

## **Memoirising Bengal : Exploring the Memories of Bengal through Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies***

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### **Abstract :**

Of the many voices that produce a distinct sound of Bengal in the English language is that of Jhumpa Lahiri. Her narratives provide a matrix from which, time and again, the consciousness of the Bengali diaspora has been culled out. Belonging to an in-between familial space herself, Lahiri has been able to explore the identities of both worlds, the native as well as the assimilative. In doing so, she has been able to create, through her narratives, a space in which Bengal is seen to construct an identity of its own that is accommodative of the personal renditions of history. Not only does this construct an overall sense of Bengal, the cultural space, but also Bengal, the personal space. The historicity of the former space is part of the “collective consciousness”, that which accentuates the understanding of the accepted reality. It provides a vantage for the world to view Bengal from an already existing perspective. The latter space, the personal perspective, is the subject of exploration for the present paper. In both her long as well as short forms of fiction, Jhumpa Lahiri immaculately creates an abundance of experiences for the personal consciousness to organically develop itself. As a part of the same, the cultural background of Bengal, without failure or pause, plays an extremely decisive role. In her *Interpreter of Maladies*, Lahiri provides not a singular but multiple perspectives that create a distinct sense of the history of Bengal. She places certain characters within the narrative, both as the protagonist or otherwise, and provides them experiences that are tailor-made for the construction of a distinct idea of Bengal. Sometimes these are Bengali natives living as immigrants in America whereas sometimes they are foreign nationals with an association with individuals with a Bengali connect. Through their experiences within the narratives, these individuals form their sense of the history and culture of Bengal or in other words their distinct and personal sense of the historic truth of Bengal. This constructed idea of Bengal was not only assimilated through the “collective” knowledge of the world but also through an intermingling with other individuals with their own personal idea of Bengal indented in their memory. The present paper intends to study the extent and character of memory as a personal attribute as operative within the narratives. It further intends to take recourse to a psychoanalytic understanding of the operations of personal memory in terms of recording,

preserving and manipulating historic reality. It intends to delve into the domain of the personal idea of historicity. The present paper thus, intends to analyze the use of memory and its progression and culmination into personal reality in the form of memoirs.

**Keywords:**

Bengal, Memory, Jhumpa Lahiri, Memoir

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Of the many voices that produce a distinct sound of Bengal in the English language is that of Jhumpa Lahiri. She was born in London in 1967 to Bengali parents who had relocated to England and then to the US when Lahiri was just a child. Her father was a librarian at the University of Rhode Island and her mother too was a teacher at South Kingstown School Department. At home, there was a constant attempt on the part of her parents to keep their Bengali heritage alive. The family frequently visited Calcutta and thus, Lahiri was never far away from the Bengal that we find so frequently arising in her narratives. She says in her *My Two Lives*, "I feel Indian not because of the time I spent in India or because of my genetic composition but rather because of my parents' steadfast presence in my life." (Lahiri 105).

Lahiri's connections to Bengal get transformed into memories of Bengal living through her characters throughout her narratives. Not only does this construct an overall sense of Bengal, the cultural space, but also Bengal, the personal space. The historicity of the former space is part of the "collective consciousness", that which accentuates the understanding of the accepted reality. It provides a vantage for the world to view Bengal from an already existing perspective.

Why she chose Bengal, more specifically Calcutta, may be understood through her comment:

My own experience of India was largely that of a tunnel imposed by a single city we ever visited, the handful of homes we stayed in, by the fact that I was not allowed to explore the city on my own. Still within these narrow confines, I felt that I had seen enough life, enough details and drama, to set stories on Indian soil. (*My Intimate Alien* 117)

Thus, her Calcutta experience may be considered to have served the role of being the microcosm of the Bengali flavour of her narratives as a whole. There are various aspects, which will further be investigated in the paper, which not only point towards Calcutta per se, but towards Bengal in general. Calcutta, with all her cosmopolitan features comes to celebrate Bengal in Lahiri. In her *Interpreter of Maladies*, Lahiri provides multiple perspectives that create a distinct sense of the history of Bengal. She places certain characters within the narratives, both as the protagonist or otherwise, and provides them experiences that are tailor-made for the construction of a distinct idea of Bengal. Sometimes these are Bengal natives

living as immigrants in America whereas sometimes they are foreign nationals with an association with individuals with a Bengali connect. Through their experiences within the narratives, these individuals form their sense of the history and culture of Bengal or in other words their distinct and personal sense of the historic truth of Bengal. Their constructed idea of Bengal was not only assimilated through an intermingling with other individuals but also with their own personal idea of Bengal indented in their memory.

Memories have always been an integral part of the relationship between an expatriate and the native country. Having moved out of the native boundaries, an expatriate negotiates, through assimilation, with the new cultural and social patterns in which s/he has landed. In case of an adult, there are cultural markers which are indented within the psyche, in the form of memories, and the very personality of the individual is influenced by the same. It is through these memories that the individuals remain permanently connected to their homelands. Uma Parmeswaran in her "Writing the Diaspora" has pointed out that there are four distinct stages of settlement of an immigrant in a foreign land. First, the immigrant displays a sense of nostalgia for the homeland s/he has left behind and a certain sense of fear in the new land. Second, comes the phase where the immigrant is busy setting up negotiations with the new form of life offered by the new domicile. In the third phase, the immigrant gradually mingles with the ethnocultural aspects of the new land. In the fourth, the immigrant may be found to be participating in the societal, cultural, as well as national aspects of the new domicile, at which stage, the transition may be said to have been complete. Lahiri's immigrants are found suspended with the first three stages of migration. Also, the phases are still intermingled and not completely distinct in nature. It is due to this that the characters cannot be totally dissociated from their past cultural ethnicity and are found reminiscing their older life which lives strongly indented in their memories. Most of Lahiri's expatriates in *Interpreter of Maladies* carry these extended identities. Bengal remains, in this way, a part of the identity of Lahiri's immigrants through memory. Bengal, thus, takes the shape of not only a metaphoric representation in Lahiri but also a constant living reality in the lives of these characters.

The present paper intends to study the extent the character of memory as a personal attribute as operative within the narratives. It further intends to take recourse to a psychoanalytic understanding of the operations of personal memory in terms of recording, preserving and manipulating historic reality. It intends to delve into the domain of the personal idea of historicity. The present paper, thus, intends to analyse the use of memory and its progression and culmination into personal reality in the form of memoirs.

In the present context, the memory of Bengal is the foundation on which the historic and cultural reality of Bengal are constructed. Frank Kermode in his "Palaces of Memory" asserts that "[m]emory...offers the clue to the way the world at large functions, for the world is also fallen into materiality and sense, so that it's redemption must be a matter of history, of a cosmic memory." (Kermode 3). In fact, "[t]he tangible past is altered mainly to make history conform to memory. Memory not only conserves the past but adjusts recall to current

needs. Instead of remembering exactly what was, we make the past intelligible in the light of the present circumstances.” (Kermode 3). This operational attribute of memory, in the present context, therefore, transposes the narratives into pieces of personal history or memoirs. The objective contention of the present paper, therefore, is to explore the narratives of the mentioned text as memoirs that provide a distinct taste of Bengal as preserved within the individual psyches.

Many have been able to develop an idea of what is known as memory in popular parlance. What actually is this aspect of reality of human rationality is difficult to fathom. This is not only due to its abstract quality but also because of the depth of the sphere of its operation. This sphere, interestingly, operates both within the human anatomical structure as well as outside of it. It is nurtured and sustained by not only what is thought and done by the individual human psyche, but also by the ‘collective consciousness’ of the entirety of the being itself which represents the external manifestation of the same. Both of these come together to construct a common reality.

The human psyche, individually, is a two-pronged functioning unit. The first deals with the registration in the mind of everything that is experienced and has a concrete, sometimes even tangible, existence. Concrete here would not only mean something tangible, but also that which has the validity rendered to it by both the five human senses as well as the community comprising of the other individual units of the society. The second deals with those which the mind fathoms on its own and requires no validations whatsoever. This part of the mind’s activity is called the ‘imaginary’. Aristotle in his “On Memory and Recollection” has stated that “...memory belongs to that part of the soul to which imagination belongs; all things which are imaginable are essentially objects of memory”(Aristotle 159). This is seated strongly in human consciousness. Sartre points out in his seminal *The Imaginary*, “[a]ll consciousness is consciousness of something” (Sartre 11). What he means by this is that consciousness brings together the two binaries of the real and the ir-real, to formulate the basis of human history which survives in the form of what the argument is trying to get at-memory.

The question then arises-what is memory? What is its operational mode and why is it so important? The discussion so far has been able to establish the dual nature of the operations of the mind. However, these operations are only exercises undertaken by the rational faculties of man to gather an estimation of his surroundings. The real end of these exercises, all taken together, is to create a meaning out of the experiences that one goes through during a lifetime. The idea of memory as a storehouse of all experiences, real and imaginary, has been clearly hinted at in this observation. However, limiting the assertion till this very point might limit the complex contribution of memory on the establishment and development of the self as such. Memory is no longer understood to be a capsule which acts as a niche for the ‘important’ happenings. Neither is it any longer taken to be a sieve that disposes of the insignificant details of daily life. The argument is trying to assert that memory is an omnipresent and all-encompassing entity. It is a storehouse, yes, but of every single unit of experience. It is a

sieve, yes, but faithfully and systematically categorizes all such units into various sections of the mind. It not only highlights the dominant but also pushes the unnoticed detail into the subconscious so as to bring it to use only when necessary.

This memory is the medium through which the narratives of the present author construct and visualise the concept of Bengal. The characters and situations produce experiences out of which the reader is to estimate the meaning of Bengal. They have variant experiences and variant memories of those experiences. Thus, a wide variety of memories culminate into not only the idea of a geographical but also a cultural space. A closer look at these narratives will prove the same.

As a case in question, "A Temporary Matter" deals with the drifts of modern living for Indian couples abroad. It talks about the struggles that a young Bengali couple go through in their personal spheres, dealing with a dead child and a dying relationship. It is within the layers of these struggles that the image of the erstwhile Calcutta glimmers. It comes through "...the mortar and pestle she'd bought in a bazaar in Calcutta, and used to pound garlic cloves and cardamom pods, back when she used to cook" (Lahiri 12). Calcutta symbolises a time and space within which the relationship had found its niche but is now gone. So it symbolises the ideal that seems too far to achieve. This ideal can also be found in the traditional Bengali parents of both the protagonists who despite their NRI status produced a visual of vintage Bengal.

Due to her constant state of flux between Bengali, English and American cultures, Lahiri often experienced a sense of homelessness. However, her creative imagination became a fertile ground for a psychological settlement in the memories of a home away from home. For her, Bengal was a repository of all that was left behind and yet that which rooted her, somewhere. She points ponders:

I spent much time in Calcutta as a child—idle but rich time—often at home with my grandmother. I read books; I began to read books and to record things. It enabled to experience solitude ironically because there were so many people, I could seal myself off psychologically. It was a place where I began to think imaginatively. Calcutta nourished my mind, my eye as a writer, and my interest in seeing things from different points of view. There's a legacy and tradition there that we just don't have here. The ink hasn't dried yet on our lives here. (Patel 80)

In the next relevant narrative, "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine", is perhaps the most successful portrayal of Bengal through the eyes of the protagonist. It talks about two Bengalis—the Indian and the Bangladeshi...struggling out of East Pakistan. It gives a picture of a Bengali family based in America in 1971 where Mr. Pirzada from Dacca had taken mental refuge during the Civil War. It graphically presents Bengal during these severe times when:

...Pakistan was engaged in a civil war. The Eastern Frontier, where Dacca was located, was fighting for autonomy from the ruling regime in the west. In March, Dacca had been invaded,

torched, and shelled by the Pakistani army. Teachers were dragged onto streets and shot, women dragged into barracks and raped. By the end of summer, three hundred thousand people were said to have died. (Lahiri 20)

With seven daughters and a wife of twenty years back home in Dacca, Mr. Pirzada reminisces about the way of life in his homeland. He drops by every night at Lilia's place in the hope of attaining some light at the end of the tunnel, mainly because he could not contact his family because, "...the postal system, along with almost everything else in Dacca, had collapsed, and he had not heard of them in over six months" (Lahiri 20).

Apart from this part of Bengali's history, the Bengal aligned to India is also a part of the collective experience of this narrative. Lilia's father had a sense of Bengal's history, seeped in through the pores of his memory and one he wanted to pass onto her. It is from him that Lilia gained her idea of Bengal and from Mr. Pirzada, the other Bengal. She did not understand the difference that sliced up the two nations.

It made no sense to me. Mr. Pirzada and my parents spoke the same language, laughed at the same jokes, looked more or less the same. They ate pickled mangoes with their meals, ate rice every night for their supper with their hands. (Lahiri 21)

Therefore, this narrative can be seen to construct the idea of Bengal through two counter-narratives infused with a lot of commonality. This brings them together into a singular whole as is seen through the eyes of Lilia, who projects a neutral space, constantly kept out of the purview of either.

In the "Interpreter of Maladies", the Bengal connection is only resourced out of the identity of the Bengali couple, Mr and Mrs Das, travelling through parts of Orissa. "A Real Durban" has Boori Ma, a sixty four year old woman who sketches a dicey version of the united Bengal, when she was not a refugee. Living in an old apartment building in a Calcutta because Partition had separated her from her husband and four daughters, her various possessions provide the various colours of this sketch.

Tied to the end of her sari is a set of skeleton keys belonging to coffer boxes that housed her valuables...she chronicles the easier times in her life, the feasts and servants and marble floor of her home. (Lahiri 42)

Right up to her ouster from the building, she is seen to repeatedly, like clockwork, go on about the past life and that forms the bridge with her present. It portrays her experiences brought on mainly due to the Partition. Her Bengal therefore was the broken one, slicing up her future.

For Miranda in the next narrative "Sexy", Bengali is a religion rather than a geographical space. "But then he pointed it out to her, a place in India called Bengal, in a map printed in an issue of *The Economist*." The uniqueness of this narrative lies in the reversal of memory as is in the case with Miranda and Dev. An Indian by birth, Dev is the one who lacks any

interest in harbouring any Bengal related memories. “Before leaving the apartment he’d toss the magazine in the garbage, along with the ends of three cigarettes he always smoked in the course of his visits...Miranda retrieved it, (after he left) and brushed the ashes off the corner...” (Lahiri 48). It is Miranda who culls out a memory out of the ashes of the experiences of Dev’s Bengal. She tries to comprehend the idea of Bengal hoping to find images on turning pages. But all she finds is “graphs and grids”.

This was very much like the story of Eliot in “Mrs. Sen’s” who met Mrs. Sen at her Bengali household in the US. Of all the babysitters that he had encountered so far Mrs Sen was the most intriguing for him. In the “...shimmering white sari patterned with orange paisleys, more suitable for an evening affair...”, (Lahiri 61). The lady came through as an object of curious interest for the little boy. Indeed, he quite enjoyed her outlandish activities:

He especially enjoyed watching Mrs. Sen as she chopped things, seated on a newspaper on the living room floor. Instead of a knife she used a blade that curved like the prow of a Viking ship, sailing to battle in the distant seas. (Lahiri 62)

It is through the eyes of Eliot that one can visualise Bengal in terms of the outsider. One can imagine a Bengali middle class lady of the house sitting “...cross-legged, at Tim’s with legs splayed, surrounded by an array of colanders and shallow bowls of water...” (Lahiri 62), and going on about the other household chores in the typical Bengali fashion. Her attire, her sofa “with rows of elephants bearing palanquins” (Lahiri 62), her blade that she had brought from Bengal, her stories of wedding when all the family got together, “laughing and gossiping” (Lahiri 63), in totality, build a Bengal not only for Eliot but also for the reader. The narrative acts as a mirror reflecting the cultural intricacies of the Bengali way of life.

“The Testament of Bibi” however, provides a more somber picture of Bengal where it is seen to harbour some superstitious elements as is portrayed when the protagonist is taken to Calcutta for hypnosis for the treatment of he apparent mental issues.

The final narrative “The Third and the Final Continent”, is perhaps the most direct in its depiction. The narrator moves from continent to continent in search of better job opportunities and a better life. After having spent a considerable time away from home, the narrator is seen to have adapted to the ‘foreign’ way of life. Having acquired the American lifestyle, the narrator goes on to marry an Indian bride. It is through his experiences that the reader is able to grapple with the idea of a Bengali married life:

...I had repeated endless Sanskrit verses after the priest...which joined me to my wife. The marriage had been arranged by my older brother and his wife...My wife’s name was Mala...she was the daughter of a schoolmaster in Belegkata. I was told that she could cook, knit, embroider, sketch landscapes, and recite poems by Tagore. (Lahiri 93)

Having settled with her husband, Mala “presented me with two pullover sweaters” (Lahiri 93). She gradually transformed the life of the narrator on foreign soil into a near

Bengali experience. The “Pears soap” that she brought from India, the pajamas, the smell of steamed rice, the fragrance of the coconut oil and the delicate sound of her bracelets all reflect the way a Bengali builds a life within the space of Bengal. For once, Lahiri gives us a taste of it on foreign soil. It creates a memory, an experience that leaves the reader with a Bengali aftertaste.

As per Nancy Mack in her “Critical Memoir and Identity Formation: Being, Belonging, Becoming”, memory aides one to interpret, orient and represent the experiences. It is this orientation and representation that transforms reality into memoir. What we find in Lahiri is a collection of variant memories that culminate into a memoir of Bengal. What we comprehend is a way to believe in the identity of Bengal as multifaceted, multi-coloured and multidimensional. This multiplicity creates a story , a memoir with its own patterns of expression. What comes out is a visual of Bengal as both the Self and the Other. The Self is the memoir of the Other and the Other becomes the memoir of the Self.

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