

# **Psychological Journeys in Diasporic life: A Study of Works of Jhumpa Lahiri and Bharati Mukherjee**

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## **Abstract**

This paper examines the migratory experiences of the immigrants and the role of psyche in their life which is well portrayed in the works of Jhumpa Lahiri and Bharati Mukherjee. It attempts to diagnose the problems of aggravated psyches and tries to resolve the complications associated with it. The comparative analysis of these texts demonstrates that a merging identity is dependent upon a return to the protagonist's roots either by the protagonist or medium which is closely associated with them. Their identity keeps shifting from past to present and vice versa. They are living in the contrasting experience of association and dissociation through psychological journeys. The migrants keep travelling to their ancestral homeland and in the process develop a value system that reflects the manifold identity.

**Keywords:** Psyche, Diaspora, Migration, Homeland, Hostland, Exile, Identity, Alienation

The present paper examines how the characters of the works of Jhumpa Lahiri and Bharati Mukherjee sets out a psychological journey to provide an escape from the alien culture and tradition. As memory always play an important role and creates a space in such a sense that the immigrants wish for their past in a passionate manner for the vision of homeland. Immigrants remember their past which may be happy or sad. During the process of recalling, some objects are taken up as metaphor of their uprooted past. These objects may be related to their religion, food, dress, and sometimes habits too. The expectations for the festivals/events to celebrate, enjoying food and style of particular dress is found in the life of these immigrants. The practice of such cultural aspects reflects that one is not feeling alienated in a foreign land. The cheaper air travel, the phone calls, the Internet, satellite television and other technological devices has made a faster and easier way to tread across nations. But to keep up the identity through frequent journeys is still a difficult task.

**Said notes:**

“For an exile, habits of life, expression or activity in the new environment inevitably occur against the memory of these things in another environment. Thus both the new and the old environments are vivid, actual, occurring together contrapuntally.” (186)

The travelling from one place to another dislocates a person from his homeland physically while they always preserve old memories and culture in their psychology.

Rushdie expresses that “the past is a country from which we have all emigrated,” (12) and that being an Indian author in Britain meant that he was removed from, and yet always searching, his past arresting of homeland developments in their psyche reflects through their consciousness and emotional attachment.

The diasporic writers establish the cultural tones in the diasporic medium. While negotiating between the homeland and host land culture, the diasporic writers occupy what Homi Bhabha calls

“interstitial space”. Though migrants extended their borders and travelled a long distanced but they continue to claim to their deep-rooted past. The potential of individual played an important role for such adjustment. They keep thinking about their food, dress, festivals, and habits while staying away from their motherland.

As Meena Alexander in *The Poetics of Dislocation* becomes nostalgic about the place of her birth across the Pemba River on the west coast of Kerala, even as she lives in New York close to the Hudson River. Hence, the feeling of leaving things behind is always reflected in the present world.

Mukherjee and Lahiri recognize cross-cultural experience as a further source of the dilemma of the immigrants. This oscillation led the immigrants to search for self and establish one's identity. The grafting of identity helps immigrants to play a dual role and to adjust in the society.

Jhumpa Lahiri's *Namesake* narrates the assimilation of an Indian Bengali family from Calcutta, into America, the cultural dilemmas experienced by them and their American born children in different ways. Like other migrant Indians, Ashoke Ganguli, too leaves his homeland and comes to America in pursuit of higher studies to do research in the field of “fiber optics” with a prospect of settling down with “security and respect ” (105).

After two years stay in the U.S.A he comes back to India, marries a nineteen years old Bengali girl from Calcutta named Ashima, who has no idea or dream of going to a place called Boston so far off from her parents, but agrees for the marriage. After the legal formalities, she flies alone to be with her husband, with a heavy heart and lots of instructions from her family members and relatives who come to see her off at Dum Dum Airport “not to eat beef or wear skirts or cut off her hair and forget the family the moment she landed in Boston.” (37)

Most of the time she remains lost in the memories of her “home” thinking of the activities going there by calculating “the Indian time on her hands” which is “ten and a half hours ahead in Calcutta”. She spends her time rereading Bengali short stories, poems and articles from the Bengali magazines she has brought with her. She “Keeps her ears trained, between the hours of twelve and two, for the sound of the postman’s footsteps on the porch, followed by the soft click of the mail slot in the door” ( 36) waiting for her parent’s letters which she keeps collecting in her white bag and rereads them often Ashima found preparing a number of Bengali dishes for above forty Bengali guests “less stressful than the task of feeding a handful of American children, half of whom always claim they are allergic to milk, all of whom refuse to eat the crusts of their bread .”(72) The rice ceremony of Gogol takes Ashima back to India reminding of her brother Rana and regrets that the plate on which the rice is heaped is melamine and not silver or brass or at least stainless steel. Just like immigrants of other communities, Ashima and Ashoke also make their circle of Bengali population .They all become friends only for the reason that “they all come from Calcutta.” (38)

The memory of real places, for example Shukumar remembers sporadic visits to India, but, ‘As a teenager he preferred sailing camp or scooping ice cream during the summers to going to Calcutta.’ (“A Temporary Matter” 12). Such memories are found to be still alive and passed on in family stories from one generation to another. These family or personal memories shine through during the happy as well as sad hours in an alien land. There are a number of variations in the land they have left and the land which they have housed in terms of lifestyle, language, dress and diets. This is how past is influencing the present of immigrants. The reality is that they are stepping the path of two different cultures which make them feel rootless. Mobilization of the Indian people and settlement in the overseas countries for the economical progress and higher education, cannot keep an individual or group of diasporic community away from the attachment of the 'old home' in the native

land. It is not only the physical, cultural or geographical journey, but it is the journey or shifting of their identities and selves. Indian immigrants, in the foreign country carry dual or multiple identities instead of single.

The opening story “A Temporary Matter” portrays an ontological condition dealing with the conjugal crisis of a young couple – Shoba and Shukumar. The Americanized Bengali couple exhibits the trends of typical post-colonial diaspora where the characters carry different socio-geographical identities with them.

In the short story, *When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine*, Lilia’s parents invite Mr. Pirzada, a stranger from the university, to share their meals. Lilia’s parents harbour a sense of loneliness because in New England the ‘supermarket did not carry mustard oil, doctors did not make house calls, neighbors never dropped by without an invitation’. The ten year old Lilia in the short story, *When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine*, observes similarities between her Bengali parents Mr. Pirzada, a Pakistani from Dacca. They “spoke the same language, laughed at the same jokes, looked more or less the same... ate pickled mangoes with their meals, ate rice every night for supper with their hands.”(25)

In “This Blessed House”, the husband slowly realises 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 her of their shared Indian heritage. 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. (146)

Mrs Sen, in the story named after her, has a distinctive as well as individualistic speech: “Everyone, this people, too much in their world” – her impression of America. Simple household activities in

India are mentioned in this story with accuracy. This story develops with the difficulties faced by Indian wives in a foreign culture. A sense of alienation pre-occupies the hearts of people culturally as well as geographically cut off from their homeland. Her reluctance to learn driving symbolizes her rejection of America and what it represents.

“Mr Sen says that once I receive my license, everything will improve. What do you think ,Eliot? Will things improve?” (119) Mrs. Sen asks Eliot whether the car will help her to ‘drive all the way to Calcutta?’(119)

The only time she does drive is when she is desperate to buy a fresh fish for a Bengali dish. The drive to get the fish becomes a symbolic means of returning home whilst her lack of mobility is a metaphor for her failure to transcend her boundaries and assimilate. The most evocative lines of the story that sum up the nostalgia of a first generation diasporic that does not have the benefit of either skype or internets are when Eliot observes Mrs. Sen’s excitement and enthusiasm on receiving a letter from her family. On receiving a letter, she embraces Eliot, ‘clasping his face to her sari, surrounding him with her odor of mothballs and cumin’(121).

Jhumpa Lahiri evokes Mrs. Sen’s loneliness not when she is alone but when she is with Eliot. She does this to show that Mrs. Sen’s loneliness is not exactly solitariness but something more. It is a manifestation of her inner emotional needs and hence cannot be corrected by external modifications in terms of society or surrounding in a foreign country. MrsSen lives in America but sustains herself on the remnants of the life she left behind in India – cooking Indian food, getting lost in letters that came from India, buying a whole fish to cook, and even not knowing how to drive.As Mishra observes: “On days when I am far away, in very different landscapes, I only have to see a patch of mellow light on a lawn, only have to feel a fresh bracing quality in the air, or hearthe rain being fierce with a roof, to know that I want to be back, and never

leave; and it's no use reminding myself then that the senses—those semi-magical faculties of sight, smell, hearing— hold not only your most truthful memories but also your most hopeless desires.” (388)

Such ins and outs of homeland and hostland are a never ending journey. No one can forget one's roots. The past always runs behind an individual. The migrants relive their past through psychological journeys. These migrants frequently sets out psychological journeys which results in merging of two cultures and find a place to adjust the adopted land. Tara in *The Tiger's Daughter* is eager to make her return journey back to India which reveals her eagerness to return home. But a series of adventures that Tara encounters makes her realize gradually that she is different from other Indians. Her memory of India is distinct from the present unfamiliar India. Calcutta begins to “exert its darkness over her” (30) and in her journey, she is flooded by old memories. However, Tara's foreignness of the spirit sets her apart from her past history when she witnesses the medical treatment in the house of Aunt Jharna; when she sees the beggars and refugees in Joyonto's villa; and when she is in the prayer room with her mother, Tara cannot remember the next step of the ritual. It is not a “simple loss”, as her forgetting is a “cracking of axis and centre.” (51) Prayer plays an important role in her Indian family and the family assumes it is blessed by sanity and religious rituals. On the surface, Tara is in India but there is a discontinuity between herself and India. Through a visit to India, Tara realises that the real India is different from her recollected imagination. Her determination to go back to America implies her cutting off her ties to India, and her desire to become a true part of the American. At the age of fifteen,

Tara goes for higher study. “For Tara, Vassar had been an unsalvageable mistake.”(10) In *Poughkeepsie*, Tara, senses discrimination when her roommate refuses to share her bottle of Mango chutney. So she feels sad and homesick. She is unable to share her thoughts with pale dry skinned girls. She is caught in such

a situation which could be felt by a diasporic person only. Like other Indians she defends her family and her country. She also prays to Goddess Kali for strength, so that she would not break down before Americans. New York has driven her to despair. Here, in the beginning she could not digest the culture of the United States because of her deep-rooted Indian ness. As ill luck would have it, Tara falls in love with an American named David and marries him. David is totally western and Tara finds it difficult to communicate the finer nuances of her family background and of her life in Calcutta. It was because of the cultural difference. “Her husband asked naïve questions about Indian customs and traditions. She felt insecure in an alien atmosphere. Madison Square was unbearable and her husband was after all a foreigner.” (50)

Mukherjee’s *The Middleman and Other Stories*, “The Tenant” is a story that introduces to its protagonist Maya Sanyal, who seems divided between cultures. Though Maya, “a utopian and feminist” (“The Tenant” 100), struggles to disguise herself as an American, yet her visit to Dr. Rabindra Chatterjee’s house, which is full of other Third World nationalities, drifts her back to the old world of “Brahminness” and she realizes that “nothing in Calcutta is ever lost” (“The Tenant” 104). This confrontation with the past influences Maya “to cloak” herself in her “own Brahminical elegance.” (Mukherjee, *Immigrant Writing* 28)

In Mukherjee’s “A Wife’s Story”, Panna encounters two men who belong to two different cultures (Imre and her husband) in a foreign land . Out of the two men, Panna shares her roots with her husband. As the open display of emotions is not portrayed in Indian culture . Indians are thought to control their emotions before elders and at public places. The ethnicity of Panna demands more ethical behavior from her. She cannot ignore her past and traditions in India. Panna was surprised when she hugged Imre. Though she has embraced Imre while residing in America but she is aware of the customs and traditions of India. The hug takes him by surprise...my

husband would never dance or hug a woman on Broadway. Nor would my brothers.” (28)

The diasporic people construct new homes through psychological attachment with their root lands. This Psychological attachment may be in terms of origin, settlement, cultural associations, duties and values. These migrated people reiterate the significance of their history, land of origin, native values, family and traditions. In this way the past life of these immigrants escorts for the present life of hostland in terms of accommodation/ adjustment. Lahiri and Mukherjee, both are concerned with the ways in which their characters desire to come back to their roots through the psychological journeys.

The migrants become stranger for every land that they travel and this estrangement creates a multi- identity which provides a psychological relief. The psychological journey of the migrants is a journey of identity and continuity in the stream of movement. This journey is also motivated by an idea of practicing a cultural identity in alien lands as their roots are the reservoir of their culture .This results in multifaceted experience of travelling purposely between two or more cultures which is learnt rather than inherent. This plural vision of life helps diasporic people to adjust in the mainstream of life.

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