Fluid Identities in Jhumpa Lahiri’s *Interpreter of Maladies*
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Exiles or emigrants or expatriates are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt.


Me not no Oxford don
Me a simple immigrant
From Clapham common
I didn’t graduate
I immigrate.

John Agard, Mangoes and Bullets

Introduction

Jhumpa Lahiri was born 1967 in London, UK. Her parents were Indian Bengalis. She grew up in Rhode Island, USA. She is a graduate from Barnard College with a BA degree in English Literature. She did an MA in English, an MA in Creative Writing and another MA in Comparative Studies in literature and the arts at Boston University. She also received a Ph.D. in Renaissance Studies. Her stories have appeared in many American journals, including the New Yorker. Interpreter of Maladies, her first published collection, won in 2000 the Pulitzer Prize for fiction, the New Yorker Prize for the ‘Best First Book’, the PEN/Hemingway Award and was shortlisted for the Los Angeles Times Award (“A Reader’s Guide for Interpreter of Maladies”: Houghton Mifflin Company Web Pages).

For last few years an increasing number of the first and the second-generation South Asian (here South Asia means Bangladesh, India and Pakistan) diaspora writers are writing in the English language. One, critic Sampat writes about these South Asian diaspora writers:
The style and content of their writing has been greatly influenced by the extent to which they have been able to identify and adapt to their new country and tend to write about people and events which are ‘typical’ of their country of origin and are anxious to put South Asian or Indian local colour in their country. However, those who have been able to identify with their new host country, are blessed with a bi-cultural perception which enables them to write from a wider and more exiting angle. (Sampat140)

In most cases all these South Asian writers (for example Salman Rushdie, V.S. Naipaul, Bharati Mukherjee etc.) be considered South Asian diaspora writers and postcolonial writers. In the well known book on the postcolonial literature *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* the following is stated:

So the literatures of African countries, Australia, Bangladesh, Canada, Caribbean countries, India, Malaysia, Malta, New Zealand, Pakistan, Singapore, South Pacific Island countries and Sri Lanka are all postcolonial literatures. The literature of the USA should also be placed in this category. (Ashcroft, Griffith & Tiffin 2)

According to the above statement many of the contemporary literatures will come under postcolonial literature. One of the characteristics of postcolonial literature is to have dual identities. There are two reasons behind these dual identities. Firstly, when the colonial power colonised a country, they changed its administrative, judicial and educational systems. As a result anyone born in a newly independent postcolonial
country will still encounter a colonial legacy. Secondly, colonial exploitation led to a mass migration from former colonies to different parts of the world. Therefore many of these people became citizens of two countries (i.e. their original homeland and their new countries). According to Peter Barry postcolonial writings ‘celebrate hybridity’ (Barry 199) and ‘cross-cultural’ interactions is a fourth characteristics of the postcolonial literature (Barry 196). Therefore most of the expatriate South Asian writers are part of postcolonial diaspora literature. Jhumpa Lahiri is such a new postcolonial South Asian diaspora writer.

Jhumpa Lahiri’s *Interpreter of Maladies* tells stories of different South Asian diaspora communities. Most of the characters of Jhumpa Lahiri’s *Interpreter of Maladies* have fluid (which means a substance that can flow) identities like other contemporary postcolonial literary characters. As in most cases they are citizens of two countries (their first country and their new country). So their national and cultural identities are not fixed. Their identities are more fluid. On the one hand they belong to South Asia but on the other hand they are living in the United States. While some characters bodies are in the USA their minds are in South Asia. Some characters have been absorbed into the American society but their identities are still attached with their South Asian origin. These stories deal with people who left their homelands in the South Asian subcontinent for different reasons. After that they lived in their new home (in most stories the United States) for a considerable amount of time. Despite living in a foreign land for a considerable amount of time, their identities are connected directly or indirectly with their old homelands. This essay will perform three tasks. Firstly, this essay will show the notion of identity loss or identity crisis
for the diaspora community in general. Secondly this essay will show identity loss or identity crisis of the characters of Jhumpa Lahiri. While the idea of identity gradually changes for some characters, most characters still bear their original identity and fear to lose their original identities. Even some second-generation South Asian migrants still have influences in their lives from their original country. Thirdly, this essay will show that although these characters are going through “identity crisis”, their problems are different from each other and each of them is unique.

The Diaspora Community and the Notion of Identity Loss and Identity Crisis

The stories of Interpreter of Maladies directly or indirectly speak about the South Asian diaspora community and the notion of identity loss. But what is the diaspora community and what is the identity loss? According to the Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary of Current English the word ‘diaspora’ has two meanings. Firstly it means “the movement of the Jewish people away from their own country to live and work in other countries” (Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary. 6th ed. Page 347). Secondly (during the modern time) “it means the movement of people from any nation or group away from their own country” (Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary. 6th ed. Page 347). Diaspora literally refers to “dispersal or scattering of a people” (Nelson IX). In that sense any expatriate community can be identified as a diaspora community as well. But one critic Nelson says: “In all its contexts, however the concept of diaspora remains problematic, for it raises complex questions about the meanings of a number of related terms, such as nationality, ethnicity and migrancy”
(Nelson IX). According to Nelson a “broad definition” of the term ‘diaspora’ is needed (IX). Another critic William Safran gives a good definition of ‘diaspora’:

...concept of diaspora be applied to expatriate minority communities whose members share several of the following characteristics”: 1) they, or their ancestors have been dispersed from a specific original “center” to two or more “peripheral”, or foreign, regions; 2). they retain a collective memory, vision or myth about their original homeland—its physical location, history, and achievements; 3) they believe that they are not—and perhaps can not be—fully accepted by their host society and therefore feel partly alienated and insulated from it; 4) they regard their ancestral homeland as their true, ideal home and as the place to which they or their descendants would (or should) eventually return—when conditions are appropriate; 5) they believe that they should, collectively, be committed to the maintenance or restoration of their homeland and to its safety and prosperity; and 6) they continue to relate, personally or vicariously, to that homeland in one way or another, and their ethnocommunal consciousness and solidarity are importantly defined by the existence of such a relationship. (Safran 83-84)

Therefore diaspora or expatriate communities feel alienated in their host country. For this reason they suffer from some kind of identity loss or identity crisis as well. It seems ‘identity’ is an important factor of postcolonial expatriate literature and Lahiri’s stories deal with identity crisis and identity losses. About identity Jhumpa Lahiri stated in an interview:
The question of identity is always difficult one, but especially so far for those who are culturally displaced, as immigrants are, or those who grow up in two worlds simultaneously, as is the case for their children. The older I get, the more aware am I that I have somehow inherited a sense of exile from my parents, even though in many ways I am more American than they are. In fact it is still very hard for myself to think as American. For immigrants the challenges of exile, the loneliness, the constant sense of alienation, the knowledge and longing for a lost world, are more explicit and distressing for their children. On the other hand the problem for children of immigrants, those with strong ties to their country of origin, is that they feel neither one thing nor the other. The feeling that there was no single place where I fully belong bothered me growing up. (“A Reader’s Guide for Jhumpa Lahiri’s *Interpreter of Maladies*”: Houghton Mifflin Company Web Pages)

It seems Jhumpa Lahiri herself suffered from an “identity crisis” which enables her to write about identity crisis of expatriate communities. Interestingly many characters of Lahiri’s short stories also suffer from “loneliness, alienation and longing for a lost world” as she did. Lahiri’s background is important for her writing because generally expatriate writers write about expatriate communities. About Lahiri’s background an Indian critic, Asha Choubey’s says:
The personal life of Jhumpa Lahiri is the very prototype of diasporic culture. Having spent more than thirty years in the United States she still feels 'a bit of an outsider.' Though she has confessed that her days in India are 'a sort of parenthesis' in her life, the fact that she is at heart an Indian cannot be denied. The stories collected in her debut anthology *Interpreter of Maladies* deal with the question of identity. (Choubey: Postcolonial Web)

The notion of identity loss is not only common in Lahiri’s characters but also in the writing of other diaspora writers. The reason is most expatriates suffered or are suffering this type of identity loss. Diaspora writers are also influenced by their sufferings or by their expatriate communities. As Salman Rushdie points out: “Exiles or emigrants or expatriates are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt” (Rushdie 9).

In Jhumpa Lahiri’s short stories we find different kinds of identity Loss. This notion is not very uncommon in contemporary post-colonial writings. Current literature on migrant communities deals with this kind of problem. Contemporary post-colonial writings also show that a migrant’s first country lives within his/her second home. But as they can not go back to their first countries they suffer a kind of psychological trauma. In their new countries they are living as a tree with out roots. In British-Bangladeshi author Monica Ali’s famous novel *Brick Lane* has a similar example. There the character British Bangladeshi Dr. Azad says: “this is another disease that affects us.’ said the doctor. ‘I call it Going Home Syndrome. Do you know what that means?’(Ali 24). Than another character Chanu says: “They don’t
ever really leave home. Their bodies are here, but their hearts are back there. And anyways, look how they live: just recreating the villages here” (Ali 24). Monica Ali shows (through Dr. Aziz) that obsessive longing for the first homeland is a kind of disease; Jhumpa Lahiri depicts these as maladies in her short stories. Her character like Mrs. Sen is trying to make a mini India in her house and Boori Ma is re-telling her stories of East Bengal again and again, Mr. Pirzada’s pocket watch is set with Dacca (Dhaka) time, Sanjeev’s Hindu religious identity is threatened by Christian symbols and the narrator of ‘The Last and Final Continent’ is worried that his son will not carry on speaking the Bengali language and using his hands while he eats rice. The very title of the book *Interpreter of Maladies* indicates that by losing their original homeland most characters are suffering from a kind of psychological or social diseases. And Jhumpa Lahiri is interpreting or describing those diseases to her readers.

**Different Kinds of Identity Loss and Identity Crisis**

There are different kinds of identity loss or identity crisis. Every character in these stories is suffering from same kind of identity loss or identity crisis. For Mrs. Sen, it is loss of social identity. She left Calcutta and lost her female friends. For Boori Ma of “A Real Durwan” it is the loss of her economic identity and financial status since she lost her property while migrating to India from Pakistan in 1947. Mr. Pirzada’s identity loss is due to temporary political crisis, the 1971 Bangladesh War. For Sanjeev it is his religious identity loss. The narrator of “The Third and Final Continent” problem is related to the identity crisis of the second generation.
Social Identity Loss

The story of “Mrs. Sen’s” informs the reader of the loss of social identity. This story tells the expatriate experiences of Mrs. Sen, an Indian Bengali housewife. Mr. Sen works as a university teacher and spends a good deal of his time at his workplace. As a result Mrs. Sen remains lonely and alienated in her home. She spends her time doing household work and babysitting for an eleven-year-old American boy, Eliot. Lahiri looks at Mrs. Sen’s identity problem through the eyes of Eliot. The first point of alienation which Lahiri describes about Mrs. Sen is “Mrs. Sen did not know how to drive” (Lahiri 111). Eliot’s mother is also concerned about the fact that Mrs. Sen does not how to drive. ‘Driving’ can be seen as an essential skill in the United States. But even in this regard Mrs. Sen is attached to India: “Yes, I am learning”, Mrs. Sen said. “But I am a slow student. At home, you know, we have a driver” (Lahiri 113). She is slow and seems little bit reluctant learning to drive, as she is slow and reluctant to accept America as her home.

The novels of Bharati Mukherjee show similar experiences. About Bharati Mukherjee’s novels one critic Sudesh Mishra says: “Her novels trace the split in the diasporic subject, expressed in that sense of being here and elsewhere of being home and abroad” (Mishra 287). Similarly Mrs. Sen is physically in the United States but mentally she is in India. For her, ‘everything’ is in India and home is in ‘India’. Throughout the story the reader sees through the eyes of Eliot that Mrs. Sen is failing to shed her Indian identity.
From the story the reader can assume that before coming to America, Mrs. Sen had a happy life with her family and neighbours. She talks about her experience of joint cooking with other neighbours in Calcutta or how letters from India make her happy. It seems Mrs. Sen did not think that she would leave her home one day. As she says to Eliot: “When I was your age I was without knowing that one day I would be so far (Lahiri 123). Mrs. Sen’s experience is very similar to that of Gloria Anzaldua. Anzaldua states in her essay “Borderlands/La Frontera” that:

I was the first in six generations to leave the valley, the only one in my family to ever leave home. But I didn’t leave all the parts of me, I kept the ground of my own being. On it I walked away, taking with me the land, the Valley. (Anzaldua 887)

Again Anzaldua says:

Yet leaving home I did not lose touch with my origins because _lo mexicano_ is in my system. I am a turtle; wherever I go I carry “home” on my back. (Anzaldua 892)

Similarly Mrs. Sen brought ‘India’ on her back. To Mrs. Sen India is related with her life not the USA. It is related with saris, food, letters etc. On the other hand she is physically in the USA but she is not part of it. Mrs. Sen continuously confirms her nostalgic memories of India. Mrs. Sen mentions the cutting blade she brought from India:

“Whatever there is a wedding in the family,” she told Eliot one day, “or a large celebration of any kind, my mother sends out word in the evening for all neighbourhood women to bring blades just
like this one, and then they sit in an enormous circle on the roof of
the building, laughing and gossiping and slicing fifty kilos of
vegetables through the night.” (Lahiri 115)

At another occasion Mrs. Sen tells Eliot:

At home that is all you have to do. Not everybody has a telephone.
But just raise your voice a bit, or express grief or joy of any kind,
and one whole neighborhood and half of another has come to share
the news, to help with arrangements. By then Eliot understood that
when Mrs. Sen said home, she meant India, not the apartment
where she sat chopping vegetables. (Lahiri 116)

Mrs. Sen’s motherland is associated with her permanent identity. Her happiness
centres in India not in the USA. Her memories, dreams and happiness are related with
One was the arrival of a letter from her family” (Lahiri 121).” The other thing was
‘fish’. Both of them are related with India. Letters from India and fish are both major
symbols of this story. Fish is one of the major foods for Bengalis of both India and
Bangladesh.

Mrs. Sen’s car accident confirms her inability to merge with the American
society. She will always remain an Indian Bengali who has to cook fish in America
without green bananas. For Mrs. Sen the reason for her alienation is her longing for
her identity as an Indian Bengali lady who works and shares her experiences with her
women friends while her husband is working. As one critic, Jennifer Bess points out about Mrs. Sen:

> If the commonality she found in communal cooking fostered her identification with others and her own sense of purpose, then the despair with which she abandons her cutting blade in favour of peanut butter and crackers after the accident exposes the fact that she has lost the only identity she has ever known - nurturer, homemaker, wife of Mr. Sen. In her effort to adapt, Mrs. Sen has lost herself to the silence of loneliness and the noise of modern life.

(Bess 125)

Mrs. Sen lives in some kind of ‘past-present’ India not in the United States. Homi Bhaba writes in his essay ‘The Location of Culture’: “The ‘past-present’ becomes the part of necessity not the nostalgia, of living (Bhaba 938). Mrs. Sen is living in the United States with her Indian past and her Indian dreams. Unlike her husband who is pursuing his profession she does not follow an American dream. Unlike American women she is unable to learn driving and become independent. Instead, she is interested in cooking like an Indian woman. By migrating to America she lost her social identity.

**Economic Identity Loss**

While Mrs. Sen has lost her social identity, Boori Ma of “A Real Durwan” has lost her economic identity. Boori Ma did not migrate to India from Pakistan for financial reasons rather she migrated for political reasons. But in that process she has lost her economic identity. In 1947 the South Asian subcontinent was divided into two states
i.e.: India and Pakistan. Bengal was also divided in two parts. West Bengal went with
ing India and East Bengal (present day Bangladesh) went with Pakistan. The partition
created a mass migration of Hindus from Pakistan to India and Muslims from India to
Pakistan. During this mass migration some people lost everything including their
identity. Boori Ma of the story “A Real Durwan” is also a migrant from East Bengal
(Bangladesh), an erstwhile province of Pakistan, and she has lost her upper middle
class identity. Her very name Boori Ma means ‘big mother’ in Bengali. Usually this
kind of name is given to an old female servant in South Asia. It is not any one’s real
name. Through out the story the reader does not get her real name. Boori Ma works as
a sweeper cum security guard (Durwan) of a building in a poor neighbourhood in
Calcutta:

It was with this voice that she enumerated, twice a day as she swept
the stairwell, the detail of her plight and losses suffered since her
deportation to Calcutta after Partition. At that time, she maintained,
the turmoil had separated her from a husband, four daughters, a two
story brick house, a rosewood almari and a number of coffer boxes
whose skeleton keys she still wore, along with her life savings, tied
to the free end of her sari. (Lahiri 71)

Through out the story Boori Ma’s identity is attached to those keys that are stolen at
the last stage of the story. To Boori Ma her past identity of a richman’s wife of East
Bengal is more important than her present identity of a sweeper of Calcutta City. She
can not forget her identity related with her first homeland (East Bengal,
Pakistan/Bangladesh). As she claims:
Yes, there I tasted life. Here I eat my dinner from rice pot. Have I mentioned that I crossed the border with just two bracelets on my wrist? Yet there was a day when my feet touched noting but marble. Believe me, don’t believe me, such comforts you can not even dream them. (Lahiri 71)

The ideas of ‘imaginary home’ are present in the story “A Real Durwan” just as they have in other diaspora South Asian novels. Like in the novel The Revolving Man (1959) by British-Indian author Victor Anant “views homelessness not as the product of a psychological transformation engendered within the migrant by a spatial divide between India and Britain, but as the ‘other’ that the colonial modernity enforces” (Mishra 283). The novel tells the story of John Atma who rejects his “family, friends and country” (India) and goes to Great Britain, there he marries Queenie. But Queenie rejects him for a British man. So Atma comes back to India with his son Dharma. But his conservative parents reject his son for being out of Hindu caste. Thereafter Atma flees with his son to his ancestral village. Here his native village symbolises the “imaginary womb that would perhaps take care of his son and put together his fragmented self” (Mishra 284). For Boori Ma it is her ‘imaginary home’ where she had a rich and stable life. But her life has been fragmented by the political migration of 1947. She left a rich life style in Pakistan for a poor life style in India. She can not find the other half of her fragmented rich life of Pakistan. In her Indian fragmented life, nobody believes her stories for lack of concrete evidence. The inhabitants of that flat-building created their own history of Boori Ma’s background: “The theory eventually circulated that Boori Ma had once worked as hired help for a
prosperous zamindar back east, and was therefore capable of exaggerating her past at such elaborate lengths and heights” (Lahiri 73). As a result it is only Boori Ma who is fixed with her upper class East Bengali identity and remains alienated from the West Bengalis of that building. This is assured in this scene: “Knowing not to sit on the furniture, she crouched, instead, in doorways and hallways and observed gestures and manners in the same way a person tends to watch traffic in a foreign city” (76). In South Asia domestic servants and housemaids can not sit on the furniture. Boori Ma claims that she was rich in Pakistan; now she is a very poor person in India. For her the loss of homeland is also the loss of her financial status. As a result whenever she visits one of the flats she does not sit on any furniture. This seems a disgraceful fall for a former feudal lord’s wife (as Boori Ma claims). At the end of the story a washing basin is stolen from the building and Boori Ma is expelled from that building. The ‘basin’ incident is like the driving accident of “Mrs. Sen’s” symbolising that Boori Ma has been always alienated in West Bengal and her identity will be always attached to East Bengal. She will always remain an outsider.

**Identity Attached with Family**

While Boori Ma lost her financial status in the 1947’s partition of the South Asian subcontinent, Mr. Pirzada has lost connection with his family temporarily for the 1971’s Bangladesh Independence war. “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine” is a story about an East Pakistani (Bangladeshi) gentleman who is to dine with an Indian family
in 1971 when a war is going on in East Pakistan (Bangladesh). About this story Judith Caesar says:

Moreover the stories expand the definition not only of what it can mean to be bicultural, but of postcolonial, Asian American, and American Asian literatures. This transcendence of the boundaries of what have been rather insulated subcategories of contemporary fiction is particularly evident in the second story of the collection “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine”. (Caesar 82)

The story takes place in 1971, in a small American college town in New England where ten-year-old Lilia lives with her Indian-born parents. In this story Lilia remembers Indian foods and warm family life. And yet her parents apparently feel isolated and lonely, for every year they go through Lilia’s father’s university faculty directory for Indian names and invite them at their home. Mr. Pirzada, a visiting scholar from what was East Pakistan, thus becomes a temporary part of this family. Pirzada is having dinner and spending the evening almost every night with this family. Lilia, the narrator, informs the reader as follows:

In the autumn of 1971 a man used to come to our house, bearing confections in his pocket and hopes of ascertaining the life and death of his family. His name was Pirzada, and he came from Dacca, now the capital of Bangladesh, but then a part of Pakistan. That year Pakistan was engaged in a civil war. (Lahiri 23)

Mr. Pirzada comes to the United States to study the foliage of New England. In March 1971 the war starts and Pirzada becomes a kind of war refugee. Though Mr.
Pirzada is stranded in the United States, his identity leans towards East Pakistan (Bangladesh) and he is always longing for his homeland. Even his pocket watch is fixed with the standard time of his country. As he says to Lilia: “Unlike the watch on his wrist, the pocket watch, he had explained to me, was set to the local time in Dacca, eleven hours ahead” (Lahiri 30). One critic Caesar says: “It is almost as if a shadow of Mr. Pirzada is trapped there in New England, while the true Mr. Pirzada goes about his life in East Pakistan” (Caesar 84). The war finally ends in December 1971 and Pirzada goes back to Bangladesh in January 1971. Several months later Lilia’s family receives a card and a short letter from Mr. Pirzada, which says he has been reunited with his family. So Mr. Pirzada’s temporary migration comes to an end and he does not return to the United States and Lilia’s family does not see him again. Mr. Pirzada’s identity has always been attached in Bangladesh to his family. So when the war was over and Bangladesh becomes independent from Pakistan, Mr. Pirzada rushes back to reunite with his family. He has no attachment to America. His only attachment is to his family and home country.

**Loss of Religious Identity**

While Mr. Pirzada lives in the United States for a temporary period, Sanjeev settles down in the United States for good. Unlike Pirzada, Sanjeev’s identity is attached to religion. In “This Blessed House” the reader meets one newlywed Indian couple Sanjeev and Twinkle who have moved to a newly purchased house. In the house they find the statues of Christ. Twinkle is very excited about this discovery and starts calling the house ‘a blessed house’. But
Sanjeev is not happy about this. His remark is; “We’re not Christians”. Sanjeev is very scared to lose his and Twinkle’s Hindu religious identity. Twinkle says that the previous owners are trying to convert people and that is why they left the statue of Jesus Christ, the postcard of St. Francis and other objects related with Christianity. Sanjeev replies: “Clearly the scheme has succeeded in your case”(Lahiri 138). Those statues related to Christianity are challenging Sanjeev’s original Indian Hindu identity. In order to remove those symbols from the house, Sanjeev quarrels with Twinkle. But than they resolve the disagreement. When his guests arrive for the house warming party Sanjeev does not forget to inform them about his and Twinkle’s religious identity:

“I hope you don’t mind my asking,” Douglas said,” but I noticed the statue outside, and are you guys Christian? I thought you were Indian.”

“There are Christians in India”, Sanjeev replies, “but we’re not”.

(Lahiri 151)

It is interesting to notice that a MIT graduate like Sanjeev (who does not seem to be practising Hinduism) is offended by a few symbols associated with Christianity. It seems to the reader that Sanjeev is associating his identity with religion. The existence of Christian symbols in his home is very uncomfortable for him. Many South Asian expatriates become more religious after leaving their home country in order to protect their identities. In the USA and UK many South Asians become involve with religious activities (like building mosques, temples) and become part of religious groups. Similarly the reader finds that for
Sanjeev also religious identity becomes important in order to save his original identity. The following conversation proves this point about the statue of Virgin Mary:

“No, silly Sanj. This is meant for outside. For the lawn.”

“Oh god, no. Twinkle, no.”

“But we must. It would be bad luck not to.”

“All the neighbors will see, they’ll think we’re insane.”

“Why, for having a statue of the Virgin Mary on our lawn? Every other person in this neighborhood has a statue of Mary on the lawn. We will fit right in.”

“We’re not Christian.” (Lahiri 146)

Sanjeev does not want to keep the statue although his other American neighbours have Virgin Mary on their lawn. This shows that Sanjeev does not want to be like his American neighbours, instead he wants to remain a ‘Hindu’ Indian. At the end of the story the reader finds that Sanjeev is still feeling very uncomfortable because he and Twinkle will live with those Christian symbols. Though these objects are sacred, Sanjeev is feeling a kind of hatred against them. The last scene of the story is very symbolic. The reader finds that Sanjeev is more careful about Nora’s feather hat (his boss Douglas’s girlfriend who has left her feather hat at Sanjeev’s house by mistake) than the statue. It seems Sanjeev is very interested about America for his professional identity but as far his religious identity is concerned Hinduism is more important to him.
The Second Generation’s Identity Crisis

For Sanjeev his religious identity is more important. But for the narrator of “The Third and Final Continent” the identity of the second generation seems important. He moves from India to the United Kingdom and finally he migrates to his ‘third and final continent’: North America. The main reason for his migration seems economic. As he states in the first paragraph of the story:

I left India in 1964 with a certificate in commerce and the equivalent, in those days, of ten dollars to my name. For three weeks I sailed on the SS Roma, an Italian cargo vessel, in a third class cabin next to the ship’s engine, across the Arabian Sea, the Red Sea, the Mediterranean, and finally to England. I lived in north London, in Finsbury Park, in a house occupied entirely by penniless Bengali bachelors like myself, at least a dozen and sometimes more, all struggling to educate and establish ourselves abroad. (Lahiri 173)

Than the narrator gets an offer of a full-time job in America, in the processing department of a library at MIT. So for a better life he moves to the USA from the UK. His motivation to move from India to UK and later to the USA is economical. There the narrator can be identified as an economic migrant who came to for a better life. But even as an economic migrant, who appreciates moon landing by American Astronauts, the narrator finds problem in migrant life. For an example he sees a dog scares an Indian woman-wearing sari (Lahiri190). It seems that even to the dog the
Indian woman seems out of place. About which the narrator says; “Such a mishap, I realized that morning would soon be my concern” (Lahiri190).

The narrator seems merges his life with his ‘Third and Final continent. As he declares that; “We are American citizens now, so that we can collect social security when it is time” (197). But he still has connections with his home Calcutta, India. He visits Calcutta every few years and brings drawstring pajamas and Darjeeling tea. Still the narrator and his wife deeply worried whether his son follows the South Asian culture or not:

We have a son who attends Harvard University. Mala no longer drapes the end of her sari over her head, or weeps at night for her parents, but occasionally she weeps for our son. So 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 we sometimes worry he will no longer do after we die. (197)

Even the final continent does not become perfect for the narrator. He is willing to keep his own culture of using his hand for eating food and speaking Bengali language. The narrator thinks he and his wife became Americans but still attached with South Asian food and tradition. About this story Asha Choubey says in her essay “Food as a metaphor”:

The last story in the collection, 'The Third and Final Continent,' presents the alienation and gradual initiation of a Bengali gentleman. He pursues his higher education in Britain and then his job takes him to America. Adapting to the
ways of three continents, the man and his wife succeed in retaining his original cultural identity. Even in America the smell of steamed rice (192) marks a home as different from an apartment. A dish of chicken made with 'fresh garlic and ginger on the stove' (193) makes a sumptuous meal. Not only food but the eating habits also become dear as it induces a sense of belonging. Eating with hands gives pleasure as no spoon or fork does. Their son who attends Harvard University will also inherit this habit of eating steamed rice with his hands. This habit, which is becoming considered contemptible and uncivilized in India itself, is in great favour with Indians settled abroad. (Choubey: Postcolonial Web)

Diaspora or expatriate communities are always trying to keep some of their own cultures. Even when some of their cultural practices become old fashioned in their home countries, they keep on following them. Sometimes the British Asian community seem more conservative and old-fashioned than their countrymen in their home countries. So despite the fact that the narrator of “The Third and Final Continent” becomes a part of the American society, he does not absorb a hundred percent with the American culture and that is why he goes to India to fetch Darjeeling tea. But he is more worried about the identity crisis of his son. The narrator wants his son to retain his Indian Bengali identity. He wants that his son will speak Bengali and will use his hands to eat rice. Eating rice by hand and speaking Bengali are two important symbols for this story. These two symbols prove that the original national identity is still important for the migrant.
Conclusion

Jhumpa Lahiri’s short stories deal with fictional characters, but her subject matter and the problems suffered by her characters are universal. For the diaspora communities, losing their original identities and trying to retain them is a common problem. One can visit Brick Lane in London where the British Bangladeshi community has created a mini Bangladesh or South Hall, London where the British Asian community has created a mini South Asian subcontinent. The Little India of Singapore is evidence of a similar practice of the diaspora Indian community. These are evidence that diaspora communities are always scared of losing their identities. Therefore they try to re-create something to preserve their identities. It also suggests that their original national identity will always remain important for rest of their lives. Even when an expatriate becomes a citizen of a new country, he still can not shed away his national identity, even if he tries. One Bangladeshi expatriate in Canada, Mr. Abu Md Falze Arif writes ironically:

I am very much disappointed with my prejudices with Canada and decided to stop dreaming about Bangladesh. Henceforth I will be thinking myself as a forthcoming Canadian who will be one of the residents of Richmond Hill. I will not think anymore about health and education systems of Bangladesh. I will refrain myself from searching the word "Bangladesh" from the political science books. I will not reciprocate Bangladesh when I will read my development studies books; instead I will be eagerly bluffing myself with the notion of divulging my education with Canadian inclining growing
This personal letter to a Bangladeshi newspaper shows the sufferings and dilemmas an expatriate can suffer. Most South Asian left their countries for a better life. But like the author of this letter and like most of the characters of the *Interpreter of Maladies*, they can not settle full-hearted in their new country. Their nostalgia for their homeland becomes a malady. This essay describes the different kinds of identity loss of some of the characters. This essay shows that their identity crises are unique and their circumstances are different. Though their problems are different, the very heart of their problem is the same…their original identity and identity of their children. But unfortunately most of the characters can not go back to their homelands to stay permanently like Mr. Pirzada. That means their maladies have no cure. Lahiri shows us those problems or maladies but does not give any solution or cure. At the end she remains the ‘interpreter of maladies’ not the ‘physician of maladies’.
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Appendix


“Thoughts of an Expatriate” by Abu Md Falze Arif, Windsor, ON, Canada

My father has advised me to stop thinking that I will be going back to my land. And he has asked me to start to believe that Canada is my final home. I am now in the Leddy Library, one of the two libraries in University of Windsor. It is my regular habit to read all the national newspapers of Bangladesh from their internet editions. Technology is one of the best friends of human kind. I am listening Moushumi Bhowmik's "Jessore Road" from thousands of miles away. And I am thinking about the canal beside our house. I am thinking about my first love...Bangladesh. I was wondering why I am doing this. As an obedient son, soon I will be giving up my Bangladeshi passport and will become a proud Canadian. My national anthem will be "O Canada". I will be known as official minority in multicultural Canada. My house will be in Richmond Hill, my children will call me dad, and I will not go with my son to *Eidgah*, as I used to go with my father. My Children will never know about "*Pahela Boishakh"*. I was conjecturing at the end of the day why my dreams all are around Bangladesh? Why I dream that I can make some differences, while I know I will not be allowed to return. I am very much disappointed with my prejudices with Canada and decided to stop dreaming about Bangladesh. Henceforth I will be thinking myself as a forthcoming Canadian who will be one of the residents of Richmond Hill. I will not think anymore about health and education systems of Bangladesh. I will refrain myself from searching the word "Bangladesh" from the
political science books. I will not reciprocate Bangladesh when I will read my development studies books; instead I will be eagerly bluffing myself with the notion of divulging my education with Canadian inclining economy. Definitely I will be a happy man. In fact one of the happiest persons in the world, as I will kill my inner voice pretty soon. And certainly I will kill the love for Bangladesh, for which my father fought at the age of 19.