

## **Cultural Elements of the East and the West in Jhumpa Lahiri's Interpreter of Maladies**

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**Abstract:** *Jhumpa Lahiri, Pulitzer Prize winner 2000 was born in 1967 in London, England, and raised in Rhode Island. Her father a librarian and mother a teacher had emigrated from Calcutta, India. 2000 Pulitzer Prize winning short story collection Interpreter of Maladies focuses on the lives of Bengali-Indian in Americans, and India. Two out of nine short stories in the collection are set in India and the remaining seven are set in America. They almost invariably picture the cultural difference, isolation, and sufferings of the Indian in India and abroad. A brief survey on the evolution of the east –west conflict in Indian Writing in English has been made. In her 'A Temporary Matter' Hindu religious ceremony- rice ceremony or Annaprashan has been referred. In 'Mr. Sen's' cultural and social alienation has been discussed in detail. In 'This Blessed House' religious conflict between Hinduism and Christianity has been presented in a light manner. Some of the Hindu cultural elements present in the short stories have also been discussed. This paper attempts to substantiate Lahiri's cultural and religious ties with Hinduism and Indian culture.*

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### **I. Introduction**

The expression **East-West encounter** stands for the conflict between religion and rationality, tradition and modernity, spirituality and materialism, superstitions and scientific outlook, tyranny and democracy. The cultural conflict between the East and West is a recurrent theme in Indian English Literature. Jhumpa Lahiri depicts the clash of deep-rooted values of Indian culture, characterized by Hindu culture, with those of the Christian in many of her short stories and novel. The 'locale' has shifted from the village to the metropolis of our country and the abroad. East-west encounter if explained in terms of hybridity in relationship by post-colonial critics, takes 'a place' in Post-modern Indian English fiction. When the world has become 'a global village' no culture or society is pure or insular today. That's why Indian English fiction now takes characters situations both from inside the country and abroad into its orbit and develops them." Bijay Kumar Das (2006:56)

The impact of globalization has transformation the Modern world increasingly interdependent on one another. Hence R. K.Narayan, Kamal Markandaya Anita Desai and others penned on the theme of East-West conflict in their fictional world. The classic examples of east-west encounter in Indian English literature are: Raja Rao's *The Serpent and The Rope* (1960) Kamala Markandaya's *The Nowhere Man* (1973) R.P.Jhabvala's *Heat and Dust* and Bharathi Mukherjee's *The Tiger's Daughter* (1973). "Some recent post-independence novels focused on a different aspect of the east-west encounter theme. Anita Desai's *Bye-Bye-Black Bird* (1971), Chaman Nahal's *Into Another Dawn* (1977), Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* (2001) explore the life of Indians who goes abroad and how he adjusts or fails to the alien culture." Basavaraj Naikar (2007:83-84) "The cultural alienation of Indian writers in English is most often referred as swing towards west, east-west encounter or cross-cultural conflict." Gauri Shankar Jha (2006:01)

Jhumpa Lahiri, the daughter of Indian immigrants from West Bengal, was born in London. Amar Lahiri her father works as a librarian at the University of Rhode Island where she grew up. So she considers herself an American. Her debut short story collection, *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) and *The Namesake*, her first novel addresses sensitive dilemmas in the lives of Indians or Indian immigrants. Her second collection of short stories, *Unaccustomed Earth*, was released on April 1, 2008. Lahiri has also had a distinguished relationship with *The New Yorker* magazine as it has published a line of her short stories, mostly fiction, and a few non-fictions.

### **II. Cultural Elements of the East and the West in the Interpreter of Maladies**

Jhumpa Lahiri, an Indian American author in "Interpreter of Maladies" essentially represents the cultural differences between India and America and the problems that are faced by the characters due to these cultural changes. Mr. Sen's is the sixth short story of the total nine short stories in Jhumpa Lahiri's Pulitzer Award 2000 winner *The Interpreter of Maladies*. Since the beginning of his school year, Eliot an eleven year

old American school going boy is cared by Mr.Sen, an Amerindian and wife of a mathematics professor in a university in Boston, USA.

Though he is old enough to care himself, his mother wants a baby-sitter to supervise him. Lahiri presents the cultural contrast of the East (India) and the West (America). Most often Mrs. Sen compares India with America. She conveys Mrs. Eliot she doesn't know how to drive. At their earliest meeting, Eliot is shocked by the stack of shoes by the door and the carefully covered furnishings. His mother the representative of the west is the one who looks odd, Eliot thinks (himself a representative of the West).

"Mrs. Sen's" is a story about isolation of the protagonist Mrs. Sen and her diverse experiences chiefly while she babysits Eliot, an eleven year old American boy at her own home in university staff quarters in Boston, USA. The meeting of Mrs. Sen and Eliot's mother symbolizes the East west encounter. In East (India) driving a car is not considered a basic need to lead a successful life. But in West (America) driving a car is considered a basic need to lead a successful life. Mrs. Sen explains her "At home, you know, we have a driver." (113 ) Eliot's mother drives to work in an office fifty miles north, while Eliot's father, the last she had heard, lived two thousand miles west. To affirm Eliot's mother Mr.Sen says "I have been giving her lessons, actually," "By my estimate Mrs. Sen should have her driver's license by December."(113)

Pasupathi Jha and T. Ravichandran "Mr. Sen suggests his wife to learn driving and move out of the house when free. But for a typical Indian housewife, driving does not come easily. Eventually, Mr.Sen takes up the job of baby-sitting but at her own house." (200:79) Mrs. Sen supports her husband by saying "Yes, I am learning," Mrs. Sen said. "But I am a slow student. At home, you know, we have a driver." "And that's all ... in India?" "Everything is there." (113 ) Eliot's mother symbolizes the mother of the West and Mrs. Sen the mother of the East. Eliot mother is aloof. She hardly shows warmth towards Eliot whereas Mrs. Sen showers. While Mrs. Sen not even allows the American boy to do little things, his mother leaves for leftover work to Eliot to finish after dinner. Unlike his past two American baby-sitters-Abby, a university student and Mrs. Linden an old woman, Mr.Sen asks something more than her official obligation. She always gives something to eat. He not only accepts and her affection but also reciprocates it.

The east –west cultural conflict works on two levels – Mr.Sen adheres to Bengali culture without assimilating the American culture and the conflicting attitude of her Indian habits with those of Eliot's mother. She is never out of her memories of her life in Calcutta. She tells "And that's all... in India?" "Everything is there." Her joy has bounds when she receives letter from India. Once when Eliot delivers a letter from India to her she's extremely happy and so she embraces Eliot it is uncommon in America.

The story brings to light a unique relationship between Eliot (West) and Mrs. Sen (East), who both are away from homes and in a somewhat similar situation. Both are each other's friend and only hope to live by. While the story is narrated from Eliot's perspective, it is about his interpretations of different situations in which he gets in along with Mrs. Sen. The boy soon discovered that "when Mrs. Sen said home, it meant India, not her apartment" (116).

Mrs. Sen surprises Eliot by cutting vegetables in seconds expertly with a curved blade brought from India. She sat cross-legged, at times with legs splayed, surrounded by an array of colanders and shallow bowls of water in which she immersed her chopped ingredients. She forbids Eliot from entering into the kitchen, in wake of his safety. She tells him in India a knife is in every household and a retinue of women would gather to prepare feasts for weddings over the night. In India homes are noisy while in America it is too quiet. Eliot too hates his home as he lives with his mother alone in a beach house.

Screaming is a call in India, but in America it invites complaint in America. Mrs. Sen informs Eliot 'at home' (Calcutta), people would come running at the slightest commotion to share either joy or grief. She reminds Eliot of a party hosted by a neighbor oh his for which neither he nor his mother was invited. "Home" to Mrs. Sen means India and not the university quarters in Boston they live in.

When Eliot asks Mrs. Sen about the vermilion powder used to wear on part in her hair she compares it with a wedding ring of the west she adds unlike the ring, the vermilion powder won't get lost in the dishwasher. Mrs. Sen offers Eliot's mother offers her a snack Eliot's mother gives her excuse by having a bite or two in spite of her hunger. But Eliot knows his mother doesn't like the tastes (the taste of East) and she has not taken a late lunch as well. His mother pours glasses of wine and eats bread and cheese (the taste of West) when she is at home.

Mrs. Sen picks up Eliot at the bus stop every day and takes him in her car for driving practice. She asks Eliot how long it would take to reach Calcutta. Trivial things easily distract her from her attention in driving. Everything is too much for her except a letter from her family and fish from the seaside. Whenever she receives a letter from home in the east, Mrs. Sen calls her husband and reads the contents literally. A letter from the east makes her restless as she laments for missing her sister's daughter who will not know her own aunt. "My sister has had a baby girl. By the time I see her, depending if Mr. Sen gets his tenure, 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." (122) She indirectly

shows his sympathy by placing her hand on Eliot's head and asked him "Do you miss your mother, Eliot, these afternoons with me?" (122) He never thought of missing his mother until she asked. She says he is wise – he already tastes the way things must be as most westerners do.

Day after day Mrs. Sen calls the local fish market in Boston (West) asking for a whole, fresh fish as she sued to get in Calcutta (East). The boy in the fish market knows her well. For her the fresh fish available in Boston is not as fresh as she used to get the same in Calcutta though Boston on the coast of Pacific as Calcutta is on Bay of Bengal. She finds it very difficult to confront the culture of the west. One day she expressed her deep anguish by weeping and takes the American boy into her room where displays her beautiful saris of different texture and color on the bed. She outburst her inner feelings saying that there has no occasion for her to wear them, no pictures of her life in America to be send to Calcutta. Rajinder Kumar Dhawan "The American child is gradually exposed to the life of an Indian women in her kitchen" (2001:113)

When Mr. Sen forces her to drive to the fish market, in dejection she refuses to do so. No lavish meals, no entertainment from the small screen, tea grows cold, and a sad Indian raga, display her grief-stricken heart. She plays Eliot an audio tape of her family recorded on the day she left India sorting the events of the day. "As the succession of voices laughed and said their bit, Mrs. Sen identified each speaker. "My third uncle, my cousin, my father, my grandfather."(128) She identifies each family member and then translates the ordinary events to Eliot. In a minor road mishap she and Eliot incur minor injuries and pains. Mr. Sen comes to rescue and explained the cop she is a learner and not yet issued the driver's license. There ends the relationship between Eliot and Mrs. Sen. Eliot has none to care but himself. He wears his house key in a string around his neck. "You're a big boy now, Eliot," she told him. "You okay?" Eliot looked out the kitchen window, at gray waves receding from the shore, and said that he was fine. (135)

When Mr. Sen asks her to drive the car home it lands into a catastrophe. She drives very slowly, as she is easily distracted by the radio. She finally pulls over to the side of the road and refuses to drive further. She hates driving. She hates the west. When the passengers in the bus complain about the smell of the fish, she feels confronted. The conductor embarrassed her. "The smell seems to be bothering the other passengers." (133) Susan Ram "In this beautifully observed story East meets West in the shared experience of loneliness and the poignancy of Mrs. Sen's situation is handled with utmost delicacy and control unsullied any hint of mawkishness. (1999:71) this shows Cultural differences and customs differentiate between India and the West. "This Blessed House" is about newly wedded young Indian couple -Twinkle and Sanjeev, recently moved from Boston to Connecticut in America. Twinkle a Hindu shows her fascination for 'a sizable collection of Christian paraphernalia left by the previous owners in their new home. The Christian paraphernalia includes 3-D post card of Saint Francis, a small plastic Nativity scene, a painting of the three wise men, and a Virgin Mary lawn ornament. So the conflict was cultural between Eastern Hinduism and Western Christianity.

Sanjeev, 33-year-old Indian national living in America and an aspiring company vice president marries Twinkle, a careles 27-year-old as they both liked novels of P. G. Wodehouse, and they both disliked sitar music. Their smooth life gets disturbed by their ever-conflicting mindset. Sanjeev learns Twinkle cooks without recipes, leaves her undergarments on the floor when she gets into bed and feels no hurry to unpack the boxes in their new home. Her state of mind is "content yet curious," which drives the methodical Sanjeev nuts. While Twinkle bothers Indian food, her husband is all for it. He recalls his college days when he would walk each evening across the Mass. Avenue Bridge to order Mughlai chicken with spinach from his favorite Indian restaurant on the other side of the Charles.

Serious trouble erupts in the "good little Hindu" family when "little" Twinkle discovers many scattered Christian pieces left behind by the previous dweller. She is enchanted while he is dismissive. The husband hopes his wife will get rid of her Christian whim. Twinkle's discoveries of St. Francis 3-D postcards and Noah's ark light-switch plates grow into a treasure hunt. Sanjeev feels that if the friends see the Christian pieces in his home they may mistake him as a Christian. So to save his reputation of his home Sanjeev goes to the extent of threatening of disposing Virgin Mary from the lawn by force. When the tension reaches its climax Sanjeev notices that "some of the water dripping down her hard blue face was tears." () Sanjeev feels Twinkle's interest on Christian relics is temporary just a scheme to come to the attention as an Indian woman among the Americans.

Not all people in the world remove their footwear off before they enter the house. In Asians countries like India, Japan, China and Nepal still have the tradition of leaving shoes outside before entering the house. The traditional houses are furnished with a shelf exclusively placing shoes outside the door. In the west men walk into their house and even churches without leaving the footwear outside. Hindu temples forbid footwear inside. Hindus believe god lives not only in temple but also in their house and so a house is regarded as a temple.

Hence stepping into a house with shoes is considered not only unacceptable but also a sign of disrespect to the god. Eliot wonders at Mr.Sen house where footwear is kept in front of the door. In 'Third and Final Continent' Mrs. Croft an American lady of 103 years (West) observed the narrator (East) walking into her

room bare footed as he still felt strange wearing shoes indoors. So he always removed them before entering the room. Looking at his strange behavior the old lady inquired that if he was new to Boston?

In A Temporary Matter, rice ceremony or Annaprashan (**Sanskrit "grain initiation"**) mukhe bhaat in Bengal is the Hindu custom that marks the initiation of first solid food in a baby's life. Following the ritual, the child is slowly introduced to solid foods at six months if it was a boy, seven if it was a girl. The ceremony is mainly done at home or at a temple to celebrate the baby's transition from liquid food to solid food.

Unlike an Indian woman, Twinkle enjoys smoking and she smokes constantly. She also enjoys teasing Sanjeev. She not only likes to read when she's bored, but talk to her girlfriends on the phone for a long time. She leaves her inner clothes at the front of her closet, would read any magazine, and listen to song on the radio. She is more influenced by American rather than the Indian culture.

The culture and society of the east and the west are portrayed in detail. Like Tagore, Lahiri has understood the psychology of the children - both the Indian (Lilia, Ronny, Bobby, Tina and Rohin) and American (Eliot and Dora). Lilia is puzzled as she is unable to trace the difference between her parents and the Pakistani visitor Mr. Pirzada. As Mr.Pirzada is unable to distinguish her own daughters Lilia is unable to distinguish the difference between them.

Lilia feels that many still feel the idea of eating in the other's company unthinkable. But it made no sense to her as Mr. Pirzada and her parents spoke the same language, laughed at the same jokes and looked more or less the same. They used to eat meals and mango pickle with their hands, eat rice for supper. Like a typical Indian the visitor **took off his shoes before entering a room, chewed fennel seeds after meals as a digestive, drank no alcohol, dipped austere biscuits into successive cups of tea for dessert.** In spite of all the indifferences her father insisted her to understand the difference between them.

Taking a nap is an unusual thing in American (West) culture. Miranda (West) a young American had never known an adult American who took naps, but Dev, an Indian (East) said it was habit he'd grown up doing in India. He justifies his action by saying that people didn't leave their homes until the sun went down in India due to heat. Miranda never slept. After lunch they made love, and then Dev took a nap for twelve minutes. Miranda had never known an adult who took naps, but Dev said India is so hot that people don't leave their homes until the sun sets. Boori Ma in 'A Real Durwan' had just woken from a nap of twenty minutes, which she had taken on a temporary bed made from newspapers.

### **III. Conclusion**

Changing the dress in the presence of children is common in India but not in America. In 'Sexy' when Miranda refuses to put her silver cocktail on in Rohin's presence he tells Miranda that her mother changes her dress in his presence. But in America changing the dress in the presence of others including one's own child is considered uncultured. So Miranda refuses to change her dress in the presence of the small Indian boy Rohin. Thus Lahiri who herself is a hybrid of Indian and American culture shows the life of Indian immigrants in America and their struggle.

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