Chapter IV

Reaching Out: Jhumpa Lahiri
Chapter IV
Reaching Out: Jhumpa Lahiri

Jhumpa Lahiri is yet another creative talent that has rightly drawn noticeable critical attention from different corners of the world especially for her preoccupation with the plights of women. She shares this basic concern with her contemporary women novelists writing in different languages and countries. In spite of the shared common grounds, the fictional canvas of Jhumpa Lahiri is wider than that of her contemporary Indian novelists in English and especially from the writers discussed in the earlier chapters. The set of women characters she dexterously designs transcends the boundaries of creed and countries. Her fiction attempts to reach out to the nooks and corners of gender dialectics in broader global perspective and intra-cultural transactions. She exploits the generic possibilities of fiction to systematically capture the cultural contact and resultant cultural transformations. Dorothy Spencer rightly suggests that:

Indian writings in general and fiction in particular have been regarded as ‘a major source for a systematic study of cultural contact and cultural change’ 1
Pulitzer Prize Winner for *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), Jhumpa Lahiri captures various aspects of women’s lives in her short stories. These stories can be viewed from the Indian as well as transcontinental points of view. Jhumpa Lahiri fictionalises complex human situations and emotions. We get in her novel and short stories engaging glimpses of the lives and relationships of people from Bengal to Boston. The stories delineate the lives of Indians settled abroad, their dreams and desires, their hopes and frustrations, and their practices and professions. Jhumpa Lahiri’s novel and short stories may not appear to be feminist according to the traditional feminist norms but her writings highlight a great degree of the female trauma and internal conflict. Lahiri’s women face problems of displacement, generational differences, transformation of identities and longing for homeland. Her characters transcend the feelings of confusion (of culture, language and traditions) and find new ways of adaptation and thinking as per the demands of the situation. Lahiri’s characters seek to reach out to the world, places, people, situations and circumstances. Most of the characters from *Interpreter of Maladies* play out a simultaneous existence in two cultures. They are Indians living in
America or India, or their lovers, neighbors, or landlords are, with, informed cultural chiseling, and their creator shapes them into sharply sculpted personalities.

Lahiri’s short stories powerfully present the social and cultural realities. They transcend to the larger universal nuances. She portrays the plurality of the lived moments and dynamism of everyday reality with efficacy through her potentially rich stories.

*Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) is a collection of characters from all over the world, which live with both, objectivity and compassion for life. Lahiri’s female characters feel isolated and alienated; the female characters face a very painful condition of living ‘in-between’. Aruti Nayar in her article “An Interpreter of Exile” rightly observes:

> ...Lahiri negotiates the dilemmas of the cultural spaces lying across continents with a masters touch. Though endowed with a distinct universal appeal, her stories do bring out the predicament of the Indians who trapeze between and across two traditions, one inherited and left behind, and other encountered but not necessarily assimilated.  

Jhumpa Lahiri deals greatly in generalizations in “Interpreter of Maladies”, many of her characters depicted in diasporics situations hold onto role definitions that American readers find
stereotypical of Indian culture. Such generalizations and their ironic reversals act as literary tools that add to her most sympathetic characters and her most poignant storylines.

Lahiri often engages herself with the reversal of gender roles, especially as they relate to husband-and-wife roles within marriages. Whereas in India, a strict set of guidelines dictates how husbands and wives should act both publicly and privately, in America, such guidelines are not as clear-cut and, oftentimes, are thrown out altogether. Lahiri's married characters often deal with confusions of marriage roles in relation to cooking, working outside the home, and bearing children. According to Lahiri's generalizations of Indian marital culture, women are solely responsible for cooking and doing household chores, as well as becoming completely domesticated with the arrival of children. Men are, according to such guidelines, responsible for working and providing their families with a monetary income.

Many of Lahiri's characters, specifically the ones in diaspora, must cope with new and sometimes shockingly different gender stereotypical roles in their new homelands. Generation gap
and culture shock upon moving away from the "homeland" and the questions of sexuality play important roles in Lahiri’s interpretations of gender. Her fiction, on the whole, is a significant attempt to redefine what it means to be Indians in Diaspora. Lahiri's fictional motives and methods reveal her commitment to gender and sexuality in terms of diaspora.

“A Temporary Matter” is a wonderful story that speaks volumes about relationships and the failure of relationships. In this story Jhumpa Lahiri stresses that relations break off because partners fail to reach out to each other. The relation between Shoba and Shukumar, the protagonist couple drifted apart after Shoba had given birth to a dead baby. It is carefully revealed about Shukumar that-

…His own mother had fallen apart when his father died, abandoning the house he grew up in and moving back to Calcutta. 3

Lahiri skillfully works out the difference in the patterns of these two relationships. Shukumar's parents share a conventional relationship and Shoba whereas Shukumar have a relationship where there is a deliberate subversion of the traditional gender
roles. It is Shoba, the wife, who is breadwinner and caretaker of the family and Shukumar is a research student who stays back at home in order to complete his doctoral dissertation on ‘Agrarian Revolts in India’. He cooks meals for himself and his wife. It is Shukumar, not his wife Shoba, who seems to "fall apart" at the dissolution of their marriage:

Instead he thought of how he and Shobha had become experts at avoiding each other in their three-bedroom house, spending as much time on separate floors as possible. 4

Shukumar and Shoba represent a possible reversal of gender roles in this instance. Shukumar is the stay-at-home student who does the cooking and cleaning; he is blamed in part for the miscarriage, whereas in India, the mother would bear the full responsibility. There exist generational differences between the sexes in "A Temporary Matter". Shobha's mother blames Shukumar for the miscarriage. She does not discuss about Shobha with him but when they talk about the baby’s death she sternly says, But you weren’t’ even there. 5

Shoba and Shukumar try to solve their differences during a scheduled power failure by telling each other those facts which had
never shared with each other. It is Shobha who decides to play this
game because she had decided to separate and she looked upon the
power failure as an opportunity to communicate her decision to
Shukumar. Shobha and Shukumar begin by telling each other
every small detail about the events in their life ever since their
relationship began. They realise that they could communicate
better in the dark as it provided them an opportunity to elude each
other (each others eyes) and yet establish the rapport that existed
earlier between them:

Something happened when the house was
dark. They were able to talk to each other
again. 6

These conversations between Shobha and Shukumar reinforce
Jhumpa Lahiri's strategy of reversing the gender roles by giving
the prerogative of separation and choice of finding a new
apartment on her own. Shobha declares:

I’ve been looking for an apartment and I’ve
found one, she said, narrowing her eyes on
something, it seemed, behind his left
shoulder. It was nobody's fault, she
continued. They’d been through enough.
She needed some time alone. She had
money saved up for a security deposit. 7
Though, Shobha and Shukumar have certain problems in their relationship they continue to love each other. They realise that the past had been wonderful and romantic and lament the failure of their relational crisis. Shobha blames Shukumar for his absence during her delivery but when he tells her the truth that he had held their baby and was present in the hospital, she realises his love for her and also the reason for concealing the truth. The story ends with a beautiful beginning. Shobha and Shukumar weep together for the things they knew about each other. This does suggest that the right to forgive rests with Shobha.

Preoccupation with the feminine world and problems of femininity continues engaging Jhumpa Lahiri's creative efforts. Even in a story like, “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine” that apparently deals with the issues of global significance, like liberation of a country or of political and ideological combat and survival of highly sensitive beings torn apart by the historical exigencies, her concern with the feminine persists, though not in a direct confrontational mode that dominates the ideological writings of the immigrants settled in the West.
In this apparently a different sort of story, plights of women are very subtly presented either by an intelligently loaded innuendo or in concrete naturalistic kind of description like women being raped or wife being abandoned or family, especially seven daughters torn apart by the pressures of history:

That year Pakistan was engaged in civil war. The eastern frontier, where Dacca was located was fighting for autonomy from the ruling regime in the west. In March, Dacca had been invaded, torched and shelled by the Pakistani army. Teachers were dragged onto streets and shot, women dragged into barracks and raped. 8

What deserves, especially to be mentioned here that Jhumpa Lahiri doesn't fail to choose a female narrator for the story. She projects Mr.Pirzada as a man suffering from pain of separation from his wife and eight daughters and his anguish and anxiety for their fate who are caught in the cross currents of India and East Pakistan and the birth of the nation of Bangladesh.

Jhumpa Lahiri has powerfully projected feminine qualities of love, concern, affection, warmth and hospitality in Lilia, the young narrator of the story. Lilia's observations are purely
feminine even at a tender age of ten. She thinks about Mr. Pirzada's wife and his seven daughters and prays for their safety:

My stomach tightened as I worried whether his wife and seven daughters were now members of the drifting, clamoring crowd that had flashed at intervals on the screen.

Lilia is innocent, yet genuinely feminine:

...I prayed that Mr. Pirzada’s family was safe and sound. I had never prayed for anything before...

On the occasion of Halloween, children dressed in various costumes and went out in streets knowing doors of neighbours for collecting candies. When Lilia, dressed up as a witch, sets out with her friend Dora, Mr. Pirzada expresses his concern by saying that he would accompany her. Lilia, in her own way assures Mr. Pirzada that she would take care of her self but feels sorry as she feels she should have expressed that concern earlier for his family:

“Don’t worry,” I said. It was the first time I had uttered those words to Mr. Pirzada, two simple words I had tried but failed to tell him for weeks, had said only in my prayers. It shamed me now that I had said them for my own sake.
The story weaves beautiful patterns of relationships between people belonging to different countries and genders. The character of Lilia speaks volumes about the wonderful dimensions of a young woman’s psyche. Lilia and her mother represent Indian values of warmth and conviviality expected of women within and out of the Indian context.

The “Interpreter of Maladies” is a story that talks about the fragile nature of relations and relationships. The story makes certain unexpected revelations about the human psyche. Culture and gender play a very important role in shaping the thinking of human beings. The main characters in the story are Mr. Kapasi, the taxi driver cum tourist guide and his clients Mr. Das and his family. Mr. Das, his wife Mina and three children Ronny, Bobby and Tina are on a holiday to India from America. Mr. Kapasi is fascinated by the beauty, grace and charm of Mrs. Das. He keenly observes all the members of the Das family. He mentions that:

Mr. and Mrs. Das behaved like an older brother and sister, not parents. It seemed that they were in charge of the children only for the day… 12
The discord in the family is partly caused by Mr. Das’ profession as an interpreter because she firmly believed that it was a second rate sort of job that rusts potential and future prospects of man. She, like many Indian women is a romantic being. But her romanticism is marred by the dull and dreary realities of her married life:

She has also used the word romantic. She did not behave in a romantic way toward her husband and yet she had used the word to describe him. 13

Jhumpa Lahiri’s statement on the Das couple underscores various dimensions of the marital relationship:

Mr. and Mrs. Das were a bad match, just as he and his wife were. Perhaps they, too, had little in common apart from the three children and a decade of their lives. The signs he recognised from his own marriage were there – the bickering, the indifference, the protracted silences. 14

Mr. Kapasi then starts looking at Mrs. Das as a beautiful and sexually appealing woman. He narrates his other experiences with patients as an interpreter. He is fascinated by her closeness while taking photographs. He feels pleased when Mrs. Das appreciates the Sun Temple. The story takes an unexpected twist when Mrs. Das reveals the fact of her second son Bobby’s birth to Mr. Kapasi.
She tells Mr. Kapasi that Bobby was not Raj’s (Mr. Das) son but his friend’s son who had stayed at their home just for a week. She tells Mr. Kapasi that when her husband’s friend had taken the initiative she had not objected but to the contrary submitted instantly and she was quite satisfied with the way he made love to her. This revelation comes as a shock to Mr. Kapasi because he fails to understand the reason behind Mrs. Das sharing her most intimate secret with him. The dialogue that ensues between Mrs. Das and Mr. Kapasi is quite interesting:

“Mr. Kapasi, don’t you have anything to say? I thought that was your job.” “My job is to give tours, Mrs. Das.” “Not that. Your other job. As an interpreter…Don’t you realise what it means for me to tell you?” “What does it mean?” “It means that I’m tired of feeling so terrible all the time. Eight years, Mr. Kapasi, I’ve been in pain eight years. I was hoping you could help me feel better, say the right thing. Suggest the right kind of remedy.”

Mrs. Das tries to establish an intimate rapport with Mr. Kapasi in order to find a solution to her problem. But when she realises that he was not capable of providing any solace or to solution to her to free her from the guilt she loses interest in him. As a woman she possesses the guilt of committing adultery. Though she mentions
that she had enjoyed the moments she shared with the other man, she could not free herself from the guilt of having his child.

Thus, Jhumpa Lahiri pinpoints the very subtle dimension of feminine sensibility.

“A Real Durwan” is the story of an old woman who engages in loquacious descriptions about her lost grand past which nobody believes, yet, nobody minds listening to because it did no harm to anybody. ‘Boori Ma’, a sixty-four years old lady, fondly addressed as mother by everyone who knew her was the sweeper of a stairwell. She often lamented her separation form her husband and four daughters since her deportation to Kolkata after Partition. Boori Ma often spoke about her easier times and her daughters’ lavish weddings. Her narration about her past, whether true or false, does create sympathy in the readers mind. Jhumpa Lahiri describes Boori Ma as a ‘victim of times.’ Her gender adds to her problems and the things she tells people suggest that she had longed for certain things in life which were never fulfilled. Boori Ma is appreciated for keeping the stairwell clean, driving away salesmen and peddlers, summoning auto-rickshaw for anybody who needed it and protecting
the flat apartment from suspicious characters. The residents of the apartment acknowledge her services in these words:

…Boori Ma’s services came to resemble those of a real durwan. Though normal circumstances this was no job for a woman…

The residents call Boori Ma as a real durwan, which means a true sentinel. They provide her with basic necessities and listen to her stories with patience but the tragedy occurs when there is theft of basin, which was fixed in the stairwell. The same residents suspect Boori Ma for interacting with strangers and being a part of the robbery. Unfortunately, Boori Ma is robbed of her life’s savings at the same time. This is highly symbolic because her savings suggest the trust she had earned as guard of the apartment. They sling allegations at her calling her imposter, betrayer and thief. They drive her away without giving her an opportunity to prove her innocence. She repeatedly pleads and begs for pardon but nobody listens to her. Boori Ma’s story is an eye opener as it highlights a particular section of the society and the cruelties thrust upon women by the same society. A woman who was once appreciated a real durwan is mercilessly thrown out of the premises by the same people.
“Sexy” differs from the other stories in “Interpreter” of Maladies because, as Lahiri notes, it depicts in the most outright manner the blatant Westernization of India. In "Sexy," how does Dev, the Indian lover cheating on his wife, utilize the Western fetishization of Indian men to his own advantage? How do the actions of Miranda, the stereotypically flighty and flirty American woman, provide evidence to support the idea of a sexually fetishized India? What do the Indians in the story Laxmi, Dev and Rohin do intentionally or unintentionally to encourage Miranda's false notions of a sexually exoticized India?

The major thematic concern of this story is the issue of extramarital relations, which have taken the center stage in every culture. However, Jhumpa Lahiri delves into the sincerity and sensitivity of the female mind by bringing a change of mind in Miranda’s thinking. The very beginning of the story underscores the writer’s feministic concerns. The story thus begins:

IT WAS A WIFE’S WORST NIGHTMARE. After nine years of marriage, Laxmi told Miranda, her cousin’s husband had fallen in love with another woman. He sat next to her on a plane, on a flight from Delhi to Montreal, and instead of
flying home to his wife and son, he got off with the woman at Heathrow. 17

Laxmi, an Indian woman plays a very important role in the story as she highlights the importance of marriage and the ability of a woman to defend her self-respect. She believes and lives by the belief that a husband is the only source of survival and happiness for a woman and how a woman’s life can be shattered by her husband’s infidelity. Yet, she possesses the strength to break off a relationship that is devoid of love and trust. Laxmi lives in America and is economically independent. She does not agree with her cousin who had decided to forgive her husband because they have a son. She also displays the preparedness to teach a lesson to her husband if he would betray her.

She tells Miranda:

Not me. If my husband so much as looked at another woman I’d change the locks. 18

The irony of the story is that Laxmi shares her cousin’s ill fate with Miranda who herself is involved with a married Indian, Dev who worked in an investment bank. Miranda is a perfect beloved who tries to please Dev in every possible way. She carefully stocks the things he likes. The relationship between
Miranda and Dev is a perfect relationship because they spend time-sharing each other’s feelings and watching movies. The best thing about their relationship was that they never argued with each other. Jhumpa Lahiri underscores the need of understanding between partners, without expecting anything in return which is the very essence of parallel relationships. Miranda is portrayed as a very loving and compassionate beloved. She tries to understand and his needs and fulfill them. Miranda displays her curiosity about Dev’s wife and when he tells her that she resembled an Indian film actress Madhuri Dixit, Miranda visits an Indian store to get the video of the actress.

The turning point in Miranda’s life comes when Rohin, her colleague Laxmi’s cousin’s son stays with Miranda for some time. Rohin makes Miranda wear a sexy dress and tells her that she looked “sexy” which shocks her but she realises that he did not know the meaning of the word. Yet, out of curiosity when Miranda asks Rohin what he meant by the word he tells her that it meant loving someone you did not know and that was what his father had done and made his mother’s life miserable. After listening to Rohin, Miranda weeps a lot and makes an important decision. She
decides to part with Dev, which gives her lot of pain, but she feels that she wasn’t being fair to Dev’s wife by being a part of his life. She avoids Dev and prepares herself for leading a lonely life.

The story underscores various sensitive aspects of man – woman relations. Here Jhumpa Lahiri delves into that corner of feminine psyche, which is above selfishness. Miranda’s decision to sacrifice her love is an example of a woman’s generosity towards the other in order to save her marriage and life.

“Sexy” voices existential despair. More painful than the physical hardships is the emotional trauma of separation. Her tragic lot lies in her willingness to fail as a beloved of a married man. The story is a powerful rebuttal to the commonly held notion that youthful girls are nasty ‘familial home wreckers.’

“Mrs. Sen’s” is another story about human relations. Mrs. Sen is a thirty- some loving woman whose husband is a Mathematics at the university. She misses India and everything about India and refers to India as home. The small child Eliot makes various observations about Mrs. Sen and tries to compare her with his mother. He, however, develops a liking for Mrs. Sen
and also sympathises her for whenever she laments being away from home. Both the women in the story, Mrs. Sen and Eliot’s mother present a sharp contrast in terms of confidence, relationships and representation of cultures.

An observation of both the women from Eliot and reader’s viewpoints underscores Lahiri’s feminist thematic concerns. For the eleven-year-old Eliot, Mrs. Sen is an ordinary lady who wears eveningwear colours during the day but looks more pleasing than his own mother:

She was about thirty. She wore a shimmering white sari patterned with orange paisleys, more suitable for an evening affair than for a quiet, faintly drizzling August afternoon. Her lips were coated in a complementary coral gloss, and a bit of colour had strayed beyond the borders. Yet it was his mother, Eliot thought, in her cuffed beige shorts and her rope-soled shoes who looked odd. 19

His mother has been divorced and manages her own and Eliot’s life but Mrs. Sen is dependent on her husband for simple things such as getting fish from the store etc. Mrs. Sen is a nervous wreck and she refuses to learn driving, though once she makes an
attempt to display her confidence. But unfortunately for her she meets with an accident and Eliot’s mother decides that he will not stay with her anymore.

There is a mention of Mrs. Sen filling her hair parting with vermilion as a sign of her marital status and her acceptance of everything thing that her husband decides. But Eliot’s mother is a divorced woman who invites a colleague of hers and spends a night with him in her house and is never seen again. Jhumpa Lahiri states the transient nature of relations and ultimately the dumping of women after spending one night with her. Thus the story hints at various cultural differences between women of the same age and their life styles and ways of thinking, which ultimately reflect upon the conditions of women and gender politics that dominates cultural situations.

“This Blessed House” is an excellent illustration of Lahiri’s deliberate inversion of gender roles. Twinkle, the protagonist is a twenty seven year old woman, who is born of Indian parents living in California; hence she has imbibed most of the American culture. She smokes cigarettes but does not bother to throw the ashes and
butts away. She flaunts a carefree or rather a careless attitude. She is a perfect opposite of the typical Indian girl who hesitates to even voice out her likes and choices. Her disinclination towards cleaning the house and other untidy habits come as a shock to Sanjeev as he had a different image of a woman as a wife.

Twinkle, the wife in “This Blessed House” is characterized as “excited and delighted by little things, crossing her fingers before any remotely unpredictable event, like tasting a new flavour of ice cream or dropping a letter in the mailbox…” It was a quality her husband, Sanjeev did not understand. Sanjeev was an MIT graduate and very successful in his career. At the age of thirty-three he had a secretary of his own and a dozen people working under his supervision. Yet, when it came to Twinkle and her ideas it made him feel stupid, as if the world contained hidden wonders he could not anticipate, or see. He looked at her face, which, it occurred to him, had not grown out of its “girlhood”.

This image of sustained girlhood is, according to the generalizations set forth by Lahiri, admired in a wife in India; in martial relationships, women are expected to be docile
homemakers, as Twinkle attempts to be. Her girlish charm is not, however, a quality Sanjeev, an Indian husband in diaspora in America, admires or even tolerates in his wife. What does this say about gender stereotypes, and, more specifically, husband-wife roles, within Diasporan cultures should be of relevance in the context of argument.

The description of Twinkle and Sanjeev’s marriage is highly interesting because they did not have a love marriage as it happens or should be in America. Twinkle’s parents lived in California and Sanjeev’s parents lived in Kolkata. Sanjeev had never fallen in love or had relationships prior to his marriage to Twinkle but she had a relationship with an American who had tried and failed to be an actor.

There are certain questions that can be posed from the viewpoint of the story in relation to gender, culture and religion.

Why does Twinkle get so excited by the effigies she finds scattered throughout her new American home when she describes herself ironically as "a good little Hindu"? What does her excitement, coupled with her lethargy and apathy in all other
things, say about the way she views herself within her marriage? Is she unintentionally redefining her gender role, or knowingly breaking out of those boundaries? Lahiri leaves the story open ended that it takes into account many more questions pertaining to the gender dialectics.

Jhumpa Lahiri has beautifully presented the hysterical suffering of a thirty year old lower middle class woman. “The Treatment of Bibi Haldar” has much to say about the idea of sexuality, and specifically one's own agency in establishing it. It is determined that Bibi, an older woman with seemingly incurable disease that causes fits of seizures, should marry in an attempt at a cure. The community sees her as a sexual object for the first time after doctors make this suggestion:

They "imagined the contours below her housecoat, and attempted to appraise the pleasures she could offer a man". 21

The depiction of Bibi raises certain important questions related to the position of women in society. One can ask questions such as: How much of a stake does Bibi have in the determination of her own sexuality, and how much is left up to the community?
How much of an agent is Bibi in her own sexual destiny? Bibi is at the mercy of an elder cousin and his wife and she did the work of recording inventory for her cousin’s cosmetic shop. But she does not get any money instead she is provided with food, clothes and other necessary things. Nobody looks upon Bibi as a woman with specific womanly needs, desires and passions. All that she desired was the love and security provided by a man. She expresses her feelings by telling other women

Is it wrong to envy you, all brides and mothers, busy with lives and cares? Wrong to want to shade my eyes, scent my hair? To raise a child and teach him sweet from sour, good from bad? 22

These lines speak what Bibi pines for and how the people who know her ignore her very simple and utmost mundane desires. She laments her physical condition and feels more depressed when she starts thinking that she will never get married and she would be deprived of all the physical and emotional pleasures that a married woman enjoys.

Jhumpa Lahiri’s, ‘The Treatment of Bibi Haldar’ deals with a doubly disadvantaged woman-disadvantaged because of her gender
and internal ailment rendering her more incapable than disabled. In almost every society women who are disabled are devalued, firstly because of their gender and secondly because of the myths and misconceptions about impairment. 23

One day Bibi suffers a severe fit and she has to go through a series of blood tests. The doctor concludes that marriage was the only cure for her ailment. After this incident everyone surrounding Bibi starts looking at her like a woman. But her cousin and his wife are aware of Bibi's physical and mental condition.

Bibi had never been taught to be a woman; the illness had left her naïve in most practical matters. 24

Bibi was not taught the art of cooking and embroidery which she should have learnt as these are feminine arts, she had formal education only till ninth standard and she was not allowed to watch television as it was believed that the electronic properties would excite her so she was ignorant of the events of the world. Bibi was looked after and cared for by her father till he was alive but after his death she was at the mercy of her cousin Haldar and his wife. To multiply Bibi's woes, Haldar isolates her when his wife conceives in order to protect the baby from Bibi's influences. After
the birth of the child Haldar and his wife leave the house without informing anybody. He just leaves three hundred rupees in an envelope for Bibi. After this incident Bibi sells the cosmetics that had never been sold by Haldar and she buys new stocks with the profits. The story takes an unexpected twist with the revelation of Bibi’s pregnancy and nobody having the knowledge of the child’s father. Bibi too does not reveal the name of the man who had defiled her. She gives birth to a son and with the help of the women of the apartment she learns every thing a mother should know. The story ends on the following note: She was, to the best of our knowledge, cured. 25

The story very clearly hints at the various dimensions associated with a woman’s life. The presence of a man in a woman’s life is as basic as the need for food, clothing and shelter. In Lahiri’s own words, ‘It's about a misfit, a young woman, living in a rundown building in Calcutta, and she's in the care of her cousin and his wife, who run a shop. She’s epileptic, and she lives a very sheltered life; so she's rather naïve. The story is basically about the plight of a woman who is physically disadvantaged and faces consequences of disabilities in a society that is cruelly carried
away by its parameters of beauty and social appearances. Bibi Haldar represents the undeserving repercussions of her physiological shortcomings for no fault of hers. The problems of Bibi Haldar and a number of women like her are appealingly presented by Boylan Esther in her statement on the sufferings of a helpless disabled woman:

…disabled women are systematically denied the most human rights- the rights of love, the right to marriage, the right to motherhood, the right to personal fulfillment…in some societies it is considered somehow shocking that a disabled woman should marry and families are usually vehement in discouraging any aspirations disabled women may have, to fulfill a woman’s destiny. 20

“The Third and Final” Continent is the final story in the collection that depicts the different emotions of men and women and their involvement with one another that goes beyond geographical boundaries, religion and gender. The story talks about a young enterprising Bengali who was offered full time job in America, in the processing department of a library at MIT. The period described is 1969, when women were not allowed many liberties and also the year when the first man reached the moon.
The narrator of the story makes a passing reference to his dead mother when he meets Mrs. Croft the landlady of the house he stays in. There are certain interesting facts about story that highlight man-woman relationships.

The narrator’s name has not been mentioned but what is noteworthy is that the story is based on his relationship with two women: Mrs. Croft the hundred and three years old American landlady and his wife Mala. Mrs. Croft is old, ailing and widowed, yet she commands certain authority over people and situations. He compares his mother and Mrs. Croft in terms of their widowhood. He states that:

This person was a widow who lived alone mortified me further still. It was widowhood that had driven my own insane…26

The statement can be understood in terms of the cultural differences between India and America. A widow in India reduces herself to a helpless being whereas as an American woman, in spite of being physically weak and a widow is self sufficient. The comparison here is of women of sixties, but has contemporary relevance.
The narrator respects her and has a certain affinity for her. Whereas Mala, the narrator's wife gains the status of a wife after a certain period. He looks at his wife as a woman bound to him by a certain relation only after she is appreciated by Mrs. Croft: “She is a perfect lady!” 27

Though the narrator and his wife begin a new phase in their life, Mala continues to miss her parents and weeps for them. She, however, accepts the life in America and tries her best to come to terms with it. The rest of the story talks about the narrator’s life in America with his wife but his relation/ship with three different women cannot go unnoticed.

While Lahiri’s stories bear the stamp of the same painstaking craftsmanship as Buddhist sages apply to the making of a mandala, their lives are far from fleeting. Most of Interpreter's characters play out a simultaneous existence in two cultures. They are Indians living in America or India, or their lovers, neighbours, or landlords are. With informed cultural chiseling, their creator shapes them into sharply sculpted personalities.
The stories with an American setting presage a changing national cast of real and fictional characters. For instance, Mrs. Sen, the protagonist of her eponymous story, is hardly a fish out of water for feeling diminished without a daily regime of fresh halibut: at least 50,000 other immigrants from Bengal share her piscine tastes.

Jhumpa Lahiri can be compared with a noted Urdu short story writer, Ismat Chugtai who also laid major emphasis on the marriage in Indian women’s life in particular and women in general. Like Ismat, Lahiri, too, sharply focuses on how women survive, as they are living and suffering moment by moment. Basically middle class characters, these women keep seeking flickering rays of light in the darkness of their married life. With little or no education, they are absolutely helpless with no solid source to fall back on.

Though, most of Jhumpa Lahiri’s stories and characters do not belong to India, they remain closely bound with the Indian culture. In a story like “Mrs. Sen’s”, she gives subtle details about the life of an Indian woman.
Tejinder Kaur’s words give an apt conclusion for *Interpreter of Maladies*,

... by interpreting various maladies and experiences of the diasporas in their various nuances and manifestations, and suggesting them new possibilities, new routes and new modes of thinking and existence in the new countries in the fast changing, political, social, economic and cultural global scenario. Jhumpa Lahiri, with her first collection of short stories has secured for herself a commendable place along with writers such as Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, V.S. Naipaul and Bharati Mukherjee. 29

Jhumpa Lahiri’s women characters are highly sensitive to their surroundings and people. They represent the young and the old, the rich and the poor and the ‘Indians’ and the ‘non-resident Indians’, resolving conflicts and trying to live a balanced harmonious life. Her stories are impressive explorations of the human conditions as it shapes and is shaped by the varying textuality of the human personality and offer testimony to her interest in creating an organic evolvement of the content and the form.

*Interpreter of Maladies* reveals Jhumpa Lahiri’s capacity to transmute commonplace objects and ordinary experiences derived
from the natural and human worlds into symbols of deeper speculative meaning. The stories teach a lesson of humility and equality along with a display of courage of women characters to face the challenges of life with dignity and self-respect.

*The Namesake* is a narrative about individuals bound by certain relationships and their survival. The protagonist Gogol Ganguli is battling on various fronts due to his name, as he is born of Indian parents in America with a Russian name. The novel has several gender-based undertones. Jhumpa Lahiri has made pertinent observations about the Indian culture in general and Bengali culture in particular. These observations stand out as a stark contrast to the American background. Ashoke Ganguly, a doctoral candidate in electrical engineering at MIT and Ashima, his wife occupy central focus in the novel. Ashima is a housewife, is in a broader context, a projection of Indian values of service and sacrifice, who plays a pivotal role in the novel. At the very outset we get a clear picture about Ashima’s character:

> When she calls out to Ashoke, she doesn’t say his name. Ashima never thinks of her husband’s name when she thinks of her husband, even though she knows perfectly well what it is. She has adopted his surname
but refuses, for propriety’s sake to utter his first. It’s not the type of thing Bengali wives do. Like a kiss or caress in a Hindi movie, a husband’s name is something intimate and therefore unspoken… 30

Jhumpa Lahiri critiques the Indian social system that does not allow a woman to utter her husband’s name. Though, the entire action takes place in America, Lahiri makes subtly critical statements about the rituals related to arranged-marriage, an Indian socio-cultural construct to dominate women. Even today, in many parts of India, girls do not enjoy the freedom of choosing their life partner. There is a statement regarding the salesmanship of mothers who have daughters of marriageable age. Ashima overhears her mother eulogizing Ashima’s extraordinary feminine abilities to her prospective in-laws. Her reaction to this is worth noting: Ashima smiled at her mother’s salesmanship… 31

This particular remark has to be considered distinctly because it makes a comment on the treatment given to girls in the Indian society. The above statement is a critique on the treatment of girls as a commodity. It also satirizes the attitude of parents towards their daughters regarding their education, career and marriage. It underscores the existence of gender bias prevalent in
the society. Ashima Ganguly represents the handicapped Indian woman, who is neither physically strong nor is she strong enough to take decisions regarding the most crucial aspects of her life such as marriage and willingness to leave the country.

Lahiri’s portrayal of the character of Ashima in *The Namesake* depicts her outstanding insight into the heart of a young woman who is destined to live friendless in a foreign land after marriage. 31

Throughout the novel, Ashima’s presence, as a prospective bride, a wife, a mother and a helpless widow is femininely silent yet symbolically eloquent. She is separated from her family and motherland after marriage, which is symbolic of a girl’s transfer as a commodity from one family to the other with no change in status as she has to be an obedient wife and duteous daughter-in-law. She is supportive to her husband and appears to be happy performing wifely duties. The other women characters in the novel present different hues of the feminine psyche. They are Gogol’s sister Sonia, his girlfriends Ruth and Maxine and his wife Moushami. But, all the other female characters are the representatives of ‘the new age women.’ Ashima is the representative of the traditional Indian woman who does not part with her Indianness and her
feminine values, which belong exclusively to India. Her Indian femininity resounds powerfully throughout the novel. On the one hand we have Ashima who stands for sacrifice, fidelity and dedication and on the other are Ruth, Maxine and Moushami who seem to be far away from these values. They represent only different ‘selves’ and live for themselves. Maxine breaks off her relationship with Gogol because she feels jealous of his affection for his mother. Moushami is born of Indian parents but she does not possess anything that has the Indian soul.

The description of parties hosted by the Ganguly family portrays the Indian feminine spirit of hospitality that Ashima has not lost, despite leaving India. She is presented as a satisfied and content woman. The question that arises here is whether Ashima is really content and happy with her life? Is a woman’s satisfaction and fulfillment confined only within her sacrifices for the family? And how often is her act of sacrifice reciprocated? Marriage severs a woman from her parents, siblings, friends and her land too. Ashima spends major portion of her life getting adjusted to new surroundings like many women who give up their careers and professional aspirations for their husband and family. Many a time
life becomes mere adjustment for women who have to leave the motherland as a consequence of marriage.

This brings to light the other issues related to women living abroad after marriage. Indian women face problems of sexual harassment by way of flesh trade in foreign countries. They cannot escape from there as their passports are confiscated from them. A very prominent example can be cited from the real life story of Betty Mehmoodi in *Not Without My Daughter*. Betty an American woman marries an Iranian doctor who takes her to Iran by telling her that it was a temporary stay but later discloses that she would never be able to go back to America. Betty lives a life of pain, suffering and violent treatment from her husband. She, somehow manages to escape with her daughter. Exploitation of women and their trust and innocence is a global crime that has been looked upon with concern by various women writers.

Jhumpa Lahiri has explained the meaning of ‘Ashima’ as “she who is limitless, without borders”, and by this definition of Ashima she defines the creation called woman who takes everything in her stride and her capacity to do so cannot be
confined by limits or boundaries. Ashima’s loneliness cannot be understood in the following lines:

She begins to pride herself on doing it alone, in devising a routine. Like Ashoke, busy with teaching and research and dissertation seven days a week, she, too, now has something occupy her fully, to demand her utmost devotion, her last ounce of strength. Before Gogol’s birth her days had followed no visible pattern. She would spend hours in the apartment, napping, sulking, rereading her same five Bengali novels on the bed. 33

Ashima is accompanied by loneliness in America after marriage, child-birth, children’s departure after they grow up and finally after her husband’s death. Ashima does face problems of physical violence or sexual abuse but her problem can also be understood on highly psychological plane. Her loneliness is deeper and more severe than physical abuse. Ashima has to cope with her loneliness in a foreign land where she does not have any friends. She misses her parents and relatives on various occasions and sheds tears. As time passes Ashima gets busy with the children but her problems do no end there. She is constantly tortured by the thought of their upbringing and training. She has to surrender in front of Sonia and her American ways. This shows that Ashima, as
a mother does not possess any command over her daughter due to their exposure to the American culture.

*The Namesake* offers motherhood as a site of agency for negotiating a transnational identity for the postcolonial female subject in diaspora. Lahiri shows how traditional gender roles – often considered subordinate in the postcolonial context in their appropriation by nationalist agendas – can be read as a source of empowerment when translated into the context of middle class immigrant life in America. *The Namesake* depicts the cultural and national fluidity offered by this status: the immigrant mother, a central character in this novel, is able to preserve the Indian traditions that link her to her homeland while simultaneously benefiting from the privileges afforded by American citizenship in order to ensure a successful future for her American-born children. An Indian matriarch living in the suburbs of Boston, she does so through the careful negotiations she makes for her family on a daily basis in response to the often conflicting demands of traditional Bengali culture and the pressure to become an assimilated American. Although in the context of Western feminism it may seem contradictory that it is through the role of
wife and mother that a subjectivity which transcends any fixed national identity is achieved; this reading of Lahiri's novel is informed by the arguments of transnational feminists who resist any essentializing understanding of female emancipation. Lahiri’s novel and stories assert that immigrant women from the so-called ‘third world’ need to be understood not only in the context of their particular national histories, but also through the manner in which they appropriate these histories in forging individual identities in America. Lahiri’s *The Namesake* provides the occasion for such a discussion within ethnic American literary studies, especially as this field continues to engage with postcolonial and transnational paradigms.

Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* established her as one the most brilliant writers of her generation. Her stories are one of the very few debut works and only a handful of collections to have won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction. Among many other awards and honors it received were the New Yorker Debut of the Year award, the PEN/Hemingway Award, and the highest critical praise for its grace, acuity, and compassion in detailing lives transported from India to America. In *The Namesake*, Lahiri enriches the
themes that made her collection an international bestseller: the immigrant experience, the clash of cultures, the conflicts of assimilation, and, most poignantly, the tangled ties between generations. Here again Lahiri displays her deft touch for the perfect detail - the fleeting moment, the turn of phrase that opens whole worlds of emotion. The Namesake takes the Ganguli family from their tradition-bound life in Calcutta through their fraught transformation into Americans. On the heels of their arranged wedding, Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli settle together in Cambridge, Massachusetts. An engineer by training, Ashoke adapts far less warily than his wife, who resists all things American and pines for her family. When their son is born, the task of naming him betrays the vexed results of bringing old ways to the new world. Named for a Russian writer by his Indian parents in memory of a catastrophe years before, Gogol Ganguli knows only that he suffers the burden of his heritage as well as his odd, antic name. Lahiri brings great empathy to Gogol as he stumbles along the first-generation path, strewn with conflicting loyalties, comic detours, and wrenching love affairs. With penetrating insight, she reveals not only the defining power of the names and expectations
bestowed upon us by our parents, but also the means by which we slowly, sometimes painfully, come to define ourselves.

The New York Times has praised Lahiri as "a writer of uncommon elegance and poise." *The Namesake* is a fine-tuned, intimate, and deeply felt novel of identity. Gogol constantly grapples with his identity on the hand and relationships on the other. In *The Namesake* women characters are similar to those in the other stories in *Interpreter of Maladies*. Ruth and Maxine have short affairs with Gogol but Moushami; Gogol’s wife is a liberated woman. She is unhesitant and not in the least guilty about her liaison with Dimitri, a man she had loved as a student. On the contrary:

She wonders if she is the only woman in her family ever to have betrayed her husband, to have been unfaithful. This is upsets her most to admit: that the affair causes her to feel strangely at peace, the complication of it calming he, structuring her day. 33

Jhumpa Lahiri has painted Moushami as a self-reliant woman. Moushami’s observation of her mother makes her so. Even after marriage, Moushami goes alone to the restaurant simply to remind herself that she was capable of being on her own. For her
the feeling of being independent was as important as the Sanskrit vows she had repeated after her husband at the wedding. Moushami’s regrets at her mother, an honours student in philosophy, despite spending thirty two years abroad, did not know how to drive or have a job. Her mother had been ignorant about financial matters too. These facts about her mother develop Moushami into an independent girl. Though she is born of Indian parents, she does cherish or blindly accept the patriarchal laws laid down by the society. Moushami accidentally mentions Dimitri’s name to Gogol and walks out of his apartment life after that. She does not regret or repent for any of her actions.

Ashima who is poles apart in thought and action, misses her dead husband:

Ashima feels lonely suddenly, horribly, permanently alone, and briefly turned away from the mirror, she sobs for her husband.

Ashima regrets that she had missed life in India for thirty-three years. But when she decides to go back to India her mind is flooded with the memories of America. She remembers the ties and bonds she had developed in America. The thought of staying
away from her children and leaving the memories of days spent with her husband pains her.

*The Namesake* represents the women of two generations seeking happiness and independence in different situations and circumstances. The novel offers a convincing creative investigation into the functioning of women’s psyche under the pressures of changing cultural situations. Lahiri’s novels and stories in their ultimate intellectual evaluation document the heart rending reality of women’s plights and precarious positions right from their birth to adolescence and from their marriage to motherhood. A woman is continually tortured in each and every gender-role imposed upon her. Her chief contribution, however, is an added dimension of transnationality. Her fiction stands as an authentic critical statement on the dilemma of women who oscillate between the contradictory cultures they are placed in. Their irresolution and helpless indecisiveness reflect upon their socio-psychological cultural and spiritual dissipations.
References

4. Ibid p-4
5. Ibid p-9
6. Ibid p-19
7. Ibid p-21
9. Ibid p-32
10. Ibid p-32
11. Ibid p-
12. Lahiri, Jhumpa. Interpreter of Maladies in Interpreter of Maladies p-49
13. Ibid p-53
14. Ibid p-
15. Ibid p-65
16. Lahiri, Jhumpa ‘A Real Durwan’ Interpreter of Maladies in Interpreter of Maladies p-73
17. Lahiri, Jhumpa “Sexy “Interpreter of Maladies in Interpreter of Maladies p-83
18. Ibid p-92
19. Lahiri, Jhumpa “Mrs. Sens” Interpreter of Maladies in Interpreter of Maladies p-
21. Lahiri, Jhumpa “Treatment of Bibi Haldar” Interpreter of Maladies in Interpreter of Maladies p-162
22. Ibid p-160
24. Lahiri, Jhumpa “Treatment of Bibi Haldar” Interpreter of Maladies in Interpreter of Maladies p-163
25. Ibid p-
26. Lahiri, Jhumpa “The Final Continent” Interpreter of Maladies in Interpreter of Maladies p-172
27. Ibid p-187
28. Ibid p-195
30. Kaur, Tejinder.”Portrayal of Diaspora Experiences in Jhumpa Lahiri’s Interpreter of Maladies
32. Ibid p-9
33. Ibid pp-34-35
34. Ibid p-260
35. Ibid p-278