CHAPTER III --- REFLECTION OF DIASPORIC SENSIBILITY IN LAHIRI’S *INTERPRETER OF MALADIES*

3.1 Introduction

Jhumpa Lahiri won the prestigious Pulitzer Prize 2000 for her first short story collection *Interpreter of Maladies*. Through this collection, Lahiri attempts to interpret maladies of immigrants by revealing their diasporic sensibility convincingly. As Anupama Kaushal has rightly observed;

> The writings of Jhumpa Lahiri are all about such diasporic Bengali migrants settled in USA. She is fortunately among those writers who have become aware of the relativity of the concept of diaspora, its contradiction, numerous possibilities of alienation and assimilation, going back to various patterns of memory, the marginal and the central- which all we observe in her Pulitzer Prize-winning fiction *Interpreter of Maladies*. The collection of short stories talks not only about the contradictions, complexities and ambivalences of Bengali diaspora in Boston but also of diaspora prevalent within the nation and even in one’s own house. It is largely about those who are associated with shifting from one society and adjusting into another. (Kaushal, 2010:92)

The first edition of this short story collection, published by Harper Collins was sold out in record time. It has received great acclaim from readers and critics. The anthology has a notable subtitle, *Stories From Beagal Boston and Beyond*. The title shows a wide range of her stories across three continents having their locale in
London, Boston, Calcutta and even Dacca. The word ‘beyond’ points out the universality of her stories which tells us about the lives of immigrants navigating between their indigenous culture that they inherited and the new one that influences them on various levels. The present chapter will attempt to trace out diasporic sensibility reflected in the nine stories in the collection. It will be done in the framework of its four aspects namely, Sense of Alienation and Displacement, Nostalgia and Cultural Assimilation, Identity Crisis and Family Relationship and Intergenerational Gap.

3.2 Sense of Alienation and Displacement

The literal meaning of word ‘Exile’ indicates physical condition, but the sense of exile is not essentially an evidence of a dislocated life. It can be observed that even if there is a geographical displacement, the exilic condition in many cases is only apparently physical and mainly psychological. The Indian diaspora in the West has experienced a physical displacement but in today’s globalized world immigrants are not regarded as alien and the most of the contemporary immigrants have migrated of their own will, and therefore there is little reason for them to experience the sense of alienation. Today’s world as a global village encourages the feeling of being at home in the multi-ethnic metropolitan cities of the world and it is in these situations that the external condition of displacement becomes of less significance and the inner circumstances, which are the psychological condition of the mind, get importance. This psychological condition of the displaced person reflects his or her alienation in the foreign land. It should be noted that this sense of loneliness and alienation differs from person to person and generations of the diaspora. The alienation caused by displacement becomes the main aspect of Diasporic Sensibility. In her debut, short story collection Lahiri has delicately dealt with the sense of alienation and has also focused on exile in the native milieu. Analysis of these stories would reveal how this aspect of alienation and displacement contributes in fostering diasporic sensibility of the first and second-generation Indian immigrants settled in U.S.A.

The story ‘A Temporary Matter’ reflects the alienation and loneliness that the immigrants face in a foreign land. The marriage bond that is still considered holy in India is breaking down under the pressure of new demands faced by second generation immigrants in an alien land.
The story deals with the life of Shukumar and Shobha in Boston. The temporary matter is that their electricity would be cut off for an hour for the five days. The story is restricted to those five days when there will be no electricity for an hour. It is during these five-day, Shukumar and Shobha come closer after the day’s busy timetable. In the darkness, they play games like telling each one secret story from his or her own life. Shukumar welcomed this power cut for an hour, as darkness could bring them nearer despite discrepancy appeared in their relationship. In darkness, they could share inner feelings of their minds to each other. They were enjoying the opportunity offered by the power cut. But in the morning of the fifth day it was declared that there would be no power cut on that evening as the line had been restored ahead of its scheduled time. The announcement saddened Shukumar. But he kept the room dark from eight p.m. and waited for the game. After their dinner Shobha switched on the light and announced that she had decided to live in separate residence and she had found one. She was fed up of the game and now she needed some time alone. This decision upset Shukumar. He thought of telling her the secret he has kept from her. The secret was that she had given birth to a dead male child which he has kept from her as it might have shocked her then. Shukumar told her the secret as the text describes;

‘------------- our baby was a boy-------

His skin was more red than brown. He had black hair on his head. He weighted almost five pounds. His fingers were curled shut, just like yours in the night’. (Lahiri, 1999:22)

Shobha got confused and turned the lights off. She came back to the table and sat down, and after a moment Shukumar joined her. The story ends with the words; ‘…they wept together, for the things they now knew.’ (Lahiri, 1999: 22)

The story reveals the marital disharmony or lack of communication in a marriage of second generation expatriate couple which resulted in the state of alienation for both.

Shobha and Shukumar, an expatriate Bengali had met four years ago the at lecture hall in a Cambridge where a group of Bengali poets giving a presentation. They decided to marry and in the duration of three years of their marriage, they had
lost their only child at birth. This incident proved a great shock for Shobha and resulted in the lack of communication in their marriage. Shobha was putting in extra hours at work and indulging in an additional assignment. On the other hand, Shukumar was slowly reducing himself into seclusion and inaction. The couple become experts at keeping away from each other and discovered that they now had nothing much to communicate about. It is in this disturbing state of conjugal relations, they have received the notice of power-cut. This power cut gives them much needed opportunity to sit together. The couple begins to share their past, their acts of omission and commission and the little lies. With the help of newly started communication, the damaged relationship was restored again. Their exchange of confession had improved the weakened relationship of Shukumar and Shobha.

Lahiri has beautifully depicted the sudden closeness in the relationship of Shukumar and Shobha. The hearing of the secret about their dead male child touches Shobha and she feels a sense of belonging to once again. Lack of such sense resulted in emotional exile. In the story, we find the marriage of an Indian-born couple, now settled in America is under a great strain. The difference between Indian and American attitude towards marriage became the main cause for lack of communication in their married life. For Indians marriage is joining together of two families based on belief, dedication and sacrifice for each other. On the other hand, for Americans individual freedom is much more important than integrated family. It is under the impact of American culture; marriage becomes a temporary matter for Shukumar and Shobha. The insecurity and uncertainty in the relationship of Indian couple living in America reflect the unsteady and unstable life in exile. Under the influence of western concept of marriage Shukumar and Shobha could not able to deal with the loss of their first born baby as under this influence they responded individually to this tragic incident, instead of sharing the grief, which is according to Indian Philosophy is the base of any human relationship. The title ‘A Temporary Matter’ can be considered as comment on the nature of marriages in the west.

In the story, Shobha is representing typical American woman. That is why after apprehending the difficulty to get along with Shukumar, she decides to live separately. It reflects a clash of two cultures. However, when she became aware about the secret of her dead son, she realized how much Shukumar still loved her. In spite of her Western outlook and education, we get the impression that still she appreciated
some Indian principles. Shukumar also felt guiltiness even as he rips one picture of a woman from book and keeps it for weeks concealed inside his own book.

The whole story is a profound study of human psychology. The Americanized Bengali couple displays the tendency of typical Diaspora where the characters carry different geographical identities with them. Both, geographical and emotional exile faithfully portrayed by the writer.

Shobha and Shukumar’s alienation from Bengali culture become evident in their first meeting itself. It was in Cambridge where a group of Bengali poets were giving a recital as the text describes,’----- Shukumar was soon bored; he was unable to decipher the literary diction, and couldn’t join the rest of the audience as they signed and nodded…’ (Lahiri, 1999:13)

After the tragic incident, Shoba and Shukumar were also displaced psychologically. Within a period of few months, they have made their routine which is based on avoidance of each other. The incident has altered their married life totally. The institution of marriage that links them together was losing its importance in an alien place.

Tragedy of such couples is that in such tragic events, these displaced individual do not get appropriate assistance of family, friends and relatives in a foreign land. This resulted in alienation under the impact of which the bond of marriage gradually breaking down under amidst modern and urbanized circumstances in a western land as Manjit Inder Singh rightly pointed out immigrants’ predicament in exile as he commented; “Diaspora experience is one of exile, migration, dislocation and displacement that brings in identity confusion and problems of identification in the backdrop of alienation from old and new cultures.”(Singh, 2007:41-42)

Through the story Lahiri also tries to show that alienation and dislocation are not only experienced by those immigrants who are burdened with nostalgia of their remembered past of their native land, but it may also be experienced by second-generation expatriates like Shobha and Shukumar who experiences more pangs of displacement .As they have ‘no home of nostalgia’ to fall back upon, the sense of alienation would become more severe. Shukumar too feels this void as the text
The story ‘When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine’ explores the isolation and loneliness of the single man who leaves home and family to do a research work in America, and the anxiety he goes through when the clouds of war start looming over East Pakistan.

The story brings forth the aspect of homesickness and departure into a personal world of memories.

The story portrays the character of Pirzada who suffers from the pain of separation from his family, wife and seven daughters who are in his homeland Dacca. His homesickness is seen in his dinner with Lilia’s parents as he keeps his pocket watch, as the text describes; ‘...set to the local time in Dacca, eleven hours ahead, ‘on his folded paper napkin on the coffee table.’ (Lahiri, 1999: 30)

Lilia remembers how her parents and Pirzada have watched the creation of Bangladesh in 1971, violence and killing on T.V with gloomy hearts and shared their feelings of past and present displacement.

In a yearning to be associated with their part of the world, Lilia’s parents’ have to search for the fellow citizen through the University Directory every new semester. This kind of identification, empathy and like-mindedness forms a measure to decrease the alienated feelings that usually seize the immigrants.

To avoid alienation, Lahiri conveys the need of every immigrant for the company of the members belonging to the similar cultural environment in the land of exile. Out of his search of University Directory, Lilia’s father and Mr. Pirzada got in touch with each other and shared their sense of alienation and displacement.

The title story ‘Interpreter of Maladies’ is all about Indian American couple-Mr. Das, his wife Mrs. Mina and their three children Tina, Ronny and Bobby and is set in Puri, where the couple hires taxi with traveler-guide to see well-known sun temple at Konark. During their conversation on the route, the couple discovers that Mr. Kapasi besides his part time occupation of a guide works as interpreter in doctor’s clinic where he translates the Gujarati spoken by some of his patients. Mr. Kapasi
does not find his profession as an ‘interpreter’ anything exceptional, but Mrs. Das has fascinated towards this part-time job of Mr. Kapasi and described it as ‘romantic’ because of its intellectual nature. On Mrs. Das’ feedback about his job, Mr. Kapasi was surprised, as even his wife had never shown any respect for his vocation as an interpreter. When Mrs. Das begins to take an interest in him, Mr. Kapasi starts to visualize a romantic bond with her. His fancy is further advanced when the couple invites him to be included in the photographs that they take. Mrs. Das even asks him for his postal address so that she could mail him prints of photographs from America. The actual crisis however, comes when Mrs. Das discloses to him in the car, that one of her two sons Bobby was conceived from her husband’s Punjabi-Indian friend in a jointly agreed intercourse in her own house. Mrs. Das’ attempt to keep this thing as a top secret makes her restless and fall out of marriage as well as love with life. The story is indicative where Mrs. Das urges Mr. Kapasi to interpret her malady, which makes her emotionally sick in exile.

The episode of extra-marital relation and keeping it secret has psychologically affected Mrs. Das, sometimes resulted in her mental alienation and imbalance as she expresses her burden as the text depicts;

Don’t you see? For eight years I haven’t been able to express this to anybody, not to friends, certainly not to Raj. He doesn’t even suspect it  
---------- I feel terrible looking at my children and at Raj always terrible. I have terrible urges. Mr. Kapasi, to throw things away. One day, I had the urge to throw everything. Don’t you think it is unhealthy? (Lahiri, 1999: 55)

Mr. Kapasi failed to suggest any cure and remedy to Mrs. Das’ malady. All he can utter is, ‘Is it really pain you feel, Mrs. Das or is it, guilt?’ (Lahiri, 1999:55) Mrs. Das’ stillness on this question spoils the fantasy of Mr. Kapasi and thus puts an abrupt end to their odd and strange relationship.

The malady from which Mrs. Das suffers is an instance of cultural conflict on the psychological level. The question arises that as they live in America where an extramarital affair is not regarded as a sin, and then what makes her keep it a secret. It is the legacy of values that she gets from Indian Culture on the psychological level.
We also come across emotional displacement as the story refers to an abnormal behavior of Mr. and Mrs. Das., as the text remarks, ‘It seemed that they were in charge of the children only for the day; it was hard to believe they were regularly responsible for anything other than themselves.’ (Lahiri, 1999: 49)

The portrayal of the couple explains their alienation from their cultural roots and bonds to the conventions of a different society and it is presented with a strong undertone of irony. The external glamour of the couple is contrasted with their inner emptiness and loneliness.

It was the freshness of the intimate experience with her husband’s friend amidst the monotony of Mrs. Das’ lonely life that allowed her to submit herself to it. She definitely got satisfaction from the act, both physical and from the consciousness of the fact that she was breaking the boredom of her immigrant life. Nothing is more thrilling than doing what is prohibited either by society or by morality.

The story also exhibits the family space with lack of communication between the woman protagonist on the one hand and her husband and children on the other. Mrs. Das’ secret alienates her psychologically from other members of the family. Her struggle is with herself and at the end of the story she seems to have fought her way back to the family fold and also seem to have been able to interact with others. Mr. Kapasi acts like a catalyst making her understand her malady.

The reason of Mrs. Das’s betrayal was boredom which arose from loneliness that was a product of her diasporic condition. But to assume that diasporic condition resulted in infidelity would be an unsound claim. The real pangs of the diasporic condition occurred in Mrs. Das’ next eight years of guilt-ridden existence, where she could not even disclose her secret to anyone. Mrs. Das needs, as a confidante, someone who is close as well as far-away at the same time, just like the country of her origin. She is emotionally so close to India that its value system suffocates her by giving her an intense sense of guilt for what she has done, and yet the country is far off that it takes her eight long years to arrive at to it. At last she confides in Mr. Kapasi is symbolic of India --- close enough to disclose but far enough not to keep any contact with.
The story ‘Mrs. Sen’s’ deals with the utter loneliness and despair of a Bengali lady in the US. In ‘Mrs. Sen’s’ the Genitive in the title indicates her place, but she feels like an outsider in her own house and undoubtedly in the new land.

Mrs. Sen is a woman of thirty without baby of her own so far. She has to use almost all her time in the University residence, while Mr. Sen, Professor of Mathematics, is all time busy in his educational work. Mr. Sen advises his wife to learn driving and move out of the residence when free. But for a conventional Indian housewife, driving does not come effortlessly. In due course of time Mrs. Sen takes up a job of babysitting but in her own house. Eliot, a child of eleven, comes to her house every day after his school, because his mother works fifty miles north and his father lives two thousand miles away. Opposite, to the nature of Mrs. Sen, Eliot’s mother is aloof. She hardly shows affection even for her son. After her dinner at home, she leaves behind the left-over work for Eliot to finish. For Mrs. Sen Eliot becomes a substitute- son. She always gives him something to eat which is not expected in her responsibility. Eliot too takes pleasure in and responds her affection.

Though Mrs. Sen opposes initially, she also makes efforts to acclimatize to American society. On the one hand, her elaborate every day routine of Indian food preparation shows she is adhered to her cultural identity. On the other hand her frequent (though failed) attempts to learn how to drive to establish that she is trying to compromise and cross the bridge between cultures.

The story presents characters of Mrs. Sen and Eliot from the different culture, sharing each other’s pitiable solitude.

It is quite clear that Mrs. Sen is always nostalgic, listens to the recorded talk of her family on the tape. On the other hand Eliot is introvert and has no objection about being fed a pizza every night by his mother because she is too tired. He accepts this as normal while Mrs. Sen needs to assure herself that she does not miss her mother. Mrs. Sen’s inability to leave behind the past and Eliot’s passive acknowledgment of his lifestyle are contrasted against each other. The aloofness of Eliot’s mother has been juxtaposed with the warm treatment of Mrs. Sen.

The story reaches to climax when Mrs. Sen smashes her car against a telephone pole. Eliot’s mother hears this; she discontinues Eliot from coming to Mrs. Sen.
anymore. However, the touching part of the story is the proximity that develops between Mrs. Sen and Eliot. Mrs. Sen has no friends in America. Her husband has no time for her. She has shared her loneliness with Eliot. Eliot’s mother also has no time to comprehend the subtle emotion that develops between an American child and an Indian Woman.

Mrs. Sen takes driving lessons and tries to maintain some sort of friendship with Eliot’s mother but Mrs. Eliot does not seem much interested. As Mrs. Sen is an outsider to in the US, Eliot’s mother also seems to be an outsider to the world that has been consciously created in the apartment to be similar to a home in India.

Eliot’s mother behaves with Mrs. Sen as a potential employer towards her employee asking questions and noting down the answers on the steno pad whereas Mrs. Sen tries to be tied her by cordially greeting and entertaining her. It can be said that the sense of alienation becomes severe in the immigrants because of this approach of the native people who are disinclined of any contact with what is not of their ‘type’. The pain of uprooting from one’s native land and shifting to an alien culture together with the ‘mind your business’ kind of attitude that the native people show contribute to the sense of displacement and alienation that affects the life of Mrs. Sen.

The story is also noteworthy in that it also describes the loneliness of modern metropolitan American life, where relationships and intimacy have collapsed. This is reflected through Eliot’s relationship with his mother. Despite being American, Lahiri suggests that Eliot and his mother are also equally alone and estranged and do not quite belong. Contrasting with Mrs. Sen’s Calcutta life with its crowded bustling groups of family and friends, Eliot and his mother do not appear to have either friends or family, and spend Labour Day alone. There seems to be no genuineness or affection in the mother-son relationship, as the mother being too engrossed with getting through her chores and too fatigued to take Eliot anywhere.

Though the story ‘A Real Durwan’ has its location in Calcutta, it reflects the theme of exile and alienation in the native milieu. The central character of the story is Boori Ma, who is a refugee from East Pakistan, now settled in Calcutta in a deprived condition. There is both fact and fiction of what she says about her past life. She is now separated from her husband, four daughters, and two storey house. According to
Boori Ma, her life in East Pakistan was simply a glory, and even she used to bath in fragrant water with petals and perfumes. Due to change in destiny, she has to work as an unauthorized guard (doorman) of a building situated in Calcutta. Now she is living on the offerings of the residents. Being a self-appointed sweeper of the stairwell of the building, she protects the building from doubtful strangers. The residents are thankful to her for this and other assistance. Despite some compassion and sympathy shown towards her by some residents, she is living a life of exile.

The condition of a Boori Ma becomes more crestfallen when residents accused her of stealing of the basin fitted on the stairwell. She is thrown out of the house for carelessness in her duty. In the beginning of the short story Boori Ma is introduced as a refugee and at the end of the story we see her again as homeless exile.

The writer wants to prove that the geographical displacement is not the only condition for an exile; a person may lose his identity even in his native land in this self-centered and greedy world.

It can be observed that Boori Ma’s life is a chain of losses, misfortunes and grief. Her second expulsion from the means of her livelihood extracts her into alienation, denial, insecure future and physical and psychological disorder.

The story reflects that it is not only in America that the Indian migrants and their children go through humiliating and discriminating experiences but the diasporas meet this kind of treatment in every dominant culture and nation. Being a Bengali, Boori Ma was sent to Calcutta after the partition. Though everybody is considerate to her, she is regarded as a refugee and is kept away from the shared activities of the locality. She faces a double displacement of being a non-Indian and belonging to a lower caste. Her dilemma is that she can neither go back across the border, which was once her home, nor is she given a space in this new country, which was politically declared to be her home.

The story ‘The Treatment of Bibi Haldar’ also deals with the displacement and alienation in the native milieu. It shows how Bibi Haldar like Boori Ma of ‘A Real Durwan’ has become a victim of alienation in her own home, family and society. This pathetic story sets in Calcutta. It also shows the clash between simplicity and shrewdness.
Bibi Haldar was an orphan since childhood and was diagnosed with a hysterical illness of epilepsy. She was staying with her relative in Calcutta. She was given a storage room on the roof that proves her pathetic condition as the text writes, ‘A space in which one could sit but not comfortably stand, featuring an adjoining latrine, curtained entrance, one window without a grille, and shelves made from the panels of the old door.’ (Lahiri, 1999:159)

Bibi Haldar maintained register of inventory for the cosmetics shop that her cousin Haldar owned and handled at the mouth of courtyard. Her cousin and his wife extract lot of work from her in running the shop without her knowledge. In return they have given her only food, shelter and sufficient clothes.

She has a disease that bewildered everyone. Her untold grief and pain was partly caused by her physical illness which have not been appropriately detected and partly caused by her unsatisfied requirements and unrealized dreams as a young woman.

It must be noted that her only passion in life is to get married. Every day she expected a man to come and offer his hand to her. She was always eager to hear from the other women the details of their marriage. Many times she was perturbed about the unfulfillment of her desire. Even the doctors examining her proclaimed that only marriage would restore her to health.

But Mr. and Mrs. Haldar never concerned to give any thoughts of Bibi’s marriage. They make many justifications for the same, such as her marriage would involve a lot of expenses. After insisted by neighbors Mr. Haldar gave an advertisement for her marriage in the newspaper that reads as

‘GIRL UNSTABLE, HEIGHT 152 CENTIMETERS SEEKS HUSBAND.’ (Lahiri, 1999: 165)

These words used in the matrimonial column speak a lot about the plight of a naïve misfit. As is expected, this exercise of advertisement proved fruitless.

In the pregnancy of Mrs. Haldar, Bibi is treated as an out caste. Mrs. Haldar feared her as an evil omen and wanted to avoid her shadow, to prevent any harm to her child. Mrs. Haldar gave birth to a female child. When her daughter suffered for
five days due to illness, Mrs. Haldar again came under phobia and blamed Bibi for the illness.

At last Mr. Haldar closed his cosmetic shop and left the place with his wife and the daughter. Bibi was left alone with Rs. 300/- In a sense Bibi became immigrant and displaced in her own house. She survives only with the help of her caring neighbors.

There appears a twist in the story when a woman discovers her pregnancy. The search for the real culprit of her pregnancy ended in futility. She becomes a mother without marriage, delivers and nurtures the baby as her hysterical fits are cured forever.

This heart touching story is full of pathos. It is about emotional exile of simple and naive woman who becomes an immigrant and alien in her own house.

While dealing with immigrant experiences, Lahiri has effectively shown that a person can become ‘Immigrant’ in his or her own home and society by facing alienation and victimization imposed by his or her own people. In the case of the last two short stories discussed above, the experience of displacement in native milieu becomes more poignant as the central characters of these stories have faced victimization on the basis of gender and caste.

In the story ‘Sexy’ the concept of displacement and dislocation is given a new turn. In the story, the feeling of dislocation is not experienced by an expatriate or an exile, but by someone belonging to her own home. Lahiri, by subjecting an American girl to the feeling which is generally experienced by expatriates, wants to portray that her stories are written with the aim to assert the multicultural nature of the society that has begun to accept the expatriates as their equal, despite their cultural differences. The story deals with Miranda’s striving to come to terms with the fact of her unsolicited love affair with an ‘other’, a married Bengali man who leaves her both emotionally worn out and alienated.

In the story ‘The Third and Final Continent’ the notion of home for the narrator, a first generation Indian expatriate, considerably transforms, of course, after thirty years of his stay in America that shows how one can cope with alienation effectively. He feels after thirty years of living in his adopted land the need for assimilation. In an effort to achieve emotional stability, he reasons himself as he
expresses his views in these lines; ‘We are American citizen now, so that we can collect social security when it is time. Though we visit Calcutta every few years, and bring back more drawstring pajams and Darjeeling tea, we have decided to grow old here.’ (Lahiri, 1999: 197)

This change has been feasible because the narrator and his wife were open-minded from the beginning, realizing traces of resemblance between Bengali life and American life. This openness gave them strength to appreciate America as their home. In early year of their marriage, they noticed as the text informs;

‘…discovered that a man named Bill sold fresh fish on Prospect Street, and that a shop in Harvard Square called Cardullo’s sold bay leaves and clover.’ (Lahiri, 1999: 196)

The duo created an ambiance of the home in an alien land, adjusting and adapting to American life from the beginning and thereby reducing the sense of alienation.

All the stories mentioned above deal with the theme of the search of ‘home’ amidst the experiences of alienation. Characters like Shobha, Mira, Mr. Kapasi, Mrs. Das, Mrs. Sen Miranda, Boori Ma, Bibi Haldar experience displacement and alienation in different contexts.

The above analysis indicates that immigrant experience is not easy, simple and straightforward but it is disturbing and contradictory. Lahiri’s stories portray the experience of cultural displacement and its consequences. The sense of rootlessness and alienation spreads through almost all the stories. The following observation of Bedprasad Giri is certainly applicable to the writings of Lahiri, as he remarks,

The non-resident Indian writers have explored their sense of displacement—a perennial theme in all exile literature. They have given more poignancy to the exploration by dealing not only with a geographical dislocation but also a socio-cultural sense of displacement. Their concerns are global concerns as today’s world is afflicted with the problems of immigrants, refugees, and all other exiles. These exilic states give birth to the sense of displacement and rootlessness. (Giri, 2007: 243)
3.3 Nostalgia and Cultural Assimilation

Nostalgia, home, and belonging are interrelated concepts. These concepts play a very important part in the development of Diasporic Sensibility. The word ‘nostalgia’ is derived from the Greek terms nostos meaning ‘return home’ and also meaning ‘pain’. It was first used in a Swiss medical treatise in 1688 to explain homesickness experienced by soldiers stationed abroad.

The term ‘home’ broadens beyond a geographical, physical space and can be elucidated with other aspects such as memories, relationships and cultural signifiers such as food and rituals.

It is often argued that ‘Nostalgia’ is a useful tool for the diasporic writer, as it helps him/her to investigate the impact of the past on the present, and its role is significant in a literature where such issues are constantly being discussed. Conventionally nostalgia is considered as homesickness for a geographical space and its process of looking backwards to the vanished past. However, in this age of globalization nostalgia can similarly be rooted in the future and be viewed as an envision for the romanticized future. Further, it should be noted that nostalgic feelings may not just revolve around going back to one’s home in a physical sense of the term; nostalgia can be a subtle psychological expression of a longing to recollect an emotional bond with one’s native land.

The term ‘belonging’ becomes uncertain as it does not depend on any fixed geographical space. In this context, displacement can be actual and allegorical and the perception of home is not only a geographical space but also an emotional space which illustrates the protagonist’s relationship with one’s self and with the world around them. Lahiri’s short stories in Interpreter of Maladies portray intensely the disconnection between feeling at home and the place of actual residence, they also represent a different generational point of view on the issues surrounding diasporic nostalgia and belonging. Her stories highlight the inner life of the characters with their in-between condition as she herself experiences the dilemma which is properly reflected in her following remark as she informs what it means to reach out her parents as a second generation expatriate in the following remark;
For though they had created me, and reared me, and lived with me day after day, I knew that I was a stranger to them, an American child. In spite of our closeness, I feared that I was alien. This was the predominant anxiety I had felt while growing up. (Lahiri, 2011: 79-82)

The home or domestic space becomes a field where her characters recognize the dilemma of spanning two parallel worlds, continuously making choices that put their individual aspirations against their familial/societal duties and expectations. The family unit and familial relationships become a frequent theme, as a basis of clash and conciliation. Her stories offer detail descriptions of everyday things and works such as cooking that in turn become metaphors for alienation or nostalgic assurance for her characters. Through stories, Lahiri has presented concept of multiple belongings that become an important aspect of the lives of the modern immigrants.

Lahiri’s characters reflect nostalgia for the homeland which is a sign of loneliness and displacement in an alien environment. Her literary creation effectively brings out the emotional clash between this first-generation diaspora engaged in a longing for the homeland and all it represents in terms of familiarity, and the second-generation, US-born children who cannot join with the unchanging worldview of their parents, and recognize their roots through a superficial appreciation of food and film. Lahiri’s protagonists do not necessarily want return to a homeland; their obsession is more with creating a ‘sense of home’ in America. In her literary works newly arrived immigrants cautiously recreate a sense of home within their domestic zone by surrounding themselves with relics of their outdated past. Mrs. Sen passionately fills her days through preparation of various Bengali dishes, while the television is permanently tuned to. It is clear that the concept of ‘home’ can expand beyond the nation-state and territorial borders to include a psychological and emotional point of reference that can be in flux.

Lahiri’s short stories unfold that nostalgia is an inevitable element of diaspora sensibility. The nostalgia may be for a departed way of life or relationships where the break with the past leads to reflection on the choices being made.

Nostalgia is also regarded as a tool that the authors use to explore deeper into how their diasporic characters deal with the issues of home and belonging. Their narrative
moreover appears to be concerned with the form this nostalgia takes within the context of the hybrid diasporic where choices are being constantly made. Their emphasis is not a return to home as defined by India, but rather to create a sense of home or to homing sense in America.

The family portrayed in the stories of *Interpreter of Maladies* becomes a dramatic setting where relationships are cultivated or challenged. Her characters know that they live in a bi-cultural world, where their concept of family is formed as much as by an inherent sense of familial values as by prevailing American norms.

The search for a home amidst cultural displacement also means that there would always be an effort on the part of immigrants to re-create a resemblance of the home knowingly or unknowingly. This re-creation would imply conscious refusal of the influence of the dominant culture and embracing consistently to one’s own native tradition which creates obstacles in the cultural assimilation of these immigrants. This refusal may be found in the stubborn approach adopted towards food, clothes, practice of religion and customs as these factors can also be regarded as identity markers. In this attitude adopted by immigrants, memory plays a key role. Referring to this complex formation of diasporic sensibility Vijay Mishra remarks; “Diasporas connect themselves with the idea of the homeland or ‘desh’ against which other lands are foreign or ‘videsh’ and carry their homelands in the forms of a series of objects and fragments of narratives and memories in their heads or in their suitcases.” (Mishra, 1996:67-68)

The reader comes across authenticity of Vijay Mishra’s observation in the short stories of Lahiri. In ‘A Temporary Matter’ Lahiri’s male protagonist reflects over the earlier happier days of courtship and marriage, while dealing with the harsh truth of an increasingly detached wife and the grief over a still-born child as the text aptly remarks, ‘He thought of how long it had been since she looked into his eyes and smiled, or whispered his name on those rare occasions they still reached for each other’s bodies before sleeping.’(Lahiri, 1999: 5)

Nostalgia, in this example, manifests as a lamenting for a missing link in a relationship. The story narrated from the husband’s point of view, brings to light his nostalgia that can be observed as a longing for the old intimacy of between the two and the possibilities of the future.
It becomes clear that the story is nostalgic not only about the ending of a marriage, but also about cultural displacement.

In fact, Lahiri’s main concern in these stories of young, metropolitan couples reaching turning point in their relationships is to illustrate nostalgia as a longing for an emotional connection or meaning in the relationship that has been lost.

Lahiri’s characters like Mr. Pirzada and Mrs. Sen endorse nostalgia for a homeland left behind and thirst for kinship ties in the most extreme sense.

Mrs. Sen, in the story Mrs. Sen’s, nostalgically longs for a cheerful childhood or the company of their siblings in their paternal home that opposes her assimilation in the host country. She contrasts the isolation and boredom of an American lifestyle against the noise and energy of the joint family and the kinship configuration they’ve left behind as the text describes, ‘Another day she played a cassette of people talking in her language […] that her family had made for her […] Mrs. Sen identified each speaker. My third uncle, my cousin, my father, my grandfather.’ (Lahiri, 1999: 128)

The importance of kinship bonds and family devotion depicted in many of Lahiri’s stories can precisely reflects dissimilarity between Indian and the Western attitude and shows how American defines female identity through the Western parameters of individualism. In her stories diasporic women play a significant role in creating a sense of home and belonging within the diaspora. They do this through tropes of memory, religious rituals, food and formation of familial/social kinships that enable comfortable individual and family life. As Mrs. Sen shares communal life she has left behind in Calcutta with its shared religious rites and milestones. This memory forms her ‘cultural memory’. The text informs the readers as follows;

Whenever there is a wedding in the family, “she told Eliot one day, “or a large celebration of any kind, my mother sends out word...for all the neighbourhood women to bring blades just like this one, and then they sit in an enormous circle on the roof of our building, laughing and gossiping and slicing fifty kilos of vegetables through the night. (Lahiri, 1999:115)

Mrs. Sen’s nostalgia reveals itself in the kind of an almost physical disease or depression which becomes severe every time she gets a letter from home.
The dilemma of immigrants is rightly captured by Abha Shukla –Kaushik in her remarks as she points out;

Lahiri’s characters reflect traces of India through the details of characters who inhabit the complex and complicated world of Indian immigrants in the United States. Her characters seem to exist simultaneously in two cultures; the reality of American experience and the memories and sphere of Indian traditions. (Shukla, 2010: 58)

Nostalgia, when portrayed as a longing for the lost way of life or bonds of kinship, is most apparent in the stories that deal with narratives of first-generation migrants, who may not be as culturally aware or cosmopolitan as the younger diaspora in negotiating psychological and physical boundaries. This is brilliantly brought out in the story ‘Mrs. Sen’s’. Mrs. Sen, a lonely Bengali wife, isolated in a small flat on an American campus, shares her sense of alienation and nostalgia with a ten-year-old American boy she babysits. Her firm rejection to drive or wear western clothes symbolizes an unwillingness to assimilate and belong to the American society that is now her home. Her apartment is a shrine to the life and memories she has left behind in India and her enthusiastic efforts to recreate Bengali dishes highlight her discord from the world around her. The text presents her predicament as it narrates; “Send pictures,’ they write. ‘Send pictures of your new life.’ What picture can I send? They think I live the life of a queen [...] She looked around the blank walls of the room. They think I press buttons, and the house is clean. They think I live in a palace.’ (Lahiri, 1999: 125)

The above quotation shows Mrs. Sen’s disillusionment with the American reality that has not measured up to the anticipation she had back home.

Mrs. Sen represents the most stunning form of diasporic isolation and nostalgic longing for the home left behind. She publicizes her services as a childminder who is ‘responsible and kind,’ and will care for the child in her home. However, the essential point of the story is that Mrs. Sen does not feel ‘at home’ in America. She rejects to accept, assimilate or adapt the American way of life. Lahiri frequently refers to her inability to belong, through a detailed account of her clothing, her home, and her culinary choices, all of which are specifically Indian and at inconsistent with her American environment.
The narrative uses markers which reveal Mrs. Sen’s alienation from her American setting. Her warm, over furnished home is a place where ‘the radiators continuously hissed like a pressure cooker’ (Lahiri, 1999: 113) and where Mrs. Sen sat ‘chopping things’ using not a knife but a ‘blade that curved like the prow of a Viking ship sailing to battle in distant seas.’ (Lahiri, 1999: 113) The curved shape of the knife and its comparison to a boat reflects Mrs. Sen’s own voyage from her family home in Calcutta to a distant campus town in Boston.

When Eliot questions her about the knife, she refers to her home in Calcutta where‘…there was at least one in every household.’ (Lahiri, 1999: 115)

Lahiri differentiates Indian life of Mrs.Sen with her present loneliness in Boston where she cannot sleep because of the silence.

Lahiri gives extensive descriptions of Mrs. Sen’s Bengali food preparations. Food, in this case, becomes both symbolic of her nostalgic homesickness for Calcutta and a source of comfort/escape as well as an alternative for the home. Lahiri uses violent images and words to describe Mrs. Sen’s cooking. This also reflects her disappointment with her surroundings that appears in the text as it narrates ‘….she took whole vegetables between her hands and hacked them apart...She split things in half, then quarters, speedily producing florets, cubes, slices, and shreds.’(Lahiri, 1999: 114)

The central drama of the story revolves around Mrs. Sen’s attempts to learn driving. Her husband imagines that this will make her mobile and independent and more at ease in America. Her reluctance to learn symbolizes her rejection of America and what it represents.

The only time she does drive is when she is desperate to purchase a fresh fish for a Bengali dish. The drive to get the fish becomes a symbolic means of returning home while her lack of mobility is a symbol for her failure to go beyond her boundaries and assimilate. The most suggestive lines of the story that sum up the nostalgia of a first generation diasporic who does not have the advantage of either skype or internet are when Eliot observes Mrs. Sen’s enthusiasm and excitement on receiving a letter from her family. On receiving a letter, she embraces Eliot as the text describes the occasion
in the words, ‘…clasping his face to her sari, and surrounding him with her odor of mothballs and cumin.’ (Lahiri, 1999:121)

The imagery used by Lahiri suggests that Mrs. Sen herself is sealed in the time warp. She is like an Egyptian mummy frozen in time, clinging to her memories. As Eliot watches her read the letter, he feels, as the text depicts; ‘Mrs. Sen was no longer present in the room with the pear-coloured carpet.’ (Lahiri, 1999: 122)

Lahiri contrasts her enthusiastic expectation of the letters from home, and her consequent joy, with the fatigued actions of her normal day-to-day routine as the text describes; ‘Two things […] made Mrs. Sen happy. One was the arrival of a letter from her family […] Afterward the apartment was suddenly too small to contain her.’ (Lahiri, 1999:121)

The letters offer a momentary relief, but it also makes Mrs. Sen question the present. Nostalgia, in this case, acts as a source of temporary joy but also as a barrier to adjusting and accepting the present.

Mrs. Sen is always engaged in the conflict between past and present ways of being and concurrently lives in two geographical spaces where they are constantly assessing and reassessing the meaning of displacement in a foreign environment. Nostalgia in such cases enables them to response the lives around them. This indicates that in cases like Mrs. Sen, the diasporic sensibility of belonging and home is shaped by the presence or absence of kinship configuration and community that allows the remembrance of certain cultural memories.

On a group level, nostalgia can often transcend an individual sense of loss to absorb a collective sense of what is absent in terms of belonging to a specific group. Mrs. Sen continuously grieves the loss of her friends and family. She tells her husband that her sister had a baby girl and that the next time she sees her, as the text describes,

‘…she will be three years old. Her own aunt will be a stranger. If we sit side by side on a train she will not know my face.’ (Lahiri, 1999: 122)

Lahiri is the master at revealing nostalgia as a condition that enables her characters to live in two geographical spaces concurrently. Similarly, like Mrs. Sen of
‘Mrs. Sen’s’ Mr. Pirzada of ‘When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine’ displays character living simultaneously in the past and present. Their homes in this milieu are not just physical places, but also the sites of memory. Their unwillingness to give up the rituals and other physical symbols of their identity and cultural separateness, such as clothing or food, can be regarded as a form of nostalgia for a way of life they have left behind and also as a way of dealing with their present.

In ‘When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine’, Lahiri develops the theme of nostalgia and the different forms of belonging, a diasporic can adopt. Mr. Pirzada’s entrance allows Lilia, the child narrator to know her own parents’ separateness and isolation from their American surroundings, even if superficially they may appear well-integrated. Lilia’s mother, for instance, has cut her hair, and as the text describes; ‘...bobbed to a suitable length for her part-time job as a bank teller.’ (Lahiri, 1999: 27)

The story focuses Lilia’s growing appreciation of her parents’ nostalgia and separateness from their American surroundings, while she as a second-generation American is equally at ease in both worlds, able to cope with her Bengali inheritance and her American present which reveals her cultural assimilation. Lilia’s parents are portrayed by Lahiri as being not completely comfortable in their adopted home, even if they are appreciative of its wellbeing and security. Lilia’s mother was proud of the fact that Lilia was guaranteed a secure life, an easy life, an excellent education with every opportunity. Despite this access to a life of material luxury, the parents’ feelings and conduct continually looking back to the life they’ve left behind.

The whole story is marked with a sense of nostalgia for the past and memory influencing the present. Lilia’s parents constantly recall about their life in India. Even the negative part of such a life, with its power cuts and exam burden, become a source of anecdotal comfort. Lilia’s mother realistically reproduces Bengali dishes in her American home as the text describes; ‘...lentils with fried onions, green beans with coconut, fish cooked with raisins in a yogurt sauce.’ (Lahiri, 1999: 30)

By reproducing Bengali dishes and talking about Indian politics, her characters reside in nostalgia as a form of reassurance. Their home and domestic arena become echoes of the life they have left behind yet dragged into the present. Mr. Pirzada’s arrival allows them to involve in this nostalgia more freely, whether through food, language or gossip about local politics and emphasizes their aloofness from the
American mainstream cultural. When they connect with the America outside their four walls, it is to seek out tangible markers of their Bengaliness that will satisfy their nostalgia. The following lines from the text hinted at their nostalgic feelings:

The supermarket did not carry mustard oil, doctors did not make house calls, neighbours never dropped by without an invitation, and of these things, every so often, my parents complained. In search of compatriots, they used to trail their fingers, at the start of each new semester, through the columns of the university directory, circling surnames familiar to their part of the world. It was in this manner that they discovered Mr. Pirzada, and phoned him, and invited him to our home. (Lahiri, 1999: 24)

In her portrayal of Lilia, Lahiri illustrates the dual-belonging of a second-generation diasporic who can lead a dual existence where her home life is at stark variance with her external life at school as the text describes; ‘No one at school talked about the war followed so faithfully in my living room. We continued to study the American Revolution.’(Lahiri, 1999: 32)

The ease with which second generation children can cope with in both worlds is also focused vividly in the Halloween scene where Lilia dresses as a witch and goes trick and treating, holding burlap sacks that had once consisted of basmati rice, for collecting candy. The ‘burlap sack,’ identifies her Indian heritage. The actions of the older generation are contrasted with Lilia’s behaviour, as she dips in and out of both cultures with equal ease. She eats traditional meals at home but dresses as a witch for Halloween and studies the American Civil War without inquiring the reasoning behind each event. Lahiri portrays the hybridity of a contemporary diasporic, who can cope with two different cultures, Bengali, and American, both as a spectator and partaker. Lilia’s parents’ willing, (though superficial) adaptation to American traditions, such as Halloween, represents the diasporic’s capacity to straddle two ways of belonging, to adapt and adopt their ways in order to feel ‘at home’ in America. While Lilia and her parents adapt to their American way of life, Mr. Pirzada remains peripheral, skimming the surface of his day to day existence, his thoughts and emotions harking back to his family trapped in the Bangladeshi civil war. He displays the most intense form of nostalgia. His strong geographical connection and longing
for the past is apparent when he religiously checks his watch, which is permanently
set to Dacca time. Before eating Mr. Pirzada, always did a peculiar thing. He took out
a plain silver watch without a band, which he kept in his breast pocket unlike the
watch on his wrist; the pocket watch was set to the local time in Dacca, eleven hours
ahead. Observing his actions, Lilia realizes that; ‘….life was being lived in Dacca
first...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)

Lahiri shows Mr. Pirzada as a man cut off from the present; a feature he shares
with Mrs. Sen. His emotional life is dealt with flashbacks of the events happening
back in the newly independent Bangladesh and the memory of his wife and daughters
in Dacca. After his exit, Lilia, the young narrator of the story, realizes ‘what it meant
to miss someone who was so many miles and hours away...’ (Lahiri, 1999: 42)

The sense of regret and nostalgia for the past is also surfaced in the story ‘A Real
Durwan’, where Boori Ma, reduced to a life of destitute as a sweeper in a lower
middle-class apartment block, continually laments back to the luxurious life she had
enjoyed in the past. Her nostalgia is for an idealized past that contains no discomforts,
as the text informs; ‘Aside from her hardships, the other thing Boori Ma liked to
chronicle was easier times […] At our house, we ate goat twice a week. We had a
pond on our property, full of fish.’ (Lahiri, 1999: 71)

Lahiri’s stories differentiate the type of nostalgia experienced by different
generations of the diaspora. The nostalgia of the second-generation diaspora is, in a
sense, second-hand and inherited from their parents. There is nothing self-conscious
or explicitly emotional in their preference for Indian food or music. In the case of her
American-born yet Indian-origin characters, there is an ease and understanding of
their cultural attachment, but less of a nostalgic anguish on maintaining or re-living it.
Her American-born second-generation characters apply their right to choose, and
elements of culture and customs are discarded or adapted to suit the conditions. There
is knowledge of Indian value systems or codes of conduct, but these are exercised and
adjusted within an American existence that values individual preferences and
personal aspiration.

In the story ‘This Blessed House’, the husband gradually understands that the
woman he has married is a stranger who does not share his own cultural values, and
he is nostalgic about the traditional kind of marriage his own parents may have enjoyed. He feels a constant need to remind his wife of their shared Indian inheritance as the text describes;

He was getting nowhere with her, with this woman whom he had known for only four months and whom he had married [...] He thought with a flicker of regret of the snapshots his mother used to send him from Calcutta, of prospective brides who could sing and sew and season lentils without consulting a cookbook. (Lahiri, 1999: 146)

In the story ‘The Third and Final Continent’, Lahiri deals with the pain of arrival facing by an immigrant. She portrays the loneliness and bafflement experienced by the newly arrived, who seem to live in periphery, caught perpetually between nostalgia as they engage in remembering how things were back home and the isolation of their present condition. There is a nostalgic longing for shared language and rituals, and also fear that, with time, these will disappear.

Written from the viewpoint of a young Bengali man who is a lodger with an eccentric American lady, the author portrays a life being established slowly and painstakingly in an alien land. As the couple seeks out the familiar flavor of food and Bengali friends, they also comprehend that they will have to give up certain elements of their separateness to belong to the new way of life. The young protagonist’s wife, for instance, as the text describes;

…no longer drapes the end of her sari over her head, or weeps at night for her parents,’ but when their son grows up and leaves for university, they still ‘bring him home’ for weekends so that ‘he can eat rice […] with his hands, and speak in Bengali, things we sometimes worry he will no longer do after we die. (Lahiri, 1999: 197)

With above discussion it becomes clear that most of the stories in this 1999 Pulitzer Prize winning debut collection, Interpreter of Maladies are unified in their nostalgic longing, either for a romanticized image of ‘home’ or for emotional connection in relationships that have been disintegrated in an alien land. The stories are largely written in an American setting and portray Bengali-Indian protagonists who do not necessarily want a return to a geographical space that is India. Their
nostalgic obsession is rather with merging their different selves and adapting to the cross-cultural, fluid space that is America. An analysis of her short stories shows that her fictional protagonists are largely shaped by the urbanized, competitive stress to settle in America and their nostalgia is clearly associated with a loss of either conventional forms of kinship backup or emotional understanding. However, this does not necessarily simplify their dilemma. Despite being lawful residents, financially stable and established in relationships whether it is marriage or a parent-child connection, her protagonists seem to be at a crossroads, facing isolation or choice.

The families of Lahiri’s short stories are generally nuclear one and the members belong to the acculturated second and third generation. Characters of stories placed in the diasporic space belong to diverse stages of cultural assimilation. While Mrs. Sen in ‘Mrs. Sen’s’ is a newcomer and profoundly rooted in Bengali Indian culture, Shobha and Shukumar in ‘A Temporary Matter’ or Mr. And Mrs. Das in ‘Interpreter of Maladies’ are Americanised and have adopted a hybrid culture. Shobha, for example, has close white American friends like Gillian. The couple’s culinary habits and sharing of household duties are indicators of their assimilation. Lilia in ‘When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine’ is born and brought up in US and looks upon her parents’ cultural practice with some disbelief. Mr. Kapasi in ‘Interpreter of Maladies’ notices that Mr. and Mrs. Das, who are visiting India dress and speak in a different way, argue among themselves, the wife calls her husband by first name. Mr. Das presses Mr. Kapasi’s hands like an American. All these suggest their differences from a common Indian. These cultural specifications place the characters in proper perspectives. However, Lahiri is not interested only in cultural specifications but she is also more interested in exploring the human mindscape of her characters and dealing with the human predicaments.

The cultural assimilation and spanning two cultures and parallel worlds is best reflected in Lahiri’s final story, ‘The Third and Final Continent,’ which not only highlights the financial difficulties and loneliness facing immigrants from India but also focuses their firm resolve to succeed and make a new life for themselves in America. It should be noted that Lahiri’s purpose is to show that although this transition is not without huge price and sacrifice; its success is due to the immigrant’s capability to improvise, innovate and balance different facets of their being. The story is insightful in tone as the narrator, an elderly Indian man looks back on his life and
remembers his youthful struggles to survive and also the companionship of fellow Bengalis, first as a student in England and then as a modestly paid librarian in Boston as the text narrates;

We lived three or four to a room, shared a single icy toilet and took turns cooking pots of egg curry...On weekends, we lounged barefoot in drawstring pajamas, drinking tea...Some weekends the house was crammed with still more Bengalis to whom we had introduced ourselves at the greengrocer, or on the tube, and we made yet more egg curry, and played Mukesh on a Grundig reel-to-reel. (Lahiri, 1999: 173-174)

The narrator and his wife ‘have decided to grow old’ in America, as American citizens who ‘can collect social security when it is time.’ His wife adjusts to her new life and learns to ‘no longer drape[s] the end of her sari over her head, or weep[s] at night for her parents,’ and together they explore the city, meeting other Bengalis. On the other hand both Mr. Pirzada and Mrs. Sen are reluctant to be assimilated as they strongly represent a nostalgia for a homeland left behind and yearning for kinship bonds in the most extreme sense, whereas Lilia’s parents have accustomed and reconciled two ways of being more successfully, recognizing their past, in the form of rituals and food, but also acknowledging their present by partaking in American traditions such as Halloween and in the case of the mother, going out to work. Lahiri faithfully exemplifies the different aspects of nostalgia and cultural assimilation.

In her depiction of the Das family, Lahiri shows the dilemma of a diasporic that seems equally ‘foreign’ in both the land of his/her birth and adoption. The Das family holiday in India reveals them as tourists whose responses and attitudes are typically American. Their reactions to their surroundings and their behaviour enthrall their guide, Mr. Kapasi, who realizes that they are as foreign as a white American family. Lahiri gives observational facts that definitely describe the family as being American as the text narrates; ‘The family looked Indian but dressed as foreigners did, the children in stiff, brightly coloured clothing and caps with translucent visors.’(Lahiri, 1999: 44)
Despite being Indian, their tour to India is not an act of coming home or a nostalgic return to roots, more a detached, impatient and momentary interest. They are not diasporic, but Americanised second-generation hybrids who express only an outward curiosity in the country of their parents’ birth and cannot find emotionally ample ways to connect.

Through her first short stories collection, Lahiri has convincingly captured immigrant’s experience as a sensitive immigrant finds himself or herself eternally at a transit position burdened with memories of the original home that are struggling the realities of the new world. S. Sujatha rightly comments;

Jhumpa Lahiri masterfully explores the theme of the complexities of the immigrant experience and foreignness, the clash of lifestyles, cultural disorientation the conflicts of assimilation, the tangled ties between generations. She paints the portraits of Indian families torn between the pull of respecting family traditions, and an American way of life. (Sujatha, 2011:148)

3.4 Identity Crisis and Family Relationship

The title story ‘Interpreter of Maladies’ deals with distressed family relations caused by the feeling of displacement which is not entirely rooted when one is culturally dislocated, but might be experienced anywhere, even in one’s own family.

The strange and surprising intimacy between Mrs. Das and Mr. Kapasi, who were having different cultural and location background, points out the shared notions of their indifference from their home. For Mrs. Das, home becomes a place where she is constantly preoccupied with guilt and pain by the thought of her single unfaithful act with her husband’s Punjabi friend which resulted in her conceiving to their second son, Bobby. She is unable to admit this past of ‘guilt’ and ‘pain’ for eight long years, makes her suffer even more. Mrs. Das realizes her insular position, as a second generation immigrant, cut off from all connection with the country of her origin, and in a way, having nowhere to go to, or no one to share with. After learning that Mr. Kapasi is an interpreter of maladies, some faint expectation aroused within her, for that he might be able to ease her of her stressful memory. Ironically, we see falling
marriage of Mr. Kapasi from the point they lost their first child due to typhoid fever. His wife also had little respect for his profession of interpreter as she takes it as “all doctor’s assistant”.

Through this Kapasi couple Lahiri tries to show that despite being rooted firmly in his own family, one can experience the feeling of displacement.

The story ‘Mrs. Sen’s’ portrays Mrs. Sen’s struggle to maintain her Indian Bengali identity in an alien land. Mrs. Sen is physically in USA but on psychological level she still lives in Calcutta. Throughout the story, she is unable to shed her Indian identity. She is proud of her Indian identity. She set the border of her sari where it raised obliquely across her chest. Clothes/dress reveals her Indian identity. Her act of clothing herself with the nine-yard fabric is a way by which she insists her Indian identity. Food also becomes an important cultural identity marker in this story. With Mrs. Sen’s longing for fresh fish in a land where chopped and canned fish items were generally favored. Back home, she had grown up eating fish twice a day. However, in America Mrs. Sen did not get that much and that kind of fishes which she used to eat back in the home. The metaphor of food is an important aspect of Lahiri’s writing.

Almost all the stories in this collection have used food as a specific identity symbol. Lahiri’s obsession with the food metaphor shows how food habits of immigrant express their reluctance to assimilate with the dominant mainstream culture. Mrs. Sen is a representation of the unhappy condition of a typical Hindu Bengali Women, who, despite herself, tries to get adjusted to the American way of life. Her talks with Eliot often bring out sharp dissimilarities between India and America, and, of course, she misses India. Mrs. Sen misses everything from the fishes of Calcutta (Kolkata) to the close social attachment. She cannot connect herself to American individualism. The story highlighted Indian or Bengali life as a life in a big family where an individual is not separated from society.

Calcutta is linked with her permanent social identity. Mrs. Sen always longs for her Indian Bengali identity. Letters and fish became two main symbols of her longing for the motherland. She would like become a typical middle-class Bengali lady who always remains busy in her household work and shares her experiences with friends and neighborhood while her husband is engaged in his job. From the story, the reader can assume that she lived a happy life with her family and neighbors before coming to
America. Unlike her husband, she cannot follow any professional life in America and also not able to cope with individualized American culture.

Mrs. Sen always dissociates herself against the ways, behavior and approach and lifestyle of American people. She complaints about the indifference shown by the neighbors in the new land, as against her home where the mere raising of one’s voice was enough to make ‘one whole neighborhood and half of another --- come to share the news, to help with arrangements.’(Lahiri, 1999: 116)

Mrs. Sen’s interest in letters received from home and recorded conversation which she often heard portrays how memory recaptures past and plays crucial role in the lives of immigrants by making the pain of living amidst an alien land manageable.

Boori Ma of the story, ‘A Real Durwan’ is enforced to leave her native home in East Bengal due to the political reason of the partition of India in 1947. She was politically compelled to live as a citizen of India. However, in reality she belonged to no country, neither here, nor there. Her identity is altered with the shifts in history, politics and destiny. Though the story has its setting in Calcutta, it reflects the theme of exile and search for identity on much deeper level. The story portrays exile in the native milieu.

The story deals with the identity crisis in the life of Boori Ma. At the beginning of the short story, Boori Ma is introduced as a refugee and at the end of the story we see her as homeless exile. The writer wants to prove that the physical dislocation is not the only circumstance for an exile; a one may lose his identity even in his local land in this self-seeking world. Boori Ma always remains linked with her past East Bengal Identity and remains a stranger in West Bengal. In fact, Boori Ma's life is a sequence of destitutions and sufferings. Her second expulsion drags her into identity crisis as she faces physical and psychological disorder.

The story ‘The Treatment of Bibi Haldar’ portrays protagonist, Bibi Haldar as a victim of the diaspora in her own house where she was born. It is due to her fits that she is made to live separate from the family in the roof top room of the house. Her cousin Haldar becomes diaspora in his own locality. Ignored and neglected by his own neighbors for not getting Bibi married, he finally had to leave the place unnoticed. The central diasporic character Bibi gives birth to a baby boy of an
unknown father and gets cured. She is helped by the neighbors to rear up the child. Bibi not only gets adjusted in her life but also becomes a part of the society.

In the story ‘When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine’, we saw, how Lilia’s parents, being first generation immigrants from India were unfamiliar with life lived in Boston. Trying to locate some resemblance of their original home they ‘used to trail their fingers, at the start of each new semester, through the columns of the university directory, circling surnames familiar to their parts of the world.’ (Lahiri, 1999: 24)

Hence, they were more than willing to welcome Mr. Pirzada, who despite being an East Pakistani, was still shared similar identity markers to them in many ways. Their investigation for home and family life amidst alien shores, in a way, gets fulfilled by the common language (Bengali) they speak, the typically Bengali dishes they like, the cassettes of Kishore Kumar they listen to and having successive cups of tea dipped in austere biscuits after dinner.

The nostalgic feeling of an exile is reflected in the story which is set in Boston; the story has a background of the Indo-Pak war of 1971 and formation of Bangladesh. The story is narrated by Lilia, a little girl who is the second generation expatriate. We see the life of expatriate Mr. Pirzada through the eyes of Lilia who was ignorant of Asian Geography and History. Lahiri very successfully joins the macro event of Indo-Pak war of 1971 with micro feelings of immigrant about his family and nation. The story deals with Mr. Pirzada, a lecturer from Dacca, who is on year’s visit to the US to study the flora of New England on a funding from the government of Pakistan. In the story, Lahiri combines the stories of two families in exile – one like Mr. Pirzada totally unfamiliar to life in the US while the protagonist’s Lilia’s family is fully at home in this new land. Lilia represents the second generation expatriate while Mr. Pirzada becomes ridiculous at times when he keeps a watch set to the local time in Dacca and thus tries to live life at home and abroad at the same time.

Out of the search of University Directory, Lilia’s father and Mr. Pirzada came into contact with each other. The only link between Mr. Pirzada and this Bengali family of Lilia is the common language. Mr. Pirzada frequently visited Lilia’s family, and he becomes a sort of friend to Lilia. For Lilia, Mr. Pirzada is no more Indian, which in any case, is beyond the grasp of innocent Lilia.
The tension in the story builds up in 1971, due to turmoil in East Pakistan, the war between India and Pakistan took place that finally resulted in the creation of Bangladesh. A visit to Lilia’s house becomes critical to Mr. Pirzada since he needs to know the latest development of war situation by watching the television news at night. He is mainly anxious about his family living in Dacca. His anxiety is shared by the entire family of Lilia. After watching the news, there are long discussions between Mr. Pirzada and Lilia’s parents on which Lilia comments; ‘As if they were a single person sharing a body and a single silence and single fear.’ (Lahiri, 1999: 28)

It should be noted that Mr. Pirzada and Lilia’s parents are first generation expatriate having different religion and nation but similar language. A shared feeling of rootlessness and displacement brings them together in an alien land, which is not theirs by birth but by adoption. Their sense of identity is derived from their native country, which is “home”. Both Mr. Pirzada and Lilia’s parents suffer from the sense of alienation. However, Lilia, unlike her parents does not share this sense of alienation, but her interaction with Mr. Pirzada does perturb her and makes her conscious of the different world that lies beyond.

The second-generation immigrant like Lilia may not share the feeling of alienation in the foreign land, but they are not totally free from their ‘past’ and ‘origin’. This is shown by Lahiri when Lilia along with her friend Dora participated in Christen festival when she is called by some American neighbor in insulting terms as “Indian witch” never seen before” She is differentiated from Dora, the native inhabitant. She is regarded an “Orient” (being Indian) in the neighborhood as well as in school. Despite second generation expatriate, Lilia faces an identity crisis as her identity is defined in terms of the past history of her parents and fixed notions of the Western culture about “Indians” and despite her birth land, she remains “other”.

The story ‘This Blessed House’ deals with the crisis in the marital life of the Americanized couple Sanjeev and Twinkle. They rushed into marriage because they liked P.G. Woodhouse, disliked sitar music and were lonely. Their marriage was a typical arranged marriage. This is a marriage of convenience and both Sanjeev and Twinkle have their own causes for marrying and it surely not love, which guides them as the text narrates, ‘In truth, Sanjeev did not know what love was only what he thought it was not.’ (Lahiri, 1999: 147)
Sanjeev, who is a high profile specialized person, is a very systematic person. On the other hand Twinkle is not a well organized housekeeper. It aggravates Sanjeev. They also have different food habits while Sanjeev is all for Indian food and fondly recollects his students’ days when he used to go to an Indian restaurant for bellyful of Mugali Chicken. However, for Twinkle Indian food is the bother.

The conflict arises when the couple starts discovering in the new house so many scattered pieces of Christian things left behind by the earlier resident. They found Christen relics like a white porcelain effigy of Christ, a wooden cross key chain, a small plastic done, painting of Jesus, etc. Twinkle decided to treasure the same while Sanjeev irritated by the very act of his wife. Each discovery upsets Sanjeev, and he secretly waits for a chance to throw everything in the garbage. Further, he gets more perturb, when Twinkle prompts his friends, who come for the party, to join in the search of Christian relics. She appears victorious when she discovers a solid silver bust of Christ having thirty pounds weight. All these discoveries by Twinkle and their celebrations are a threat for Sanjeev’s Hindu Home. He cannot sustain any threat to his Hindu dignity. Moreover, they widen the psychological gap between wife and husband. Sanjeev even despised this creation of superb art as the text remarks;

‘He hated it because he knew that. Twinkle loved it.’ (Lahiri, 1999: 57)

This brief quotation is enough to point out those conflicting claims is at the core of their marital life. The caption of the story is ironical as it shows a house becomes really blessed not by external decorative pieces, but by the inner synchronization between the residents.

Though MIT graduate, Sanjeev tries to connect his own identity with his Hindu religion. He does not seem to be hardcore practitioner of Hindu religion; still he regards Christian relics and objects that he found in the new house as a threat to his religious identity. The Christian signs existed in the house becomes very embarrassing for Sanjeev. In fact it is observed that many of the South Asian expatriates gets more involved in religious activities after departure from their native land in order to preserve their own identity. For Sanjeev also religion-based identity becomes important to guard his own identity. It seems that he is involved in America only for his professional identity; on the other hand his wife reflects liberal identity that makes assimilation more trouble-free and smooth.
The loss of native language, culture resulted in a deterioration of immigrant’s identity, what they longed for and finally what they are. Immigrants are not able to strike a balance between the two worlds; the one left behind and the other they have to live in.

Identity crisis and family relations have their impact on each other, and it is also faithfully portrayed by Lahiri in the stories of the collection.

In the first story ‘A Temporary Matter’; ‘Home’ becomes a place where both Shobha and Shukumar seek to move away themselves from each other’s company. It is only after the power – cut, they have decided to remain in each other’s company and have played a game of ‘Confession’.

The slow ending of love, where the protagonists are obsessed with the past and unsure about the future is vividly shown in this third-person narrative by the author where the young couple laments the ending of their love and the still born birth of their first child. The tone of the story is desolate and melancholic. The male protagonist reflects and compares his wife’s changed behavior, and nostalgically wishes for a return to her earlier, more cheerful house and family as the text describes;

She was not this way before. She used to put her coat on a hanger, her sneakers in the closet, and she paid the bills as soon as they came. However, now she treated the house as if it were a hotel. The fact that the yellow chintz armchair in the living room clashed with the blue-and-maroon Turkish carpet no longer bothered her. (Lahiri, 1999: 6)

Lahiri shows us how far the couple has drifted apart since the demise of their baby. The husband has flashbacks to a time when Shobha’s beauty had ‘overwhelmed’ him. The new Shobha, however ‘looks at thirty-three, like the type of woman she’d once claimed, she would never resemble.’ (Lahiri, 1999: 2)

Shobha remains enigmatic for most of the time until she admits that she has rented an apartment and plans to start a new life away from him.

Lahiri’s title of the story, though ironic, is itself nostalgic. The title refers not only to the power breakdown which lasts for a few days, but also to the transient nature of the characters’ intimacy and the brevity of their love, with both protagonists
mourning, in Shobha’s case, her dead child, a grief that she is unable to share either with her husband or mother and in her husband’s case, a realization that things will never be the same again. However, in the end after sharing their secret things normalcy restored in their relationship.

In the story ‘Sexy’ nostalgia for one’s homeland is inherently connected to the affair of Miranda and Dev. At the beginning of the story, we are told that Miranda's friend Laxmi is upset and shocked at the news her cousin’s husband has fallen in love with another woman. Her reaction is narrated in the text as it states; ‘It was a wife’s worst nightmare.’ (Lahiri, 1999: 83)

Laxmi’s reaction reflects Indian’s approach towards extra-marital affair. Amusingly at the same time Miranda a young American woman having a relationship with Devjit, a married Bengali Investment banker, whose wife has left for India for a few weeks. It gives on an opportunity to Dev and Miranda to develop extra-marital affair. In their love affair, the words like, love, sacrifice and commitment do not exist. Dev and Miranda live as if, they are husband and wife. Dev praises Miranda by calling her “Sexy”. In the world of these disloyal people, there is no worth of real accountability. As an adventure, they have sex with others.

As Dev’s wife returns America, Miranda loses her hold over Dev. She suffers from loneliness. Their Sunday warming up doesn’t help her to get away from loneliness. When she looks after Rohin, the nephew of Laxmi, she feels a bit calm. Rohin asks Miranda to put on a cocktail dress. He calls her “Sexy”. It is the same adjective used by Dev in their initial meetings. When asked by Miranda what the meaning of the word “Sexy” is, Rohin answers, ‘It means looking someone you do not know.’ (Lahiri, 1999: 108)

Miranda felt Rohin’s words under the skin. When Dev has called her sexy, she had felt not within. However, now she felt frozen. She suddenly realizes her futile attraction towards Dev because he had been made for his wife that resembled Madhuri Dixit, an Indian heroine. It was the child Rohin whose innocent narration of his parent’s quarrel over his father’s extramarital affair with a woman he had never seen changed Miranda's mind. The end of the story is symbolic; Miranda goes to the place where Dev has kissed her for the first time. She sat outside the church glances
towards enormous and solid structure of the church. Her mind also got a solid base with the reality.

The story deals with the cultural conflict regarding attitude towards extra-marital affairs. It may be a usual thing for western culture. However, it was a shocking, and an intolerable thing for Indians as Laxmi reacts to the extra-marital relation of her cousin’s husband in the words; ‘If I were her I’d fly straight to London and shoot them both.’ (Lahiri, 1999: 97)

This response can be contrasted with Miranda’s attempt to continue her relationship with Dev even after her wife’s return.

Laxmi retains her native culture in the foreign land. However, it is not the case with Dev. He is struggling to cope with cultural conflicts that he faces. The story shows how the person from a third world country is lost in the glamour of Western country and robbed of his character in exile.

The end of the story shows Miranda's realization of her mistake. This realization shows that how Indian outlook on life sets things right. As western social life has almost become sex-oriented where true love and friendship have been largely grabbed by sex.

As we know Miranda, who is in love with Dev, have only blurred notions about India especially Bengal. She is always interested to know about India and Dev’s birthplace. Miranda seeks to locate the home in a place where she can reach only in imagination. Her only Indian connections except Laxmi and Dev were the Dixits, a family living in their neighborhood, where she had grown up in Michigan.

Miranda felt at to fault on listening to Rohin’s comment. The boy’s remark brought an end to the affair she had with Dev, as even he was a married man. Realization comes to Miranda that despite her elegance and beauty, she could never be able to get the position of Dev’s wife. She understood the fact that love does not mean to be sexy, rather it means being in someone’s thoughts.

The last story in the collection, ‘The Third and Final Continent’ deals with the steady adjustment of narrator-cum-protagonist and his family in an alien society. He is keen to learn to adjust, to adopt and to adapt to the foreign land. A Bengali youth
leaves his home in 1964 for England where he lives with “Penniless Bengalis,” all struggling to educate and establish themselves in an alien land. He attends a lecture at the London School of Economics. He gets a job from MIT, at U.S.A as a librarian.

The narrator made preparation to stay in the US sincerely when he buys ‘The Student Guide to North America’ and begins to read it on his flight to Boston. Life in the US would be twice removed away from home for him- as his years in UK had already exposed him to life which is very dissimilar from the one he had lived in India. Within a week, the protagonist is able to adjust himself to the new environment, to new experiences, to new languages and soon he gets used to driving on the right, calling a lift an elevator, eating cornflakes or hamburgers, etc. In each of these experiences, Lahiri highlights the certainty of charge and the mandatory responsibilities of each individual if he wished to survive in any alien land.

The narrator arrives by the plane in America on the day when Americans land on the moon. For full six weeks he has to become a tenant of Mrs. Croft, who like other Americans is overwhelmed by the unfurling of American flag on the moon and this strange lady of 103 years old makes him to call this event “Splendid”. The story depicts a contrast between this magnificent success of Americans and the repulsive plight of this Bengali librarian struggling to adjust to new environment.

The narrator’s wife gets the first flavor of cultural clash even before she lands up in America. She does not take any food from Calcutta to Boston because her hunger is killed by the mere thought that she is offered oxtail soup on a plane. She is a traditional Bengali lady and like Mrs. Sen looks misfit in an alien land.

When the narrator brings her to Mrs. Croft for her consent, he has nervousness that this selective lady living psychologically in the earlier century may completely reject his wife, Mala. However, after an inspection, she declares her, to his surprise as a perfect lady. From this point onwards, love springs in his heart for his wife. In fact, as the narrator has lost his mother, so Mrs. Croft’s acceptance of Mala bridges the cultural gap. Here, Mrs. Croft stands for universal motherhood encompassing in love and goes beyond cultural boundaries.

The story conveys immigrant’s fear about the cultural alienation of their children in an alien land. The narrator doubts that their son will no longer, speak Bengali after
their death and it will be “linguistic loss”. Mala’s attempt to imbibe Bengali culture in her son reflects how immigrants are anxious about their cultural heritage as the text narrates; ‘------------- She weeps for our son. So we drive it to Cambridge to visit him or bring him home for a weekend so that he can eat rice with us with his hands and speak in Bengali.’ (Lahiri, 1999: 197)

The couple of this story is the only one in this book that has been living a successful arranged married life.

The story represents those Indians who have crossed the seas alone to make their fortune in Europe and America. The closing lines of the story faithfully reflect the sentiments and feelings of such immigrants as they have to struggle to form their identities in an alien milieu as the narrator says,

I know that my achievement is quite ordinary. I am not the only man to seek his fortune far from home and certainly I am not the first, still there are times I am bewildered by each mile I have traveled, each person I have known, and each room in which I slept. As ordinary as it all appears, there are times when it is beyond my imagination. (Lahiri, 1999: 198)

By dealing with family and social life of first and second generation immigrants, Lahiri authentically traces out their identity crisis. Lahiri herself suffered from an identity crisis that enables her to write realistically about the identity crisis of expatriate communities. Her characters suffer from loneliness, alienation and longing for a lost world. As she admits the fact in one of the interviews;

I think that for immigrants, the challenges of exile, the loneliness, the constant sense of alienation, the knowledge and longing for a lost world, are more explicit and distressing than for their children. On the other hand the problem for children of immigrants-those with strong sense ties to their country of origin- is that they feel neither one thing nor the other. This has been my experience…..As a young child I felt that had the Indian part of me was unacknowledged, and therefore somehow neglected… I felt that I led two very separate lives. (Lahiri)
3.5 Intergenerational Gap

Generation gap or communication breakdown between generations is an age-old crisis acquiring serious dimensions in the modern world. The diasporic space is not all free from this dilemma. Culture, whether ancestral or adopted, becomes the core point of conflict. Literary works by the first generation expatriate writers are related to the mystery of arrival in an alien land, the specific pain of dislocation, the traumatic process of acculturation and uncertain recognition by the host societies. Most of the first generation characters in Lahiri’s works like Lilia’s parents (When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine), Ashima and Ashoke (The Namesake) live in a memory to a great extent. It is not that they cannot assimilate and acculturate. They can use English language, they know the use of appliances, and they are self-confident and proficient in their workplaces. However, as the memory of the homeland haunts them frequently, obviously they have the lack of motivation for assimilation. On the other hand, the second generation immigrants suffer from existential conflict. They cannot appreciate the cultural milieu of the previous generation and gradually distance themselves from it as they assimilate into mainstream culture. As Tejinder Kaur observes,

They also face the cultural dilemma when their cultural practices are mocked at, and there is a threat to their cultural identity. They stand bewildered and confused and show resistance also to the discourse of power in various forms. In the following generations, these confusions, problems and yearnings become less intense as they get less influenced by the culture of that country and also adapt themselves to it. (Kaur, 2002:192)

However, these second-generation immigrants cannot fully separate themselves from their inherited culture. Lahiri’s characters very faithfully reflect this generational dilemma of second generation expatriates.

The first generation immigrants are obviously more infatuated with their ‘homeland’ and always suffer from a feeling of being ‘uprooted’. The complications, usually, are felt more by the women, particularly if they are living simply as labels on their husbands’ suitcases and are not motivated enough to try and enter the workforce
of the adopted land, or improve themselves by study or otherwise. As simply homemakers, the sense of emotional exile becomes even more acute as they are trapped in loneliness. Each of the characters has to struggle to cope with their efforts at assimilation and survival. For instance, Mrs. Sen starts babysitting and tries her hand at driving.

The second generation is more easily able to assimilate, but their problem is of different nature. Having been born in the new country, they can become a part of new culture more easily. However, they had experienced a great sense of denial and are constantly reminded by their peers that they are different, that they do not belong.

The first generation diasporic Indians have an emotional investment in the country of their origin but the second generation diasporic Indians have no direct links with their cultural roots. They identify themselves with their motherland through their parentage. This distancing effort helps them in identifying themselves also as citizens of Western world. It is as Westerners they are most sharp in expressing their anguish about the dual nature of their identity. It is a constant process of switching on and off from one mode of living to the other that they have gone through. In this state of concurrently living two worlds, the sense of rootlessness develops and under the stress of such condition the second generation diasporic Indians seek shelter in the sense of freedom that the western world offers freedom of thought, speech, expression, lifestyle, sexuality and so on. It is especially the sexual freedom of the west that imparts a ready lifeline as an emotional relief from the agony of being in exile.

The intergenerational friction runs on a subtle level in ‘When Mr. Pirzada Come to Dine.’ As we know that Mr. Pirzada lives in two worlds – world of his native place and the world of his residence. He even cannot adjust himself to the time zone of America. Mr Pirzada though belongs to a different country, to a different religion, yet finds emotional connection with the parents of Lilia, Mr. and Mrs. Biswas, because all of them share similar language and some cultural practices. He along with other members of Bengali community living in New England observes Bengali festivals, listens to Bengali music, watches Bengali programs on television and dines together. However, all these seems odd and strange to Lilia. She is close to Pirzada, but she does not share his or her parents’ concept of ‘home.’ For her parents
and Mr. Pirzada ‘home’ is a place to go back to, mythic place of desire but for Lilia home is just a space of imagination, and place to visualize about.

The intergenerational dichotomy sometimes changes in the course of time and even in the first-generation attitude and approach of immigrant leads towards assimilation and acculturation. In the story ‘The Third and Final Continent’ the notion of home for the narrator, a first generation Indian immigrant changes after thirty years of residence in America. After thirty years of living in the adopted land, the narrator vigorously felt the need for assimilation to confirm his emotional stability.

Out of nine stories, six stories are set in abroad and through those stories we note split in the attitude to India among the first generation migrants and the second generation born of India parents abroad. For the first generation people like Mrs. Sen, or Lilia’s father in ‘When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine’, India is a home – the country of origin. However, the younger group like Shukumar, Shobha, Twinkle, Sanjeev or Lakshmi – India does not seem to have a countable presence. The other important thing is Lahiri’s choice of class she represents in her fiction – mostly middle-class Bengali – Indians, and in the three stories set in India, often the lower middle class economically poor ones. The choice may be based on her familiarity with such classes and people.

The story ‘This Blessed House’ talks about two types of diaspora – the traditionalistic and assimilationist. The traditionalists attempt to preserve their separate identity while assimilationist tries to join in the mainstream of new land. Out of the couple, portrayed in the story, Sanjeev is the presenter of the former one as he is the first generation settler in USA who came to job here while his parents are still in India. His wife, Twinkle is the second generation of settlers and is more open to assimilation. She smokes and has an attraction for the Christian religious symbols. She does not take religion seriously as Sanjeev takes it. Sanjeev is uncomfortable to exhibit Christian symbols in his house. In the house – warming party more of Bengali friends and less of American guests were invited. Typically Indian food, refreshment, ‘Samosas’ were served along with champagne. Though a supporter of assimilation Twinkle prefers wearing Salwar – Kameez and knows the names of Indian film actors. When Sanjeev intimidate to throw away the statue of Mother Mary, rather than to
emphasize her right in the house as an American, she implores and cries like an Indian wife to prevent her husband.

We come across a variety of women ranging from extremely modern and liberated as Moushumi in *The Namesake*, Shobha and Twinkle in ‘A Temporary Matter’ and ‘This Blessed House’ respectively to traditional Mrs. Sen in ‘Mrs Sen’s’ to the subjugated and marginalized Boori Ma in ‘A Real Durwan’ and Bibi Haldar in ‘The Treatment of Bibi Haldar’.

The first generation immigrant women belong to the most traditional families in Indian reinforcing themselves to the stereotyped role models such as housewife, the mother, the servant maid, the sex object and so on. The womanhood is usually understood from the traditional point of view. However, when the first and second generation NRIs starts living in the U.S., they present themselves as secular, open-minded, unconventional and modern so as to be acceptable to the culture of mainstream America, which is popularly called as ‘melting pot’ culture. These women consequently suffer from a clash between traditional past and the modern present. The success or failure of their efforts to be assimilated into the mainstream America culture depends upon the way they resolve the conflict. Lahiri portrays the women characters that suffer from the conflict between the value systems of the Old and the New Worlds.

Lahiri’s first generation diasporic women characters find it hard to forget the culture and value system of the old world and to get adapted to the new world, while second and third generation women are found to be partially successful in this. Because their success may be traced to immediacy in time and place to modernity and distance to tradition.

Lahiri’s stories also highlight the disconnection and isolation felt by second-generation female diasporic who though externally American in the way that they understand America, lack a sense of cultural moorings and by being in-between hybrids, frequently find themselves between the fractures like situation. Lahiri seems to suggest that second-generation diasporic are often trapped in a kind of no man's land where they lack the comfort of a nostalgic re-creation of rituals and kinships of their homeland that had proved a great consolation and relief to their parents’ generation. Their inability to connect in relationships or depend on the familial
support may be considered as a metaphor for modern, urban living in general and the nostalgic longing for this connection may not just be restricted to the diaspora.

The emotional detachment of the second generation, who are unable to belong either to India or to America, is demonstrated in the title story, ‘Interpreter of Maladies,’ where Lahiri portrays the loneliness felt by a young mother. Mrs. Das who appears caught between two modes of thought and being. Externally assimilated and westernized, she is also a by-product of modern urban living where traditional forms of kinship support are damaged, leaving her to face the hardships of parenting alone. A visiting friend takes advantage of her loneliness to seduce her, and she spends the next eight years of her life too upset to confess her affair and consequent pregnancy. All this made her psychological disturbed, and the situation is aggravated due to her diasporic condition.

We find longing for the native land and the life led in India before their migration to the US reflected in her literary works. Even the second generation settlers are not free from the connection they have with the country of birth and their parents. They have to inherit the memories of their parents on a psychological level. The first generation settlers fear that the children may forget the traditions and culture of their parents and become completely Americanized. They have to keep alive the traditions of their forefathers through their children. The occasional visits to India also keep them in touch with their ‘roots.’

In the story ‘A Temporary Matter’, the husband listens to his wife’s reminisces about her childhood trips to India and wishes that he had his own childhood story of India. The men seem threatened by their wives increasing emotional and economic empowerment and are reluctant to let go of tradition. In the story, there is an exchange of conventional gender roles. It is the wife who breaks away from domesticity, assuming the role of the breadwinner who comes home late and as the text narrates; ‘retreat[s] to the living room, behind her barricade of files.’(Lahiri, 1999: 14)

Similarly, Shoba also takes the first painful decision of moving out from a marriage where both communication and love have vanished. The power cut described at the beginning of the story reflects the breakdown in communication as
the couple uses the darkness to face uncomfortable truths about their collapsing relationship.

In the story ‘This Blessed House’ also the husband is seen as house-proud and interested in upholding traditional values. This kind of role is traditionally expected from the wife.

The story ‘Sexy’ reveals the attitude of whites towards the immigrants as they have their biased views. Miranda attempts to know about India and Indian way of life from Dev. She remembers her childhood memories of neighboring Indian family. She knew her Indian neighbors were teased because of their different lifestyle such as taking off shoes while entering the house. Lahiri tries to show how prejudices are built, and relationships broken due to misconceptions, lack of knowledge and misunderstanding. The malady of Dev’s sexual deception is given a remedy when Miranda decides to break up with him, showing the change of attitude. The story is a reflection on the mysteries of human behaviour beyond the dynamics of culture and diaspora.

Miranda’s childhood comes across with a portrait of Goddess Kali in the house of Indian neighbours. The Dixits –is a powerful representation of an American’s fearful reading of an Indian symbol of worship and dedication.

Through the collection, Lahiri had dealt mostly with the dilemma of first generation middle class Indian –Bengali immigrants with exception to Lilia, who has presented the perspective of the second generation young child.

3.6 Summary

In the final analysis it can be argued that the present chapter has attempted to examine and to interpret nine stories of Jhumpa Lahiri’s debut short stories collection in the context of four prominent aspects of diasporic sensibility that surfaced through her stories. The sense of displacement and alienation found in most of the first generation immigrants, many of whom were nostalgic, the feeling created hurdle in their cultural assimilation. The attitude of native towards immigrants, intergenerational friction, has also been investigated in the chapter. The chapter has also discussed how Lahiri’s stories dealt with the different types of nostalgia
experienced by different generations of the diaspora. The chapter has studied various characters depicted in the stories and located in the diasporic space belong to different stages of cultural assimilation. The chapter attempts to highlight identity crisis and displacement experienced by Lahiri’s expatriates in diasporic and native milieu.

Works Cited:


Prasad, Amarnath, and John Peter Joseph. “*Indian Writing in English: Critical Ruminations*.” New Delhi: Sarup & Sons., 2006


**Articles:**


Websites:


<http://www.postcolonialweb.org/india/literature/lihiri/choubey1.html>

