

**Postcolonial Literature**  
**Prof. Sayan Chattopadhyay**  
**Department of Humanities and Social Sciences**  
**Indian Institute of Technology, Kanpur**

**Lecture No. #16**

**Diasporic Literature : Selections from Jhumpa Lahiri's Interpreter of Maladies**

Hello everyone, and welcome back to another lecture, on Postcolonial Literature. Today, we will again pick up the notion, of belonging simultaneously, to multiple cultural traditions, which we discussed in our previous lecture, while talking about Cosmopolitanism. And, in today's lecture, we will explore this idea of multiple cultural affiliations, with reference to, what is called Diasporic Literature.

And, this category of Diasporic Literature, has come to form an integral part, of the broader category of Postcolonial Literature. And, in order to understand, this concept of Diasporic Literature, what this umbrella termed as Diasporic Literature signifies, I think, we should start by defining for ourselves, the term Diasporic itself, that adjective. Now, Diasporic is an adjective, that is derived from the noun, Diaspora. And, this noun, Diaspora, has its roots, in the Greek language.

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### **Historical significance of "diaspora"**

- The word in its Greek form means dispersing or scattering of seeds during the process of sowing. However, today the primary understanding of 'diaspora' relates to the dispersion of people rather than seeds
- Chapter 28 verse 25 of *Book of Deuteronomy (Old Testament)* uses the Greek root word of diaspora to describe how, if the commands of the God are not obeyed, then the God will cause the disobedient people to be defeated by their enemy and cause them to be dispersed among all the kingdoms of the earth.
- This connection between exile and diaspora most strongly resonates in the history of the Jewish community, which was banished from its homeland in the sixth century BCE after the holy city of Jerusalem was sacked by the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar.

Now, the word, in its Greek form means, dispersion and scattering of seeds, during the process of sowing. So, it primarily, in its original form, related to the field of agriculture. However, today, the primary understanding of Diaspora has changed. And today, it relates to the dispersion of people, rather than seeds.

And, this specific association, of the concept of Diaspora with the dispersion of people rather than with seeds, can be traced back for instance, to the Book of Deuteronomy, in the Old Testament of the Bible, where in Chapter 28 Verse number 25, we find the use of the Greek root word, for Diaspora. And there, it is used to describe, how if the commandments of the god is not followed, then the god will cause the disobedient people, to be defeated by their enemy.

And, the god will cause them, to be dispersed from their homeland, and to be scattered among all the kingdoms of the earth. Now, while looking at this early occurrence, of this word Diaspora, in the old testament, which is used to mean a dispersion of people, we need to keep in mind that, here the idea of Diaspora, is closely associated with the notion of exile, or of being removed from one's homeland, as a form of punishment.

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And, this connection between Exile and Diaspora, most strongly resonates in the history of the Jewish community, which was banished from its homeland, in the 6th century BCE, after the holy city of Jerusalem was sacked, and the temple of Solomon, was destroyed by the Babylonian King, Nebuchadnezzar. Now, this 6th century BCE exile, and the memory of this exile, still informs Jewish identity, and is an integral part of the cultural memory, of the Jewish Diaspora.

That is, the Jewish people, who live in different parts of the world, dispersed from their homeland. And, this sense of exile, within the Jewish community, is closely entwined, with a sense of nostalgia. A sense of nostalgia, for the lost homeland, and a desire to return to it.

Now, all these emotional and cultural associations, that I have just described to you, referring back to the old testament, to the Jewish history, all of these shape our present understanding of the term Diaspora. And, let me before I proceed any further, let me reiterate the main points again, with regards to Diaspora, so that, we know, that we have clearly understood the term Diaspora, and its various connotations.

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So, what is Diaspora? Firstly, Diaspora refers to communities of people, living away from,

### **What is Diaspora?**

- Firstly, diaspora refers to communities of people living away from what they consider to be their homelands
- Secondly, this state of living away from the homeland bears the negative connotation of being in exile
- Finally, the feeling of being in exile evokes within the diasporic community a sense of nostalgic longing for a lost homeland and a desire to return

what they consider to be their homelands. Secondly, this state of living, away from their homeland, bears the negative connotation, of being in exile. And thirdly, and finally, the feeling of being in exile, evokes within the Diasporic community, a sense of nostalgic longing for a lost homeland, and a desire to somehow return to that homeland, which has been lost.

Now, keeping in mind, this general characterisation of Diaspora, and Diasporic identity, let us now try and see, how it relates to Postcolonialism and Postcolonial Literature. Because, ultimately, that is our main concern, in this course. Well, as discussed at the very beginning of this lecture series, Colonialism connects the two distant spaces, of the Metropolis and the Colonial Periphery, through a constant traffic of goods of capital, but most importantly of people.

So, in other words, human dispersion, and formation of Diasporic communities, are integral to the process of Colonialism itself. Now, in our previous lectures, we have already discussed a bit about the white man, who is removed from his homeland in the Metropolis, and who comes to the Colonial Periphery, to the Colony of the Metropolis. And here, I am thinking about our discussion, of characters like Marlow, in Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness, someone who comes to Congo, the Colonial Periphery, from the Metropolis Belgium.

And, I am also thinking for instance, of the Christian Missionaries, as depicted in Chinua Achebe's novel, Things Fall Apart, who again are people, who have come to Nigeria, the Colonial Periphery, from the Mother country in Europe. But, today in our lecture, we are

going to discuss an opposite kind of migration, an opposite kind of dispersion, that the Colonialism gave birth to.

And, this is the dispersion of the Colonised subjects, not the representative of Colonial power like Marlow, or the Christian Missionaries, but the dispersion of Colonised subjects, from their homelands, and the migration of these people, from the Colonial Periphery, to the Metropolis. However, before we deal with that, it is again important to remember that, not every dispersion of Colonial subjects, from their homelands, meant a gathering in the European Mother country, or in the Western Metropolis.

Many people, were simply displaced during Colonialism, from one area of the Colonial Periphery to another, from one Colony to another. And here, for instance, we have already discussed this, when we discussed Derek Walcott. But, I am thinking for instance, of the dispersion of slaves and indentured labourers, during Colonialism, from places like India for instance, and Africa.

And, these dispersed labourers and slaves, and sort of bonded labourers, they were gathering, they were being dispersed from Colonies like India and Africa, but they were gathering, not necessarily in the Metropolis. But, they were gathering in another part of the Colonial Periphery, like for instance, the Caribbean, where these bonded labourers, these slave labour was necessary, to run the sugar plantations, for instance.

Now, as I said, we have already discussed this particular kind of migration, when we talked about Derek Walcott. And, Walcott, if you remember, is the legacy bearer of the African Diasporic community, who gathered in the Caribbean, during the days of slavery. After slavery was banned, during the early 19th century, indentured labourers to their places.

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## Amitav Ghosh (1956 - )

Ibis Trilogy :

- *Sea of Poppies* (2008)
- *River of Smoke* (2011)
- *Flood of Fire* (2015)



And, the Indian novelist, Amitav Ghosh, in his Ibis Trilogy, especially in the first novel, in the Ibis Trilogy: *Sea of Poppies*, he describes in details, how these indentured labourers were gathered, from various parts of India, for instance, using different degrees of coercion and persuasion. And, then they were shipped to distant Colonies, distant Colonial plantations, to work as bonded labourers.

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## V. S. Naipaul (1932 - )



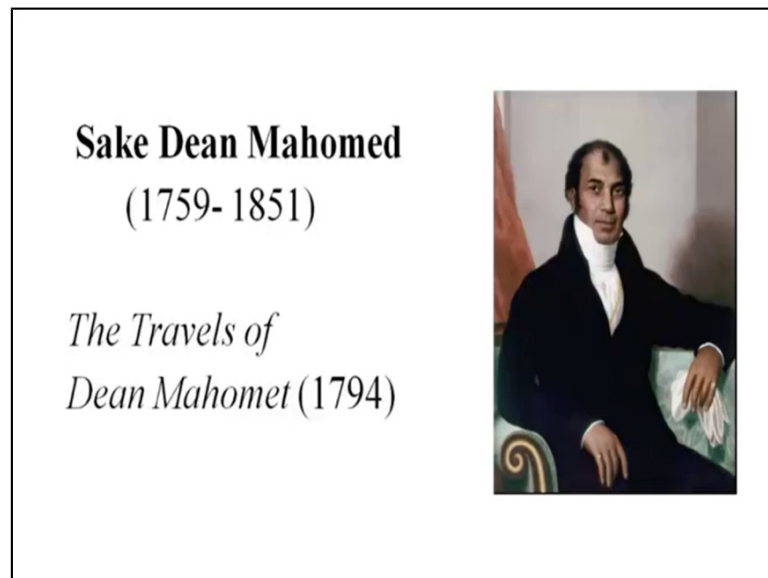
[http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/literature/laureates/2001/](http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/2001/)

And, to give you an example, the ancestors of the Nobel prize winning Caribbean author, V S Naipaul, they migrated from India to Caribbean, in this similar fashion, to serve in the plantations there. And, in fact, Naipaul, in his writings, give a very vivid glimpse, into the ways of life of Diasporic community of Indians, that started taking shape, in the Caribbean from the 19th century.

However, these dispersions of Colonised subjects, within the Colonial Periphery, was also supplemented, by significant waves of migration, that reached from the Colonies to the Metropolis. And, let us take for instance, the relation between the Metropolitan Britain, and the Colonised India. Indians, started arriving in Britain, from different parts of South Asia really, as early as the 17th century.

And, they were, these people who were arriving in Britain, during the early days, were primarily servants, employed by British households, but they were also, Sailors, Diplomats, and Savant. One the most interesting Indian migrants to Britain, during this early period, was a man called, Sake Dean Mahomed.

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And, Dean Mahomed was born in Bihar, in 1759. And, he migrated to Britain, in 1782. And there, he introduced, what he referred to as, Shampoo Baths. And, he also introduced, Indian cuisine in Europe, while becoming the first Indian author, to publish a book in English. And, this book, which was published in 1794, under the title, The Travels of Dean Mahomet, is simultaneously regarded, as the first major work of Indian English writing, Indian English Literature, as well as the first major work of Indian Diasporic Literature, in English.

Now, the group of savants, sailors, and diplomats, were soon supplemented, and then almost overshadowed, by the population of Indian students, who started arriving in Britain from India, from around the 1840's. And, this migration, that started during the 1840's, has not stopped yet. And, it is interesting to note, that many of our Indian nationalists like M K

Gandhi for instance, Subhas Chandra Bose, Jawaharlal Nehru, B R Ambedkar, they all went to Britain, for their higher studies.

So, this connection between India and Britain, and the migration of students from the Colonised India, to the Colonial Metropolis in Britain, has played a really very significant role in the history, both of Britain and of India. Now, these various waves of migration, from the Colonial Periphery, to the Mother country, established a number of Diasporic communities, within the Metropolis.

And, the category Diasporic Literature, refers to the Literature, produced by these displaced people, who migrated from the Colonial Periphery in the global South, and who gathered in the metropolitan centres in the global North. And, we need to note here, that these metropolitan centres, that we are talking about, not only includes places like Britain or France or Spain, but it also includes America, today. Because, America in many ways, have inherited the mantle, of the Colonial West.

Now, as a Literature, that reflects the displaced condition of its author, Diasporic writing is expectedly, informed by the pangs and pains of exile. And, it is also informed, by a nostalgic desire, to reunite with the homeland, that has been lost, during the migration.

And, this sense of exile and nostalgia, forms the keynote, which unites the otherwise, mind bogglingly wide variety of Diasporic Literature, produced in Britain, France, Spain, America, by people, coming from different parts of the world, like India, Africa, Latin America, the Caribbean islands. So, in our lecture today, we will try and understand, this wide variety of Literature, that is categorised under the title of Diasporic Literature, by focusing on one particular instance.

It is a story, by the author Jhumpa Lahiri. And, by focusing on that short story, it is a very poignant and very beautiful short story. We will come to that, shortly. But, in focusing on that short story, our intention would be to identify, the key concepts of exile and nostalgia for the homeland, that informs the Diasporic condition in general, and Diasporic Literature in particular. But, before we move on to the story, let me introduce the author to you.

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**Jhumpa Lahiri**  
(1969 - )



Jhumpa Lahiri was born in 1969, in London. And, she was born to Bengali parents, who had migrated from Calcutta. But, Jhumpa Lahiri was not really brought up in England, she was raised primarily in the East coast of United States, where her parents migrated, when she was only two. More recently, Lahiri has shifted base again. And now, she resides with her husband and two children in Rome, the Capital of Italy.

And, this Diasporic identity of Lahiri, this history of migration and exile, has created for her, a unique location in the interstices, or in the gaps of different culture. And, she identifies herself, as writing from a position of marginality, where limits of different cultures meet, or if they do not meet, they leave a very interesting gap, from within which, one can look at these different cultures, and combine various elements, and write about them.

But nevertheless, we also need to understand, that this marginality, this interstices, represents a gap, a sense of lack, a sense of loss. And, we understand, this sense of lack, and sense of loss, from Lahiri's own writings and interviews about herself, where she says that for instance, though she was born to a Bengali parents, her knowledge of Bengali is only partial. And, this sense of lack, of her partial knowledge of her Mother tongue, has informed her cultural identity.

On the other hand, though Lahiri was brought up in America, her desire to keep alive her connection with her Bengali roots, has meant that, Lahiri could only partially assimilate herself, within America. And, Lahiri's move to Italy, has only accentuated the sense of being



a marginal entity, who does not fully belong to any one particular culture, and who cannot firmly identify anyone place, as her home.

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### **Notable works of Jhumpa Lahiri**

- *The Namesake* (2003)
- *The Lowland* (2013)
- *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999)
- *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008)
- *In Altre Parole* (2015) / *In Other Words* (2016)

Now, this sense of being without a fixed cultural, as well as spatial home, strongly informs all of Jhumpa Lahiri's works, be it her novels, like *The Namesake*, or *The Lowland*, or her celebrated collection of short stories like, *Interpreter Of Maladies*, or the more recent one titled, *Unaccustomed Earth*. But, whereas the state of being an exile, informs Lahiri's writings, with a sense of lack and loss, it also informs them, with a tremendous sense of multicultural possibilities.

Again, as I said, the interstices, the margin, the gap between the culture, it is a gap, therefore it signifies a lack, a loss, a sense of not belonging, to any of the cultures. But again, that gap, that interstices, is also filled with multicultural possibilities. It is a position from which, one can borrow, one can appropriate elements, from different cultures, right. And, this is what happens, with Jhumpa Lahiri too.

Because, by freeing oneself, from the confines of one's homeland and one's native culture, the condition of being an exile, can make a person, an aere, to all cultures in the world. By not belonging to any one culture, you actually become an aere, to all cultures. And, that opens, a tremendous amount of possibilities, of bringing together eclectic cultural elements, to shape your own identity.

And, such a stance, such a possibility, is realised by Lahiri, in her attempt for instance, to learn Italian, the language of the country, that she now resides in. And, she is trying to make, both that language, that culture, and that country, her own norm.

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And, in her latest book titled, *In Altre Parole*, which is originally written in Italian, but which has been translated in English, under the title, *In Other Words*, gives us an account of this difficult and rewarding attempt, to appropriate for oneself, a language and culture, to which one is neither born nor exposed to, while growing up. Jhumpa Lahiri's life and Literature, therefore shows the cultural possibilities, that the condition of being born, and brought up, in a Diaspora, throws up.

But, Lahiri is also keenly aware of the sense of alienation, that this Diasporic condition entails. And, the migration from one's homeland, can make one, an aere to multiple cultures. Yes, that is a possibility. But, Lahiri realises that, it can also as easily, shut one out, from all sense of cultural rootedness. And, the claustrophobic sense of a cultural vacuum, that a migration from the homeland, can create for an individual, is beautifully depicted by Lahiri, in her short story, that we are going to read today.

And, that short story is titled, *Mrs Sen's*. And, it is there in the collected book of short stories, which won the Pulitzer prize, titled, *Interpreter of Maladies*. And, it is to this short story, that we will now turn. This story, *Mrs Sen's*, is narrated by an American boy, named Eliot. And, it tells of the time that Eliot spent, with his Bengali babysitter, that home Eliot only knows, as Mrs Sen. Who is Mrs Sen?

Well, Mrs Sen is a wife of Mr Sen, who migrated from Calcutta to America, to take up a job, to teach mathematics in a university. And, this is a very crucial part of her identity. Her identity, at least in America, refers back not to something, that she is herself, but refers back to her husband, who has a job in an American university. So, from the very beginning, we do not even in fact, know the name of this Mrs Sen, that we are introduced to, the first thing of her.

So, there is a sense of lack of identity, that surrounds this entity of Mrs Sen, making her slightly mysterious to us. Now, Mr Sen has a job, in a university. He remains, occupied. But, the migration from Calcutta to America, has meant for Mrs Sen, a painful uprooting from her familiar Bengali social cultural milieu, and most importantly, from her family. To fill the sense of lack, that the loss of her homeland creates for Mrs Sen, she tries to cling to the memory of the tiniest details, that gave substance to her life, back in Calcutta.

And, it is Calcutta, which she still wistfully refers to, as a home. In America, Mrs Sen tries to recreate, that last home of Calcutta, by repeatedly re-reading the letters, that she occasionally receives from her people, back home. She also listens to the familiar sounds of Indian classical music, and offer relatives talking, by playing cassette's in a cassette player. And, most importantly, she's tries to recreate her lost homeland, through her cooking of Bengali dishes.

Now, this very attempt, to live the memories of Calcutta in America, and this attempt to transform an American space into a Bengali home, creates for Mrs Sen, a cocoon of isolation, that is cut off from the immediate reality outside. And, Mrs Sen's failure, to come to terms with America, and her conflict with the new physical reality of this foreign land, is exposing the story. So, references to Mrs Sen's inability, to drive on American roads.

And, the tension between the Bengali in a reality, that Mrs Sen creates within her apartment, and the outside reality of the American roads, reach a breaking point. When, one day, Mrs Sen decides to drive herself, with Eliot sitting next to her. And, she decides to go to a fish shop, to buy some fresh fish. So that, she can prepare, her Bengali dish.

Now, this attempt by Mrs Sen, to go and procure a quintessential item, that is needed for a Bengali dish, from the outside American space, ends in a minor accident. And, neither Eliot, nor Mrs Sen, is very grievously hurt. But nevertheless, Eliot's Mother, stops sending him to Mrs Sen's. And, the last thing, that Eliot remembers of his Bengali babysitter, is the sound of crying, coming out of the bedroom of her apartment, within which, Mrs Sen had locked herself in.

In a way, Mrs Sen with her inability, to break free from them, cocoon of memory of a remembered homeland, and her inability to connect with the outside space, resulting ultimately in a psychological breakdown, represents the opposite of what Jhumpa Lahiri is, the Diasporic author, who is confident in her ability, to appropriate and make her own disparate elements, from different cultures.

But, the very fact, that Lahiri creatively engages, with characters like Mrs Sen, shows her desire to recognise and address, the difficulty that a migrant faces, in connecting with the outside reality, following her displacement and uprooting. The isolation of Mrs Sen's apartment, and the sound of sobbing, that comes out of her bedroom, thus forms the dark underside of the Diasporic condition, which is otherwise marked, by the luminosity of eclectic cultural possibilities.

With this exploration of Jhumpa Lahiri, and her work, we conclude our discussion of Diasporic Literature today. In our next meeting, we will take up the work of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, a very important Theorist, in the field of Postcolonial studies. Thank you.