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# History and Counter-memory in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*

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**Abstract:**

Jhumpa Lahiri is one of the most promising and highly respected Indian American writers in America. In *Interpreter of Maladies*, she depicts diasporic life of South-Asian Americans. History serves as foreground rather than background in her stories. Several short stories in this collection are dealing with the important historical events like the partition of India and the Independence of Bangladesh, the racial prejudice and exclusion inflicted on South Asia immigrants by the US and the distorted construction of the East in Orientalism, etc. By employing the lens of memory theory like personal memory, collective memory and counter-memory, this paper intends to explore the important relationship between history and memory in the stories. Personal memories serve as a counter-memory to the official history of India and a speaking voice to disclose the sins of British colonial rule, condemn the American exclusion and racism towards ethnic minorities. Through these counter-memories, the subaltern people can speak their own voice of rebellion and deconstruct the binary oppositions of center /periphery, self /other.

**Keywords:** History, memory, counter-memory, voice of rebellion

## INTRODUCTION

Jhumpa Lahiri is one of the most promising and highly respected Indian American writers in America. Her first debut book *Interpreter of Maladies,* published in 1999 won almost all the important literary awards, including the O. Henry Award, the Pen/Hemingway Award and the Pulitzer Prize. It was translated into 29 languages and became an international bestseller. *Namesake*, her second book, was a *New York Times* bestseller and a *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize Finalist. The book was adapted into a major film in the US, released in 2007. Her third book, a second collection of short stories, *Unaccustomed Earth*, topped the *New York Times* bestseller list immediately upon publication and won the Asian American Literary award in 2009. With so many important awards and achievements piled before her, she is definitely considered as one of the canonical writers in American literature today.

Jhumpa Lahiri was born in London. Her family moved to the US when she was two year old. In view of her complicated diasporic background and variable themes in her books, American critical circle shows great interest in her writing. Meanwhile they have a fierce debate as to the naming and labeling of her. She is labeled a postcolonial writer, a diasporic writer, an

Asian American writer, and an American writer. Jhumpa Lahiri seems to pay no attention to this labeling and considers her writing as a kind of "translation" of cultures. She declares "whether I write as an American or an Indian, about things American or Indian or otherwise, one thing remains constant:

"I translate, therefore, I am" (Kung120).

*Interpreter of Maladies* has proved Lahiri's superb narration skills. The nine stories in the book describe the diasporic life of South Asian Americans in the US, most of whom are middle class professionals with an Ivy-league educational background. They are strangers in a strange land, straddling two cultures, reevaluating old and new traditions, either of which they could consider as their own. Purvi Shah praised her style as "precise, elegant, sparse" (Shah 183). For Noelle Brad-Williams, this book can be compared to Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* and Sandra Cisneros's *House on Mango Street,* both of which are considered classical short story collections. He considers the book as "a short story circle rather than simply as a collection of separate and independent stories" (Williams P451) as it includes some "recurring themes of the barriers to and the opportunities for human communication; community, including marital, ex-marital, and parent-child relationships; and the dichotomy of care and neglect"（ibid）. For Jennifer Bess the collection presents "a dialectic between the failure to understand the human condition and the hope of embracing its richness" (Bess125). Laura Anh Williams discussed the relationship between the foodways and women's subjectivity in this book. For her, the stories in this collection "highlight the elided female's diasporic subject and the food practice…The women in these stories, wives of Indian academics, all utilize foodways to construct their own unique racialized subjectivity and to engender agency" (Williams 70). Judith Caesar discussed the American space in Lahiri's fiction. For Judith, "the structure of old American houses as an emblem of the emotional spaces between the people who live in those houses…Sometimes the distances, physical and emotional, connect her characters…Sometimes the spaces echo with the emotional emptiness of the characters"（Caesar 52）. From a postcolonial perspective, Bahareh Bahmanpour focused on "the identity-crisis of these often unvoiced and elided diasporic female subjects" and discussed how Lahiri gave voice to those unspoken subalterns (Bahmanpour 44).

Despite the diversity of topics and concerns to *Interpreter of Maladies*, no attention is paid to approach the book from the perspective of Indian national history and counter-memory. As a diasporic writer who grew in the shadows of Indian and American cultures and an elite spokesperson for her native country, Lahiri is inevitably concerned with the culture and history of her home country. History is not background but important foreground in *Interpreter of Maladies*. Several short stories in this collection are dealing with the important historical events like the partition of India and the Independence of Bangladesh, the racial prejudice and exclusion inflicted on South Asia immigrants by the US, the Occident distorted construction of the Orient, etc. In these texts, Lahiri gives a voice for these subalterns—Indian Diasporic people by narrating their own personal memory. But this personal memory is mingled with collective history and placed in the context of the dynamic struggle between power, history and ethnicity. By employing the lens of memory theory like personal memory, collective memory and counter-memory, this paper intends to explore how personal memory in the stories serves as a counter-memory to the official history of India and a speaking voice to disclose the sins of British colonial rule, condemn the American exclusion and racism towards ethnic minorities. Through

these counter-memories, the subaltern people can speak their own voice of rebellion and deconstruct the binary oppositions of center /periphery, self /other.

History and memory has a close relationship with each other. History finds its meanings in large part through the memory as memory brings history back to life and reworks the boundaries of history. But memory is selective so people from different classes and ethnicities remember for their own benefits. Therefore, history as a discourse, is subject to the power and manipulation of the ruling class and the mainstream voice in a society.

"Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power…[There is] a multiplicity of points of resistance: these play the role of adversity, target, support, or handle in power relations. These points of resistance are present everywhere in the power network. Hence, there is no single locus of great Refusal, no soul of revolt, source of all rebellions, or pure law of the revolutionary. Instead there is a plurality of resistances, each of them a special case. (Foucault 95-96).

For Foucault, re-memory is a way of resistance which he names counter-memory. He holds that in the battle among power/knowledge frameworks, some win and become dominant while others are displaced and become subjugated. The subjugated experiences and remembering are pushed to the margins and rendered unqualified and unworthy of epistemic respect by prevailing and hegemonic discourses. Counter-memory works by challenging the established practices of official memory and excavating subjugated bodies of experiences and memories to revive the subjugated knowledge. For him counter-memory is also a form of counter-history which refers to the experiences and memories unheard and missed in official histories. Lahiri herself also mentioned her relationship with Indian history and Britain in her novel-writing. "We were connected to England in many ways and we visited. England and India have had a relationship that goes deep into history, a relationship that India and America have never had" (Lahiri 35).

Through close reading of *Interpreter of Maladies,* the author of the paper finds that several stories in this collection have the characteristics of counter-history and counter-memory. In the second story "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine", a ten-year-old Indian American girl named Lilia narrated the experience of Mr. Pirzada going to her home for dinner in the year of 1971. Mr. Pirzada was a professor from a university in Decca. He came to US to study the foliage of New England with the grant from Pakistan government. That year, Pakistan was engaged in a civil war and the eastern frontier of it was fighting for independence. "In March, Decca had been invaded, torched and shelled by the Pakistani army. The teachers were dragged onto streets and shot, women dragged into barracks and raped. By the end of the summer, three hundred thousand people were said to have died" (Lahiri,1999: 21). Lilia narrated the cruelty and suffering inflicted by war on common people. This turmoil caused Mr. Pirzada to lose contact with his family. He worried about their safety everyday and missed his wife and daughters ravaged in war at home. So he went to Lilia's home every night to watch the news report. Worst of all, war caused him to change his nationality three times in his life. First, with the Indian Independence war and Partition Act, he changed his citizenship from India to Pakistan. Then with Pakistan civil war and independence of Bangladesh, he became a Bengali. The division of Indian nation was a great trauma for its people. But British colonizers propagated that the division was for the benefit of India. According to Chandrika Kaul, after the Indian Independence from Britain, "the imagery of the grateful imperial subject/student and the wise and benevolent colonial master/teacher was a recurrent underlying motif in many newspaper accounts" (Kaul 681). The Guardian stressed how Britain went to India "not to conquer but to

trade"…It was the Raj that by enabling "contact with the outer world" facilitated the "recovery of a vitality and self confidence" by the Indians" (680). As a small girl, Lilia couldn't understand why Mr. Piraza who spoke the same language, laughed the same laughter, looked more or less the same as her family could be a person of a different country. On the one hand, we are totally shocked at her ignorance of the Indian history. But if we probe deep into this matter, we will find that the underlying reason is America's hegemonic ideology. As Lilia confessed to her father, she only learned "American history, of course, American geography" in class (Lahiri, 1999: 27). American people turn a blind eye to what is happening in the third-world countries. What's more, the power of the main stream culture serves as a tool to suppress the circulation of the real history of the marginal people. As Lilia tried to learn more about her home country's history in the library, Mrs. Kenyon, her American teacher, discouraged her by saying "I see no reason to consult it"（33）. In this story, Lilia's personal memory serves as a bridge to connect Indian American's national history and memory. This memory also functions as counter-memory to criticize the suppression of ethnic history by American hegemonic ideology and denounce the evils of British colonial rule.

"Sixy" is another story about history and counter-memory. It was a story which first appeared in *The New Yorker.* The third-person omnipotent narrator dramatized the affair between Miranda, a white girl and Dev, a married Indian male. According to western standard about masculinity, Asian man is considered effeminate and not manly. On one hand, compared with white men, the Asian men are not strong and lack of muscles. What's more, due to prejudice and exclusion in western society, they were often driven to the periphery of society, doing jobs like laundry and waiting tables just like women. Therefore, the stereotyped Asian man is a model minority, submissive and docile. As Frank Chin remarked in the "Introduction" to Aiiieeee! "Good or bad, the stereotypical Asian is nothing as a man. At worse, the Asian-American is contemptible because he is womanly, effeminate, devoid of all the traditionally masculine qualities of originality, daring, physical courage, and creativity"（Chin 1974 xxx）. This story is regarded as a counter-memory because Lahiri writes back. The white girl Miranda finds the Indian investment banker Devajit Mitra irresistibly charming as he "was the first always to pay for things, and hold doors open, and reach across a table in a restaurant to kiss her hand" (Lhiri, 1999: 89). Miranda, loses her white power and changes to a marginal position as she becomes the mistress of Dev. She has to wait for his call and his visit when he is available. She is eager to please him by looking sexy and learning more Indian culture. She even goes into an Indian grocery store to rent some Indian videos on the actress Mottery Dixit as Dev says Mottery resembles his wife. Robin, the boy Miranda helps to babysits comments that she is sexy and explains that being sexy means that "loving someone you don't know"(107). This reminds her that she is only a sexy object and commodity in Dev's eyes. Culturally and emotionally, they are strangers to each other divided by an insurmountable barrier between them. She can't either change her position or his marriage. She ends up by severing the relationship with Dev. Through the story, the binary oppositions between self and other are reversed, so that the subaltern—the Indian Male, has the right to speak.

In *Orientalism*, Edward W. Said criticized the western prejudiced representation of the Orient. For Said, Orientalism as a set of misconceptions exists in western mind as a kind of collective memory of the East. The Occident represents civilization, reason and culture while the Orient exists as the opposite, the exotic Other. In "The Third and Final Continent", the story happened in Boston in 1969. An unnamed Bengali narrator just came to America after an arranged marriage with an Indian girl named Mala. He rented a room in the house of a 103-year-

old American lady, Mrs. Croft who was an embodiment of American independence and reason. As a widow, she raised her kids alone by giving piano lessons. Even though she was more than 100 years old now, she insisted that she should live by herself. The year of 1969 witnessed American landing on the moon. As a nationalist who took pride in this act, Mrs. Croft insisted that the narrator should repeat the word "Splendid" everyday. Insulted by the requirement, he was feeling "like an idiot" (183) He recalled his childhood when "he was taught multiplication tables as a child, repeating after the master, sitting cross-legged, without shoes or pencils, on the floor of my one-room Tollygunge"(180). For Mrs. Croft, the Asian immigrants were inferior to their American counterparts. She had to set some rules for him to behave like locking the door appropriately, paying the rent on time. She treated her lodgers as outside invaders and excluded them except boys from Harvard or MIT. This was just like the racist exclusionary act for Asian Americans in American history. Chinese immigrants were expelled out of the country after they finished the construction of transnational railroad. Japanese immigrants were placed into internment after the beginning of World War Two. In 1917, American congress declared that India was part of the Pacific-Barred zone of excluded Asian countries. As a woman with prejudiced view about the East, Mrs. Croft showed no warm human feeling towards the narrator. Although he told her that he was a married man, she insisted that no lady visitor should be allowed. But the narrator's story served as a counter-memory toward her prejudice. By narrating the details of how he took care of Mrs. Croft, like giving her company, handing her the rent directly instead of putting it on the piano keys, checking the door for her everyday, he was conveying a human sympathy and warm feeling towards the old lady. He treated him like his surrogate mother as his own mother died in India. Mrs. Croft finally admitted that he was a first lodger behaving like "a gentleman" (185). She was moved by him and respected his courage as he transcended three continents to realize his American dream in the US. When the narrator took his wife Mala to visit Mrs. Croft, she praised her as a "perfect lady" after she scrutinized her "from top to toe with what seemed to be placid disdain" (195). Mrs. Croft realized Mala's courage as she traveled a long distance alone, "not knowing where she was going" just to be together with her husband. This feat was quite like Mrs. Croft's self-reliance and courage all of her life. The narrator finally deconstructed Mrs. Croft's distorted view of Orientalism as he lived a vibrant life in an unaccustomed earth and achieved success. "We are American citizens now so that we can collect social security when it is time…We have a son who attends Harvard University"(197).Therefore, through the narrator's own memory of how he realized his American dream when he was young, he conveyed a very clear message to the white society: Asian Americans are hardworking, intelligent and very responsible rather than those lazy, uncivilized and dangerous "yellow perils" in white people's eyes.

There are other stories in *Interpreter of Maladies* which show the important role history plays . "A Real Durwan" and "The Treatment of Bibi Haldar" are all about the stories of "Other"—Indian women. They are the victims in the feudal marriage system and Patriarchy. They feel lonely and displaced because they live in a place where they don't belong. In the former story, the protagonist Boori Ma was a border-crossing refugee after the Partition of India. Her tragic life and her courage to live on went in contrast with the selfishness and parochial view of the residents of the community where she worked a durwan—an Indian word for gatekeeper. In the latter, the character Bibi Haldar was treated as an outsider and expelled as she didn't conform to the social norm because as a woman, she was not pretty, her voice "louder than necessary"(160) and she dressed "like a dishwasher"(161). She was considered as insane and forced to receive treatment. But according to Michel Foucault in *Madness and civilization*,

madness is a social construct just like sex manipulated by power and knowledge. But narration of their story serves as counter-memory to speak their own voice and shows that they are "woman warriors" against the yoke and prejudice of patriarchy as they finally throw off the shackles and live an independent and brave life. By blending history with memory in *Interpreter of Memories*, Lahiri described the alienation, pain and loneliness and rootlessness of her characters as the Bengali immigrants and Indian cultural transplants. The history of Indian immigrants is linked with the British colonial rule, the American racism and exclusion. Through their memory and counter-memory, the grand narrative of history is deconstructed. Those subaltern people can have a chance to speak their own voice of rebellion.

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