

Balancing Dualities and Fusing Opposites: Reading Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreters of Maladies*

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ABSTRACT

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With a focus on Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*, this research investigates the intricate existence of Indian women caught up in the conventional marginalization at the hands of patriarchy in their home country and repressions of otherness across new borders. By employing Gloria Anzaldúa's concept of "balancing dualities and fusing opposites", I analyze Lahiri's text in order to explore how, oscillating between displacement and resettlement, gendered identities are formed in the in-between space of acceptance across borders. Border crossing is mostly embedded in the experiences of displacement, alienation, and longing for belonging. Diasporic experiences are heterogeneous in articulating the loss and pains of dislocation, uprootedness, and struggles of immigrants to territorialize across new borders. This study explores the diverse experiences of diasporic women in the confrontation of the opposite borders of old and new and scrutinizes how they make their lives meaningful in their respective situations. In this paper, I argue that life across borders offers an in-between space for *doubly marginalized women* by resisting the hierarchical patterns at home and abroad and balancing these dualities in the liminal space between two cultures. Moreover, this cross-border life also strives towards fusing cultural opposites in the space of un/belonging through strategic resistance and resilience.

Keywords: Women, Diaspora, in-between space, resistance, border

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I

In this paper, I attempt to read Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* (2000) by employing Gloria Anzaldúa's idea of "balancing dualities and fusing opposites". I analyze Lahiri's text in order to explore how, oscillating between displacement and resettlement, gendered identities are formed in the in-between space of acceptance across borders. I study third space as a site of resistance for the third-world women who are already marginalized by indigenous patriarchy. Their border-crossing leads them to a place where they counter the hegemonies of new power structures and they construct their in-between space of acceptance. This acceptance is their formation of a new identity as empowered individuals.

Interpreter of Maladies (2000) is a collection of stories that depicts the lives of immigrants across national borders. In her anthology, Lahiri narrates the painful survival strategies and struggles of her characters who belong to the first and second generations of Indian immigrants. Her narrative exemplifies her knowledge of both cultures with prodigious interpretations of physical and psychological isolation, disconnection, uprootedness, and displacement of her characters. Lahiri's savvy depiction of nostalgia, aloofness, and sense of dislocation can well be contextualized in her own diasporic existence as she admits that she has "inherited a sense of that loss" from her parents since this loss was "palpable all the whole time", the sense of what her "parents had sacrificed in moving to the United States" and "building a life here and all that it entailed" (Farnsworth, 2000, p. 18).

Lahiri's inherited knowledge is reflected in her characters who "like her, have relatives in India but their [new] home, in unambiguous terms, is the northeastern United States" (Dubey, 2002, p. 22). Lahiri's characters also experience this sense of loss as America is a place of religio-cultural and socio-legal difference, therefore they remain captivated by the strangeness of these differences and endeavor to assimilate. In such struggles of assimilation, they are caught in their longing for belonging. The individuals who are divided between homes and abroad depict the intricacies of life across borders. Lahiri's narrative elucidates "double perspectives—between the ancient traditions of her ancestors and the sometimes-baffling prospects of the new world." (Dubey, 2002, p. 26).

With reference to Lahiri's narrative, I argue that this in-between space is a site of empowerment where women negotiate the opposite socio-cultural milieu through strategic resistance and resilience against repressive structures. It investigates how Lahiri's female characters settle their lives in the in-between space by resisting the discomfort of hierarchical pressures and devising strategies for their ease. Resistance against the old conventions leads them to assimilation in the new culture but they also resist the new norms when they seem to contrast with their comfort zone. By deploying Gloria Anzaldúa's concepts of "balanced dualities and fuse opposites" to read the selected text, this study contends that the in-between space is a new beginning for diasporic women to construct a new value system to stabilize their social position by transcending the hegemonic structures of both homes and foreign lands where they settle eventually.

(II)

In this section, I review a few critical sources on diaspora that define the conditions, problems, pains, and strategies of living in the liminal space between cultures. Though I deploy Anzaldua's concept of "balancing dualities and fusing opposites" as my principal lens, it is instructive to discuss the "third-space" with reference to different theorists on diasporic life in order to situate Anzaldua's view and tease out an interventionary position. Border crossing is an experience of striving for relocation and settlement on new lands. The diasporic settlements of immigrants on new lands, according to Edward Said, are "cut off from their roots, their land, their past" from where their return is "out of question" (Said, 1984, pp. 50, 52). Diaspora can be defined as "a multitude of ethnic, religious, and national communities who find themselves living outside of the territory to which they are historically 'rooted'" (Carter, 2005, p. 55). According to Clifford, diaspora offers a "loosely coherent adaptive constellation of responses to dwelling in displacement" (1997, p. 310). It embraces "a multitude of ethnic, religious, and national communities who find themselves living outside of the territory to which they are historically 'rooted'" (Carter, 2005, p. 56). For Baumann (1996) diaspora is "expressing notions of hybridity, heterogeneity, identity fragmentation and (re)construction, double consciousness, fractures of memory, ambivalence, roots and routes, discrepant cosmopolitanism, multi-locationality and so forth" (p. 313).

With reiteration of displacement, loss, trauma and exile, the narratives of these immigrants describe the pains of life, as Mehmood (2014, p. 188) puts it while oscillating in between "old and new", "home and abroad", longing and belonging. Jasbir Jain (2017) examines this estranged in-between state in *Crossing Borders* as the borders "allow infiltration, invasion, taking over", and, by highlighting national identities, they exclude and dehumanize the "other", and "create polarities and power struggles" (p. xvii). Life across borders disturbs the conventions of familiarity and belonging that are expected at home. As an immigrant writer, Hanif Kureishi (2001) fairly exemplifies the life of uprootedness as, "We are Pakistanis, but you, you will be a Paki—emphasizing the slang derogatory name the English used against Pakistanis, and therefore the fact that I couldn't rightfully lay claim to either place" (2001, p. 17). The diasporic life exhibits isolation from new borders with a sense of dislocation from a place of belonging which enforces individuals to live between the real and imaginary, past and present. As Subhendu Mund states: "For various reasons, the present diaspora tends to alienate the immigrants from their roots in spite of themselves, compelling them to live between two worlds: the imaginary and the real, the past and the present, and the virtual and the material" (2005, p. 108). Lahiri's *Interpreters of Maladies* explores cultural alienation, displacement, and struggles of immigrants on new borders. The collection of short stories engages with disturbance and dissatisfaction from the new place and the longing for the glorious comforts of the place of belonging. Shukla illustrates the portrayal of immigrants' predicaments in the following words:

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, p. 58)

With a particular focus on women's experiences of crossing borders, especially Asian-American, Shirley Lim discusses that subsequent challenges like "family, home, community, origin, loss dislocation, relocation, racial, cross-cultural resistance, second-generation Americanization and assimilation, identity destabilization and reformulation . . . are common trajectories in Asian American literature" (1997, p. 292). John C. Hawley manifests the female figures while engaged in shaping their diasporic figures. They "belong to multiple communities that are partially overlapping, sometimes bolstering their sense of new freedoms, sometimes underscoring their consequent rootlessness" (2006, p. 5).

Levitt discusses the intricate heterogeneity of diasporic experience which further varies "the ways in which transnational migration is gendered", since, "gender is a central organizing principle of migrant life" (2003, p. 568). With a specific focus on women's experiences in the diasporic community, I aim to examine the relationship of women with the dynamics of in-between space. This in-between space in relation to women can be seen as a shift from the sense of inclusion and belonging to the exclusion through an unfamiliar and new culture and lifestyle which, though appears to be discomfiting, but also represents a new beginning. John Welchman theorizes life across borders as "no longer a mere threshold or instrument of demarcation, the border is a crucial zone through which contemporary (political, social, cultural) formations negotiate with received knowledge and reconstitute the "horizon" of discursive identity" (1996, pp. 177-178).

The formation of this feasibility of identification is viewed by Keith Woodward and John Paul Jones (2005) as a site of "intensive marginality and creativity" (p. 245). Nonetheless, for Gloria Anzaldua, these borders are not merely lines between states, instead these lines can be located "anywhere where there are different kinds of people coming together and occupying the same space or where there are spaces that are sort of hemmed in by these larger groups of people" (1995, p. 77). While discerning migration as a process of transition, Anzaldua notes that immigrants strive to "balance dualities and fuse opposites" whereby their "feelings of fear and shame together with the wounds caused by the separation and subsequent distinction of white/colored, male/female, civilized/ barbarians, etc., are healed with a new value system" (1995, p. 3).

In this theoretical context of border crossing as a new beginning that Gloria Anzaldua defines as a new value system, I argue that women are provided with an opportunity to redefine their social positioning. Women in Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* balance their dual identities by fusing cultural opposites in the interstitial space or what Bhabha calls "Third-Space of enunciation" (1994, p.37) between cultures. They resist hegemonic conventions of oppression and find a pathway where they can challenge the hierarchical disequilibrium. Diasporic women move to this in-between space where they could negotiate with the new and old conventions, "where they could gain the power and inner strength necessary to turn their adversity into something better for themselves and other" (1995, p. 17). Though

by crossing borders and living in an in-between space, women have already disturbed the conventional patterns of thought, and way of being. They have already mobilized themselves for their future settlements as conscious individuals who can potentially set boundaries for acceptance and rejection. In this frame, it may be argued that diasporic space does not merely detach and alienate from the place of belonging but also provides a space to draw a comparison between the old and new structures of oppression or emancipation for women. With this recognition, they can exhibit their agency to mediate between the two power structures. As Spivak (1994) theorizes, the doubly marginalized women who are claimed to be saved by the hegemony of patriarchal constructions of indigenous culture are eventually silenced under the westernized hegemonic conditions of representation and otherness (pp. 78-80). This study, however, explores the in-between space as an emancipatory space that offers agency through resistance against the oppressions of being “doubly in shadow” (Spivak, 1994, p. 84).

(III)

Female characters in *Interpreters of Maladies* exhibit heterogeneous challenges of their diasporic existence that lead them to define and redefine their survival and resistant strategies for asserting their selfhood. That is how they balance their dual identities in their homes and abroad by dealing with the new power structures in North America after having suffered at the hands of their local patriarchal oppression back in India. They have to fuse the cultural opposites as a strategy of survival with a give and take on both sides. Doubly marginalized in their homeland, they find their exile with new form of alienation and marginalization. The stories like “Mrs. Sen’s” and “A Temporary Matter” exposit diversity of first and second-generation Asian-American female figures in their respective milieu. Female characters in both stories manifest their agency by resisting the hegemony of socio-cultural infrastructure according to their feasibility.

“Mrs. Sen’s” demonstrates an agonizing oscillation between real and imaginary. Lahiri portrays a Bengali woman who collides with alienation and estrangement from American socio-cultural foreignness. Mrs. Sen does not have any children. She remains alone in the absence of her husband who is a professor of Mathematics. Her utter loneliness in the university residence makes her aloof. Lahiri is particular in highlighting Mrs. Sen’s experience of exile as a first-generation diasporic woman who imagines her lost home as perfect by drawing comparisons with the loneliness in different and alienated American setting. However, this aloofness and estrangement at newly adopted lands do not remain static. While oscillating between the conventions of old and new, home and abroad, this in-between space becomes a transitional space where the confines of the real and imaginary are blurred with dynamic negotiations with acceptable adaptability.

Hall perceives the diasporic experience as heterogeneous and argues that “diasporic identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference” (1990, p. 235). Drawing over the socio-cultural and religio-political conditions that shape women’s experiences of immigration, Espin argues that a meagre attention has been paid to the psychological response to crossing the borders (1998, p. 10). She accentuates

women's emotional interruption as akin to their migration which mostly women "manage to survive and [they] emerge from the emotional struggle" (p. 10). Lau (2005) highlights that moving from East to West is exclusively depicted by diasporic women writers: "It is a move from the known to the unknown" that may be regarded as a "traumatic journey" (p. 247). Lau further points out that the problematics of identification in Asian women's writing is central to "the search for self-identity" that is depicted as "confusing, painful, and only occasionally rewarding" (2005, p. 252).

A thorough analysis of Mrs. Sen's character reveals her continuous struggles in the process of accepting the foreignness of American culture. This is initiated when she takes up the job of babysitting. Eleven years old Eliot comes to her home after school and leaves before dinner when his mother comes back from her work that is fifty miles away. Mrs. Sen takes this opportunity to overcome her aloofness. Eliot becomes a substitute son for her. She gradually begins to establish emotional connectivity with Eliot and serves him food that is not part of her responsibility in return Eliot also enjoys her affection. Through Eliot, the gradual process of her acceptance begins. Meanwhile, she is equally and consistently engaged in revealing her associations with her homeland by asserting her ethnic identity. Her cooking style and her craving for fish and listening to the recorded talks of her family reflect her nostalgia for reincarnating the memories of her lost home. Lahiri highlights the tendency of her excitement when she receives a letter from her family that her house becomes "suddenly too small to contain her" (Lahiri, 1999, p. 121). She enthusiastically embraces Eliot who also notices that "Mrs. Sen was no longer present in the room with the pear-colored carpet" (Lahiri, 1999, p. 122). This momentary nostalgia allows her to relive her memories that later translate into pain of forgetfulness.

Nonetheless, Mrs. Sen, with this nostalgic longing for home, admirably heads towards the formation of her new identity of acceptance of the new home. Her broken English in Indian accent and repeated attempts to learn to drive the car manifest her acceptance of American culture by acclimatizing the two cultures together. In making such endeavors, she is controlling the situation. According to her pace, she gradually formulates a third space to alter the adversity of her settlement. The pain of her forced migration, the haunting memories of her home exacerbate the process of acceptance when she experiences alienation from Eliot's mother. Mrs. Sen's cordial greetings and affection are always disapproved by the taciturn and professional behavior of his mother. This distant attitude contributes to aggravating Mrs. Sen's sense of alienation and displacement. But she remains consistent to mobilize herself to acclimatize to the foreignness of American culture. Her attempt to learn driving the car is symbolic of her struggle for acclimatization towards which she shows reluctance in the beginning—this reluctance is naturally blended with her attempt for a new beginning. Though this beginning comes with a failure, this experience familiarizes her with the urgency of constructing a third space to craft and negotiate her choices for embracing the differences.

While scrutinizing gendered experiences of space, Abraham states that immigrant women often stumble on multiple cultures and this in-between position

provides the amplified space of negotiations between the new and the old conventions. While negotiating with one culture, these women resist the hegemony of the other culture which is disempowering them. "As an ethnic minority, South Asian immigrant women", Abraham posits, "have to cope with semi permeable boundaries", which permit them, "to partially internalize the norms and values of the dominant culture while being simultaneously excluded by the dominant group from total membership in that culture" (Abraham, 2000, p. 198).

Jhumpa Lahiri, through her collection of short stories presents this diversity and heterogeneity of diasporic experience that voices different intricacies of life abroad. The character of Shoba in "A Temporary Matter" presents second generation of diasporic woman, whose dealings with the old and new are completely different from that of Mrs. Sen's. Lahiri presents the relationship of a husband and wife in the story that was once filled with ecstasy, but the death of their first-born child detaches them from each other. For Shoba, her inability to forget the pain of losing her child projects her agony onto Shukumar, her husband, whose absence during her labour redirects her blaming him for their child's death. Subsequently, both have "become experts at avoiding each other in their three-bedroom house, spending as much time on separate floors as possible" (Lahiri, 1999, p. 4). The tone of narration is melancholic. Shukumar often nostalgically recalls his wife's cheerful behavior before this incident and strongly wishes to normalize their life:

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, p. 6)

The writer plots how the gradually drifting apart couple through unspoken grief begins confessing and conversing their deepest fears and thoughts in a compulsory blackout for five nights for one hour to fix the defect caused by an ice storm. For Shukumar, this power cut is a momentary excuse for their inert detachment from their fears and past insecurities. The darkness reminds the couple of their home country which is symbolic of the connectivity which offers an opportunity to share their secrets and qualms. However, the fifth day morning announces the smooth functioning of electricity which suggests their existence on a new but developed and progressive land. Shukumar at eight p.m. in the evening keeps the room dark to begin similar intimacy of the previous day. However, Shoba enters the room and switches on the light with the announcement of her departure and to have a separate home for herself. Gilligan examines this state of detachment through the confusion and "lack of communication and miscommunication" that usually leave Lahiri's characters "emotionally isolated". He continues to state that "it depends not only on the capacity for empathy or the ability to listen to others and learn their language or take their point of view but also on having a voice and having a language" (1982, pp. xix-xx).

When the couple fails to share the intensity of their emotional attachment to their mutual loss, Shoba decides to be separated. Her decision shows that second-generation women have different diasporic experiences from first-generation women who are more exposed to patriarchal conventions in their home country. The in-between space provides Shoba an opportunity to take decisions for herself whether to live with her husband with whom she spent golden years of her life or to leave him. Her decision of leaving home asserts her independence that, in the case of Mrs. Sen remains invisible. Nonetheless, the situation changes when Shukamar shares the last moments of their still born child “—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, p. 22). For Shoba this revelation is altogether shocking and “they wept together, for the things they now knew” by the end (Lahiri, 1999, p. 22). The shift from miscommunication to communication, Gilligan notes, transforms the emotional detachment of the couple. They share their feelings to reframe their relationship.

Lahiri’s dealings with the second-generation couples in *This Blessed House*, also expose a new dimension of alienation and displacement in foreign land. Though the children born to first-generation are comparatively well-settled “their sense of identity borne from living in a diaspora community is influenced by the past migrant history of their parents or grandparents.” (McLeod, 2000, p. 207). “A Temporary Matter” symbolically construes the temporary detachment between Shoba and Shukamar that is bridged through a power cut. The power cut comes as a reminder of India which facilitates them to unfold the confusions and misunderstandings between them. Their still born child offers a sense of belonging, as in patriarchal conventions, the institution of marriage and childbearing and rearing are significant associations with women’s existence. As Catherine Belsey puts it:

Despite suffering due to patriarchal practices and values, women have not been able to overthrow the patriarchy. The reason for this is that female subjectivity itself is constructed and defined by the prevalent patriarchal conventions, education and culture in its broadest sense. (Belsey, 1991, p. 593)

Shoba’s detachment from her husband renders instability from her roots. This disconnection destabilizes their married life and she wants to spend some time alone too long for her belonging that Lahiri suggests by the end when the couple cries together as a temporary matter in an in-between space. Lahiri presents Shoba’s longing for her child as an emotional exile. This epitomizes her strong bond with the internalized conventions of her indigenous culture that emphasizes integrated family instead of American individualism. Shoba’s decision for her separate home and then the decision of reunion exhibit her negotiations within her in-between space where she resists hegemonic structures of both home and abroad. The ending presents Shoba’s alternative choices that contribute to her empowerment and agency whether she chooses to leave or stay.

In the eponymous story of the anthology, *Interpreter of Maladies*, Jhumpa Lahiri brings to light the lifestyle of a second-generation family, the Das family, through the eyes of an indigenous Indian Mr. Kapasi when they are vacationing in India. This narrative position brings forth the differences that Mr. Kapasi observes are alien to him and his culture. Lahiri presents the foreignness of the Das family in India by contrasting the images of western clothing and behavior when Mr. Kapasi observes, “the family looked Indian, but dressed as foreigners did” (Lahiri, 1999, p. 43). Mr. Kapasi’s description immediately questions their belongingness to the third space, where their features refer to their homeland, but their manners resonate with their foreignness. Mr. Kapasi acutely observes Mrs. Mina Das’ close-fitting outfit that is stylized to contemporary American fashion. He marks Mrs. Das’ appearance as deviating from Indian standards when he contrasts her with his conventional Indian wife. His sexual relationship with Mrs. Kapasi is represented as duty-bound during which she never exposes her body. He is married to a conventional Indian wife who “even when they made love, kept the panels of her blouse hooked together, the string of her petticoat knotted around her waist” (Lahiri, 1999, p. 58). But he is filled with desire when he has a quick glance at Mrs. Mina Das’ deep neckline. This moment gives him an exotic infatuation with the idea of embarking on an illicit relationship with her.

By implying this eroticism, Lahiri posits that men’s desire for pleasure is acceptable in the polygamous Indian setting. However, for women in India, sexual relationship in marriage is a sacred convention. The desire that subjects male supremacy in India, Lahiri posits it in relation to Mrs. Mina Das. A woman living in a liminal space who not only chooses to have an illicit affair with her husband’s friend but also gives birth to his child Bobby Das. This revelation abruptly smudges Mr. Kapasi’s infatuation with Mrs. Das. Through this, Lahiri implies the cultural restrictions at home for the crime of Mrs. Das as “guilt”. Nonetheless, the third space for Mrs. Das allowed her to make her choices that are unacceptable in her homeland.

(IV)

As the analysis of different stories included in *Interpreter of Maladies* shows, this essay explores the ways border crossing provides South Asian women a platform for balancing their dualities (their local and migrant identities) and fusing cultural opposites of the Indian and American life. This exercise becomes complicated because of differential responses and reactions of the first and second generation immigrant women living in America. Most often, they have to revisit their life choices. It is argued that South Asian women are dominated by the patriarchal infrastructure of their homeland while the experience of immigration introduces them with new cultural dynamics that are perceived as alien. This study is significant in examining the factors that allow women to reshape their existence and redefine their choice across borders. By reading Jhumpa Lahiri’s *Interpreter of Maladies*, I have investigated the process of this settlement that is at first filled with pain and trauma of border crossing while it gradually offers new vistas for challenging the mechanism of control and dominance in both cultures, at home and abroad. I have been able to explore that the female characters in the first and

second generations mark their border crossing as a new beginning that provides them a third space to exert their choices for balancing their dualities. But this is not possible unless they fuse oppositional and mutually exclusive cultural binaries of the east and west. The liminal cultural space becomes a space of their resistance and resilience where they redefine their identities.

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