

Diasporic Space: a Site of Contestation and Reconciliation in *Interpreter of Maladies* and *The Middleman and Other Stories*

✉Niran Khanal

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Abstract

This paper explores the space of diaspora in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* and Bharati Mukherjee's *The Middleman and Other Stories*. Both the authors present diasporic context, in which the immigrants hold an in-between space between home and host. The expatriates maintain emotional ties with the country of their origin resisting assimilation into the structure of the host society. Diasporic societies present the individuals with the challenge of balancing a dual orientation: acculturation into an alien culture and attachment for the home culture. Such a condition of dual orientation is the problem for research. The research attempts to answer this question: how the location of diaspora—a third space—is formed and what is the impact of dialectics between home and host on the lives of the diasporic people, and how they negotiate between incompatible elements to shape this third space. The growing trend of diaspora, a phenomenon of global migration, and its impact on established relations needs academic attention. The paper contextualizes the theoretical concept of diaspora in fictional representations. It adopts the modern theoretical concepts of diaspora and contextualizes them in *Interpreter of Maladies* and *The Middleman and Other Stories*. The dialectical relation between the host and home world shapes an in-between space which comes into existence through reconciliation between two different forces.

Dialectics between the Borders

Diasporas' in-between position between the host country and homeland shapes their identity. Identity is determined by a set of core values and such elements differentiate one group from another. The national identity of the hosting nation with its integral elements like language, culture and territory interacts with the upheld values of the immigrants. The diasporic location exists as a site of reconciliation between the contesting elements of the host and home. The interaction between such elements shapes the identity of immigrants. Anthony D. Smith sees the spirit of nationality as a binding force among the people in a country that holds them together. He states, "Nations must have a measure of common culture and a civic ideology, a set of common understandings and aspiration, sentiments and ideas, that bind the population together in their homeland" (11).

The immigrant characters in *Interpreter of Maladies* and *The Middleman and Other Stories* live in a space marked by different nationalities, races, religions and various other factors. These barriers define their space. Lahiri's stories: "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine," "Sexy," "Mrs. Sen's," "The Blessed House" and "The Third and Final Continent" mirror the lives of the Indian people struggling to find their identity in America. The American national

identity may at times come into conflict with their Indian national identity. The immigrants do not easily assimilate into the American culture completely; rather, they live between the barriers of the two nations. The immigrants live a dual life. In public they follow the culture of the host nation but in private they practice the homeland values. The characters try to balance these two contending spheres of life.

Homeland Empathy

Lilia's family in "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine" is not assimilated into the American society despite their long stay in America. Their dual life exists between the borders. Lilia's American home replicates a hybrid of Indian and American values. Mr. Pirzada, a Pakistani scholar's presence in their home evidences their homeland attachment. Their common concern for the war torn Pakistan and its political affairs reflect their collective spirit. Lilia narrates the grim situation about which Mr. Pirzada and her family are anxious, "What they heard that evening, and for many evenings after that, was that India and Pakistan were drawing closer and closer to war The war was to be waged on East Pakistani soil. The United States was siding with west Pakistan, the Soviet Union with India and what was soon to be Bangladesh" (40). These observant immigrants' anxiety for homeland affair is the manifestation of their troubled psyche. Away from home, they are still emotionally living there.

Lahiri consciously concentrates on depicting the image of home; she gives significant space for her concept of the ideal home in contrast to the actual American home. The story revolves around Mr. Pirzada, his mutual relation with Lilia's family, and his homeland turmoil. He feels estranged in America, mostly lives a traumatized life being too much anxious for the safety of his family in Dacca. America adds dread to his anxiety. Lilia's family offers consolation to balm his psychological injury. The sentiment of the Pakistani and Indian people is expressed against the backdrop of American society which is indifferent to their plight.

Mr. Pirzada's crisis is over when he returns home to Dacca. Luckily, all the seven daughters and his wife survive the devastation of war. But Lilia's family still struggles between India and America, languishing between the geographical and national boundaries. After many months, they receive a card and a short letter from Mr. Pirzada. In the letter he writes about commemorating the Muslim New Year. He informs that he is reunited with his family members. All are fine as they have taken shelter in his wife's grandparents' home in Shillong (42). This good news offers joy to Lilia's family in America. Lilia's family celebrates the occasion preparing delicious meal. Lahiri captures the sentiments of dislocated immigrants who languish between the borders as diasporas.

Homeland Kitchen and Culture

The Dixit family in the story "Sexy" live a dual life in America. They need America now but do not give up the past culture and religious devotion to Hinduism. Living in the dominantly Christian society, they cannot assimilate into the Christian culture. The religious, cultural and national barriers separate them from the mainstream society of the white people. Miranda, an American girl, studies the cross cultural differences between the Indians and the Americans.

Lahiri narrates Miranda's observation:

Miranda remembered a heavy aroma of incense and onions in the house, and a pile of shoes heaped by the front door. But most of all she remembers a piece of fabric, about the size of a pillow case, which hung from a wooden dowel at the bottom of the stairs. It was a painting of a naked woman with a red face shaped like a knight's shield . . . (96).

Miranda observes the Indian way of cooking. More importantly, she studies the Goddess Kali's image in the fabric. This shows how the Dixits embrace the Indian cultural values in the private sphere in contrast to their American way of living in the public.

Dr. M.K. Gautam views that culture in terms of heritage becomes an unforgettable historical fact shared in memory through interaction with other members of the community. It serves as the source of their action, voices, selection of material behavior, self-perception and world view (6). People's world views, behaviors and actions are guided by their culture.

Mrs. Sen, the protagonist of "Mrs. Sen's" languishes between the borders of India and America; she feels the suffocation of in-between-ness. She struggles to overcome the anxiety of being an outsider but it gives no positive result. The fascination of the new world changes into a dread. The American culture threatens her Indian identity; she perceives dread in America. Her dissatisfaction explodes, "Send pictures," they write. 'Send pictures of your new life' what pictures can I send?'. . . "They think I live the life of queen, Eliot" (125). She tells Eliot about her Indian relatives' perception of American life. They seem to be unknown about the ugly reality of ideal American Dream. Mrs. Sen gets disillusioned as she experiences the immigrant's trauma.

The sense of being an outsider, an alien among strangers, cripples Mrs. Sen emotionally. She tries to break the perpetual estrangement by taking refuge in her home back in India. Lahiri sheds light on Mrs. Sen's light moment by establishing connection with the Indian root. "Two things, Eliot learned, made Mrs. Sen happy. One was the arrival of a letter from her family. It was her custom to check the mailbox after driving practice" (121). The arrival of a letter brings a hope of rescue from her present nightmare. Lahiri puts Mrs. Sen at the frontier where the Indian and the American values clash. Sen makes her space between the barriers of home and the new place.

Sunil Bhatia argues that construction of "Indian Identity" in the Indian diaspora is attached to the questions about how India is incorporated in the imagination of the diasporic community. The imagined community unites the diverse notions of "Indianness" shaped by the members' class positions back home. They undergo nostalgia, memories, emotions, and longing for the original destination and culture of their homeland (14). He attaches importance to imagination to unite the diverse Indian origin people to shape their identity. Like Benedict Anderson, he underscores the role of imagination to shape the common identity of diaspora.

Clash of Religions

In "This Blessed House", the couple, Sanjeev and Twinkle, are divided over the issue of religion. The preparation for house warming in a newly bought house meets an unexpected skirmish regarding the statue of Jesus Christ. Sanjeev rigidly upholds the Indian cultural values being conscious of Hindu religious identity, whereas Twinkle expresses her liberal attitudes. Lahiri constructs a

religious barrier between the Indian Sanjeev and the Western Christian society. He cannot accept the American Christian ideal at the cost of Hind culture. He repeatedly affirms, “We are not Christian” (139). He wants to get rid of Christian icon as he demands, “We should call the Realtor. Tell him there is all this nonsense left behind. Tell him take it away” (138). In contrast to Twinkle’s assimilative tone, Sanjeev declares his Hindu religious identity. He perceives a distinct border between the Indian and the American values. Finally, he negotiates with Twinkle to give space to the statue of Christ in his house. This evidences his own in-between position between the border of India and America. Rainbow Coalition.

Integration calls for the minority heterogeneous group to forego its culture, language and religious values. The host society demands that the group should feel a part of its culture (Gautam 3). Through acculturation the immigrants integrate into the mainstream culture of the host society without shedding their core values. The narrator of “The Third and Final Continent” acculturates into the American society. He attains financial strength and professional success but cannot discard the homeland culture. He feels proud to uphold such values beyond the seas. His wish to continue home culture by his son is expressed in these lines, “We drive 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, things sometimes worry he will no longer do after we die” (197). The narrator succeeds to balance the conflicting cultural practices between two nations. He shapes his identity through the negotiation between the aspiration of American dream and an emotional bondage to India. In one hand, the narrator integrates into the American society. On the other hand, he longs to unite with the lost origin. He, as the Indian immigrant, embarks on to face the challenges beyond the national and continental borders and settles in a third space. He searches his destiny between the barriers.

Mukherjee’s Diasporic Representation

Mukherjee, like Lahiri, projects the condition of diasporic in-betweenness in “Fighting for the Rebound,” “The Tenant,” “Fathering” and “Buried Lives.” The immigrant characters, in these stories, undergo the trauma of dislocation and languish in the state of being nowhere. In contrast to Mukherjee’s claim as an American author who celebrates the new life in America, George Woodcock perceives the grim situation for the immigrants in her stories. He critiques, “she [has] immersed herself with relief and gladness in the great melting pot, which many of us have not found so welcoming” (quoted in Harishankar web). Mukherjee’s own stories reflect such predicament.

East Vs West

The couple of “Fighting for the Rebound” are disinterested in one another. Blanquita perceives the gulf between the East and the West. She regrets that she should never have left Manila. She realizes that her pappy was right in his view about the East and West which shall never meet (80). The disagreement between Blanquita from the Philippines and her American husband reaches exploding point; she warns to sever the matrimonial tie to give a new direction to her life. She blames the Americans for inflicting pain to the world, “All you Americans. You just worry about your own measly little relationship. You don’t

care how much you hurt the world” (85). Though Blanquita denies her assimilation into the American life, she does not leave America. She maintains a tie with the Philippines; feels proud of her Eastern Identity. These lines evidence her bondage, “Blanquita was promised a place in the Miss Universe contest. That’s why she kept her citizenship” (86). The conflict between the couple is the conflict of identity and lack of mutual trust.

Diasporic Anguish and its Remedy

Another story “The Tenant” unfolds the dilemma of Mrs. Sanyal, an Indian woman, struggling in America without stability. “She has accomplished nothing. She has changed her citizenship but hasn’t broken through into the light, the vigor, the bustle of the new world. She is stuck in dead space” (110). She seems to be celebrating the American freedom and leading a carefree life but what happens is the inner suffocation of her lonely life. After enjoying some romantic years, she feels emptiness in America. Ranee Kaur Banerjee exposes the horrors of Maya’s world, “foreignness, becomes embarrassing, awkward, “freaky”, as “visible” and “abnormal” as “crippling” as a man with no arms”(web). Maya’s condition is compared with a man with no arms, a helpless sufferer, who needs somebody, to rescue her from the misery.

Maya’s world wears a deserted look between home and America; she desperately tries to regain the spirit of life associating with homeland people. Her visit to Dr. Chatterji’s apartment breaks her monotony. He offers her homely warmth. “He speaks in Bengali to his wife, in English to Maya. To Maya, he says, “we are having real Indian Green Label Lipton. A nephew is bringing it just one month back” (104). Dr. Chatterji practices the Indian culture at home and outside the American one. This duality exists between the borders. Similarly, Maya also tries to balance the contrasting cultures of two nations.

War and Dislocation

In “Fathering,” Mukherjee presents the emotional scar of an estranged child who is dislocated from home. As the enemies invade her country, wipe out her family members, she is adopted by the American man. Frantic Eng feels the horror of war and blames the adopting father, “you shoot my grandmother?” (121). Her rescue does not yield positive transformation in her; she feels alienated among the strangers. Memory haunts her adding hatred and distrust for alien invaders. Even in her feverish delirium she denies the treatment from the doctor. Enraged Eng explodes, “When they shoot my grandma, you think pills do her any good? You Yankee, please go home” (124). The use of term ‘Yankee’ denotes her contempt for America. The conscious war victim languishes in the foreign soil from which she wants to be rescued to return home. The geographical and psychological barriers block her communication with the new people. The sense of insecurity grows which makes her more rebellious.

The narrator’s wife Sharon emotionally detaches herself from both Eng and him. She cannot accept Eng as a part of their family; an emotional barrier stands between them. Sharon complains, “Everything was fine until she got here. Send her back. Jase. If you love me, send her back” (123). She believes that it is Eng who brings trouble to the family. Lack of love and understanding distances Eng from Sharon. Eng refuses to assimilate into their society. They live together with a barrier between them. Mukherjee raises the issue of war and dislocation;

she sheds light on national interests, identities and impact of war on the innocent people. Being unable to unite with the homeland people, Eng struggles in agony.

Unwelcome Guests

Mukherjee dramatizes the venture of a Srilankan immigrant in “Buried Lives”. Venkatesan, a forty-nine year old school teacher, explores the way to escape from the arrest in his home town Srilanka. He does not feel safe to live in the war torn Srilanka, due to Tamil insurgency for many decades. Venkatesan invites trouble by throwing an axe over the crowd during the demonstration. Due to this event, his insecurity and impatience grow making him take a bold decision to cross the national border for Europe. The turmoil at homeland and the unusual circumstances during his departure compel him to imagine a new life beyond the border. The unpredictable journey of this illegal immigrant lands him in Germany though his target is Canada. Having an illegal and anonymous status, Venkatesan struggles in the the German world. The national, cultural and linguistic barriers isolate him; he takes refuge in Queene’s house. Mukherjee reflects upon the moment of his rescue, “Mr. Venkatesan felt exhilarated. Here was another of fate’s angels come to minister him out of his malady” (168). However, the dread of an alien place is scarier than the homeland insecurity for him.

Venkatesan is spotted by a German man, who throws his wrath at him, “You filthy swine,” the man shouted in English. “We don’t want you making filthy our Germany.” He threw five passports down on the kitchen table and spat on the top one” (173). The alien’s verbal abuses fall heavily upon the helpless refugees who cannot confront the German nationals. This shows how on the ground of nationality the foreigners are denied to live a dignified life. Venkatesan feels the borders that separate him and exclude Asian outsiders away from home, among the strangers.

Conclusion

The immigrant characters in *Interpreter of Maladies* and *The Middleman and Other Stories* negotiate between the borders. Cultural, national and geographical barriers demarcate their space. The dislocated immigrant characters struggle in the new location for adaptation and adjustment. Ultimately, acculturation is inevitable. They acquire the basic elements of acculturation like language, culture, laws and relationships to integrate into the host society. Before that however the intermediate state is one of hybridity, when they are struggling between host and home, with no reconciliation between the two in sight. The continuum therefore is from complete hostility to the host country to complete integration with it with various in-between positions. Diaspora mainly deals with the dialectics of the in-between position.

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