the independence, luxuries and comforts provided by their host nation, they experience a terrible need to meet and talk to people from their own land. They do miss the love and affection of their people.

Eventually, Mr. Pirzada leaves for Dacca and much to the joy of Lilia and her parents he was reunited with his family. The story ends by different sense of home as the narrator discovers her hyphenated reality at confusion with her other impulse for her

parents' homeland. She is finally aware of their desire to go back to "the lost origin" and "imaginary homelands" which are created from the fragmentary and partial memories of the native place (Priyanka Sharma 2). She comments on Mr. Pirzada's departure by saying, "it was only then...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, 42)

Regarding "Mrs. Sen's", it is about a Bengali woman who is never named. She is thirty-year-old, helpless, obedient wife brought to America by her husband. Being isolated from her family and friends and displaced from her "home", she finds the North American life distressing and hostile. The story recounts the difficulties she faces to cope with her new life, without her family. Like most immigrants to a new country, it took Mrs. Sen a long period of adjustment revolving around the issue of just where home is. She has been depicted as a baby-sitter for an American boy of eleven years named Eliot. Eliot, as many critics see, functions as a foil to demonstrate Mrs. Sen's inability to assimilate into American culture. The move from India to America proves to be challenging for Mrs. Sen. Ever since moving to America, Mr. Sen has tried to make Mrs. Sen more independent more like American women. Within the story, Mrs. Sen refuses to assimilate to American culture. This refusal stems from Mrs. Sen's fear of losing touch with her homeland. For Mrs. Sen, "home" means India.

It is to be noticed that Mrs. Sen earns the reader's sympathy with her antisocial nature and a growing obsession with food and Indian clothing, giving a sense of homesickness and her original cultural identity. Her choice of wearing Sari, a vermilion in the parting of her hair and a dot on the forehead indicate her passion for Bengali people, Bengali food and all possessions from Calcutta. She is a typical Indian woman for whom fish is the ultimate food. The repeated food imagery specially the "fish" emphasizes her feelings of displacement and yearning for home. In addition, her obsession with cooking fish, and the extent to which she goes in order to obtain fresh fish, are other ways for her to hold on to the familiar elements of her past life. The arrival of fish at the local store is greeted as a piece of news from home and she is pleased to hold it, to cook it and to serve it to her husband Mr. Sen. The fish in this story helps in reminding Mrs. Sen of her house back and holds great importance to her. It gives her a sense of closeness to her people and to her homeland that are totally absent in the American culture. That is, physically though she is in America but mentally and emotionally she seems to be dwelling in a world of the past.

Mrs. Sen repeatedly recreates through her memories, images of her life in India for Eliot. While sitting on the floor in her living-room and chopping vegetables with the traditional curved knife she has brought back from India, she tells him about weddings and big celebrations in India when women "...sit in an enormous circle on the roof of our building, laughing and gossiping and slicing fifty kilos of vegetables through the night... It is impossible to fall asleep those nights, listening to their chatter" (Lahiri, 115). Accordingly, Eliot understands that "home" to Mrs. Sen means India and not the house they are presently in. One would notice that "home" before immigration is described as a place of positive feelings and intimate relationships and relationships with different family members. This selective recalling of the past helps immigrants like Mrs. Sen, to build a home-like figure. Through Mrs. Sen, Lahiri has

skillfully presented the trauma of the loss of “home” which is illustrated in the nostalgic recall of the memory of home, and manifests itself as a home in memory. She is a representative of an desperate sense of loneliness and the pains of hostility suffered by the millions of ‘exiled Indians’ who try unsuccessfully to balance themselves between “home” and “abroad”.

Conclusion

All in all, the paper ends with the conclusion that “home” is not a static concept. It is multidimensional concept shaped by many factors including the personal, physical, emotive, social, and cultural. The meaning of “home” is not an easy concept to isolate. It seems to embrace an extensive sphere of emotional experience, sensory awareness, memory and feeling of nostalgia. Home constitutes, for most of us, simple rituals that link us with patterns of day life. The rituals that gather the family such as cooking, eating, sleeping and cleaning connect us to home, yet we pay little homage to those rituals that connect us to the diverse but collective experience of “home”.

The paper has demonstrated that the concept of home repeatedly evokes certain words and themes, such as safe, comfortable, loving, caring, familiar, understanding, memory, identity and belonging. Moreover, Lahiri has skillfully created a literature revolving around the Indian immigrations in America. Meanings of home are disturbed, changed and lost when families and partnerships fall apart, as in the case of Shukumar and Shoba. Regarding Mr. Pirzada, “home” is where one’s family is. In the case of “Mrs. Sen”, memory plays a vigorous creative role. Home exists through her memories, as it connects her with the past. It provides her with a sense of belonging and roots. What makes “Interpreter of Maladies” a timeless masterpiece is Lahiri’s powerful control over her craft which is combined with the use of clear, direct, well-designed and glowing prose.

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