

WORDS UNSPOKEN: COMMUNICATION BARRIERS IN DIASPORIC LIVES IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S THE NAMESAKE AND INTERPRETER OF MALADIES**Priyanka Singh Chandel, Dr. S.N Pandey**¹(Research Scholar), ²(Research Supervisor)

Assistant Professor (English) Rajeev Gandhi Government P.G College, Ambikapur, Surguja, Chhattisgarh.

Abstract

By analyzing this paper, we discuss the theme of communication barriers through Jhumpa Lahiri's work. Basically, communication barriers mean cultural differences which are common in Lahiri's work. This study will explore how cultural and national identities are depicted in the characters whom Lahiri situates in a liminal space between nation and identity, embodying multiple cultures and histories. There are two works of Jhumpa Lahiri for discussion in this particular research paper- 1) The Interpreter of Maladies (1999) 2) The Namesake (2003), in which she intricately weaves the challenges faced by diasporic individuals through linguistic, cultural and emotional barriers which create alienation, misunderstandings and a lot of struggles with identity for her characters. This study also highlights how the unspoken words in Lahiri's narratives shape the lives of her characters, reflecting universal themes of human connection and belonging in a diasporic context.

Key Words:- Diasporic Ambience, Communication Barriers, Unspoken words, Jhumpa Lahiri, The Namesake, Interpreter of Maladies, Cultural Identity, Language Barriers, Alienation, Cultural Conflict, Dual Identity, Hyphenated Identity, Linguistic challenges, Displacement, Cross cultural conflicts, Assimilation.

Introduction

Jhumpa Lahiri is a prominent figure in regards to diasporic literature who masterfully portrays the lives of immigrants grappling with the complexities of identity, belongingness, and communication. Both works have won the Pulitzer Prize and provide compelling insights into how communication or its absence affects relationships and individual identity in the context of migration and cultural displacement. On the one hand, The Namesake deals with the themes of immigrants' experience, identities and displacement, and ties and clashes between the generations, on the other, Interpreter of Maladies tries to reflect a complete culture within the constraints of a single work, and Lahiri succeeds by harmonizing several numbers of images rather than giving simply one, as many short story collections do. But the theme of communication barriers is common in both works. This paper investigates how Lahiri's characters navigate these barriers and their impact on their lives, relationships, and cultural integration.

The Namesake, which is the first novel of Jhumpa Lahiri, reflects the different shades of the individual relationships, the conflicts and confusions of the characters along with the cultural dilemma of the immigrants. The novel explores the diasporic conflict of the hyphenated identities of Indian-Americans. The immigrants in the novel live a confused existence as Indian-American, American-Indian and Overseas-Born-Indian. Being a foreigner is a sort of

lifelong pregnancy for Ashima- a perpetual wait, a constant burden and an on-going responsibility. The novel focuses on cross-cultural conflicts, trauma and aspirations of the two generations of expatriates, Ashoke and Ashima who are not inclined towards getting Americanized, while Gogol and Sonia, the second-generation migrants face the intense pressure to be loyal to the old world and fluent to the new. It sheds light on the construction of hybrid identities, the significance of nostalgia, and the interplay between cultural preservation and adaptation.

In *Interpreter of Maladies*, there are nine short stories by Jhumpa Lahiri that focuses on cross-cultural issues to provide a natural chance to compare the existence of opposing cultural ideals. Lahiri depicts the lives of Indians and Indian Americans stuck between their ancestral culture and the society in which they now find themselves in all of her writings. Lahiri is an outsider to Indian society who is still trying to figure it out. Her identity is shaped by the interplay of Indian and American cultures. Many of her stories reflect the isolation and loneliness experienced by immigrants caught between two vastly different worlds, drawing inspiration from this multicultural existence. Remaining in this liminal space is uncomfortable, yet leaving it feels impossible. The migrant exists simultaneously within both cultures and yet belongs fully to neither. With most characters rooted in Indian heritage, India frequently resurfaces—not just as a physical place, but as a powerful presence in their memories and identities.

Communication Barriers in The Namesake

In *The Namesake*, Lahiri examines the struggles of the Ganguli family as they navigate life in America while staying tethered to their Bengali roots. In *The Namesake*, communication barriers highlight the struggles of diasporic families to navigate dual identities and bridge generational and cultural gaps. The unspoken words and misunderstandings between the characters symbolize their broader struggles with belonging and connection in a diasporic context. The novel illustrates various forms of communication barriers:

1) Linguistic Barriers

In Lahiri's fiction, language functions both as a bridge and a barrier. Immigrant characters often rely on their native tongue to stay connected to their cultural heritage and family. For instance, in *The Namesake*, Ashima and Ashoke speak Bengali at home to preserve their roots and maintain a sense of identity. At the same time, language can create a divide, separating them from the wider community. Ashima's limited fluency in English leaves her feeling isolated and dependent on her husband and son for surviving in a foreign land. Even everyday interactions, such as shopping for groceries or navigating the hospital, become overwhelming for her:

“She hates having to speak to strangers in English, hates that she cannot express herself as fluently as she does in Bengali.”

2) Generational Gaps

The generational language gap in immigrant families often creates communication challenges. Parents may have limited proficiency in English, while their children, raised in

the host country, may lack fluency in their parents' native language. This disconnect can lead to misunderstandings and feelings of alienation. For example, Gogol's unease with his Bengali name and cultural roots reflects the broader struggles faced by second-generation immigrants as they attempt to balance their dual identities. The older generation often sees immigration as a journey of survival and opportunity, while the younger generation may experience feelings of resentment or confusion about their parents' decision to emigrate. This generational divide can create deep emotional and psychological tensions within families.

3) **Identity and Belonging**

Lahiri's characters often grapple with their sense of identity, trying to reconcile their parents' homeland's cultural identity with the culture of their country of residence. This dual identity can create an inner conflict, where characters feel they do not fully belong to either culture. For instance, the protagonist Gogol's name becomes a symbolic barrier to communication, both internally and externally. His rejection of his name and its cultural significance leads to identity confusion and estrangement from his family. The unspoken significance of his name rooted in his father's traumatic past—remains a poignant example of the unsaid shaping relationships.

“The name he had so detested, here hidden and preserved that was the first thing his father had given him.”

Communication Barriers in Interpreter of Maladies

Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*, a collection of short stories, also addresses the theme of unspoken words and communication barriers. We find each story that reveals linguistic, cultural, and emotional silences influence relationships. Jhumpa Lahiri, like many second-generation immigrants in America and Australia, finds herself equally connected to both her parents' homeland and the country of her birth. However, during her youth, she struggled with a profound sense of not belonging anywhere. The emotional displacement experienced by immigrants often extends to their children, fostering a similar feeling of alienation. While Lahiri's parents eventually adapted to life in America, they likely yearned for their homeland, allowing Lahiri to witness the struggles and adjustments that come with settling in a foreign land. Her stories explore not only the lives of immigrants but also the experiences of their children, who exist in a liminal space, belonging to neither world completely. As an immigrant herself, Lahiri deeply understood the power of family ties in maintaining a connection to one's roots.

1) **Cultural Misunderstanding**

In the title story, "Interpreter of Maladies," the gap between Mr. Kapasi, a tour guide, and the Das family exemplifies the complexities of cross-cultural communication. Mr. Kapasi's misinterpretation of Mrs. Das's confessions, combined with her inability to communicate effectively, leads to a tragic disconnect. Lahiri shapes her characters by exploring the immigrant experience and the cultural divide between India and America. Simultaneously,

she portrays, with empathy and insight, unforgettable individuals who endure the struggles and hardships of everyday life.

Lahiri threads the need to talk to and to connect with people into her story by showing that no matter where people are from, they need that human contact. Humanity needs to communicate its messages in order to feel whole.

Cultural misunderstanding is also rooted in Boori Ma who is protagonist in

"Real Durwan". Though the story focuses on the plight of an old woman Boori Ma, a refugee from East Bengal, who worked as an unauthorized gatekeeper of a flat building at hours of need, and was mercilessly driven out when the raised social status of the residents required a "real durwan", it is the callousness of the people in general that comes in the forefront. Although she is welcome at first, the kindness of the apartment dwellers in her building evaporates when their new sink is stolen, and they blame her for not being "a real durwan," and at the end Boori Ma's tragedy is amplified by the cultural misunderstandings she faces, as her narrative of the past and her self-worth are dismissed by those who are unable to grasp the deeper aspects of her identity and experience.

2) Emotional Silences and Disconnect

The story "A Temporary Matter," the opening piece in the collection Interpreter of Maladies, revolves around the deeply personal and emotional lives of its two protagonists, Shoba and Sukumar, exploring their fractured relationship and the unspoken grief that lies between them. It also explores how emotional barriers create chasms in relationships. The protagonists, Shoba and Sukumar, grapple with unspoken grief over their stillborn child, leading to the eventual breakdown of their marriage. The couple's inability to verbalize their pain reflects the devastating consequences of emotional silence. And at the end, this interaction builds up the climax in the story where Shoba speaks out her decision to separate from Sukumar.

On the other, if we talk about the emotional disconnect, we find it in the story of The Blessed House in which Lahiri sees tolerance as essential both to cultural harmony and within relationships. Through this short story, she explores both the complications of an arranged marriage and the adjustments that must be made to accommodate a couple's disparate personalities within any relationship. Until the end of the story Sanjeev internalizes his frustrations and does not openly express his feelings, leading to a growing emotional distance. Meanwhile, Twinkle's outward enthusiasm masks her own possible frustrations or misunderstandings. Their failure to address these emotions honestly prevents them from connecting on a deeper level.

3) Linguistic Alienation

In "The Third and Final Continent," the protagonist struggles to adjust to his new life in America, feeling isolated in a foreign culture. This is the story of an Indian immigrant who born in west Bengal in India, and who later went to London without any money and then later managed to find a job in America. The only thing that led this man this far was his determined attitude towards travelling abroad. The narrator embarks on a journey of self-discovery across three continents. Firstly, he born in Asia and then he moves to Europe for

his studies and ultimately settles in North America. Through this journey, Jhumpa Lahiri highlights the resilience of human adaptation. The narrator learns that the key to feeling at home, regardless of where he lives, lies in cultivating a strong and grounded sense of identity. However, small acts of communication like his exchanges with Mrs. Croft help bridge this gap, emphasizing the transformative power of language and connection.

The element of linguistic alienation is also shown in “Mrs. Sen” and “Sexy” which is also a part of Lahiri’s short story collection. So far as “Mrs. Sen” is concerned, it tells an emotionally moving story about an immigrant woman working as a babysitter. Although Mrs. Sen is originally from India, Lahiri highlights her struggles with adjusting to her life in America, facing numerous challenges in her new environment. Mrs. Sen’s limited proficiency in English creates an obvious barrier in her interactions with others. Although she is able to communicate basic ideas, her language skills prevent her from fully expressing herself or understanding others, particularly her employer, Eliot’s mother. This limited communication makes her feel disconnected from her surroundings, adding to her loneliness. And another short story of Lahiri’s “Sexy”, this story could be analyzed for its portrayal of linguistic and cultural differences, particularly through the character of Miranda a second generation Indian-American woman, who is disconnected from the cultural experience of her lover’s immigrant Dev whose culture is Bengali and lives in America. Their cultural backgrounds are different, which contributes to a lack of mutual understanding and expectations in between them.

The Role of Unspoken Words in Diasporic Lives

Unspoken words are often used to convey complex emotions and cultural divides. In both *The Namesake* and *Interpreter of Maladies*, Lahiri underscores the profound impact of unspoken words and miscommunication on diasporic lives because both works are similar to some extent. For example, in *The Namesake* which is a poignant exploration of identity, the unspoken words reflect the challenges of adapting to a new culture while holding onto one’s roots. Gogol’s name, which is central to the novel’s theme, is example of unspoken meaning.

In *Interpreter of Maladies*, the theme of unspoken words plays a significant role in the emotional and psychological depth of characters. All nine of the stories in *Interpreter of Maladies* focus on the characters inability to communicate with people who are important in their lives. Lahiri continues her story by plotting her motif of exclusion, loneliness, and search for fulfilment as the central issue. Another impressive aspect of her writing is her ability to write in the voices of both genders. The stories all draw upon different aspects of Lahiri's Indian background. Each of the stories is affected in some way or another by India. Some of the stories take place in India; others involve the lives of Indian immigrants in the United States. The bulk of the stories, though, are about second generation Indian-Americans, like Lahiri herself.

Unspoken Words in The Namesake

In *The Namesake*, Lahiri’s exploration of identity, belonging, and cultural assimilation is deeply intertwined with the theme of unspoken words. The story begins with a migration in the first generation and follows with its specific concerns to the second generation. The

family is split; two are Indians and the other two are born in America. The juxtaposition of the different nationalities creates further tensions for the characters involved. The protagonist, Gogol Ganguli, struggles with the weight of his name a constant reminder of his Bengali heritage and his parents' expectations. The relationship between Gogol and his parents is marked by an unspoken understanding of the generational and cultural gap that exists between them. Ashoke and Ashima, Gogol's parents, silently endure the sacrifices of immigration and the isolation of being far from their homeland. Their silences often speak volumes about their own discontent and longing, yet they do not explicitly voice their struggles.

The novel's depiction of Gogol's romantic relationships also illustrates the role of unspoken words. His marriage to Moushumi is fraught with unarticulated expectations and emotional misunderstandings. Their silence about their respective cultural backgrounds, desires, and frustrations creates an emotional distance that ultimately leads to the dissolution of their marriage. The failure to communicate openly about their identities and personal histories is a significant factor in their disconnection. In these ways, Lahiri highlights how silence in intimate relationships often signals deeper emotional and cultural divides.

Throughout the novel, each member of the Ganguli family represents a distinct individual navigating their own journey to self-discovery and grappling with the question of identity. While they live under the same roof and share common experiences, they each have unique perspectives on life and their personal relationships with their identities, particularly as they navigate their Indian-American lives.

Unspoken Words in Interpreter of Maladies

The stories in Jhumpa Lahiri's collection, *Interpreter of Maladies*, differ in approach and perspective in which unspoken words often serve as a window into the emotional isolation and personal conflicts faced by the protagonists. Lahiri masterfully uses silence to communicate the characters' unexpressed feelings, often exposing more through what is left unsaid than through explicit dialogue.

In "A Temporary Matter," for instance, the married couple Sukumar and Shobha have distanced themselves from each other after the tragic stillbirth of their child. Their inability to communicate openly about their grief, as well as their emotional withdrawal from each other, is mirrored in the silence that pervades their interactions. Although the couple's verbal exchanges are polite, they are devoid of emotional depth. It is through their eventual confessions during the temporary power outage that the true nature of their emotional detachment is revealed. The temporary blackout in the story symbolizes the dark spaces between them, filled with grief, resentment, and lost connection. Their unspoken words—the things they fail to say to each other—serve as a powerful representation of the emotional distance between them.

Similarly, in "Interpreter of Maladies," the protagonist Mr. Kapasi, a tour guide in India, serves as an interpreter of maladies, both literal and metaphorical. His interactions with Mrs. Das, an American tourist, highlight the significance of unspoken words. Mr. Kapasi longs for a connection with Mrs. Das but is unable to express his desires. He silently interprets her emotional needs and reflects on his own life choices, yet they never share a meaningful

conversation. The gap between them is not just a result of cultural differences but of their own internal silences. Mrs. Das's unspoken guilt and her inability to communicate openly about her troubled marriage also illustrate the emotional isolation that can arise from failure to speak candidly about personal pain. In both stories, the absence of words fosters misunderstanding, yet simultaneously reveals the deep emotional undercurrents that govern the characters' lives.

Another very interesting story of the collection is "The Blessed House" that underlines the importance unspoken words. The story revolves around the newlywed couple, Sanjeev and Twinkle, whose marriage is marked by a lack of communication and mutual understanding. Sanjeev and Twinkle come from different backgrounds, and there is a clash between Sanjeev's more traditional and conservative outlook and Twinkle's free-spirited, unrestrained personality. The "unspoken words" here reflect the gap between their individual desires and the expectations of their respective cultural identities. They do not openly confront or discuss these differences but instead internalize their frustrations.

In "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine", the unspoken words in this story primarily revolve around the complex political and cultural divide between India and Pakistan, as well as the emotional distances between the characters. This story revolves around a young girl, Lilia, who observes her parents' interactions with their guest, Mr. Pirzada, an expatriate from Pakistan. Throughout the story, Lilia begins to grasp the emotional significance of the world events happening around her, but much of the conversation in the story remains unspoken, especially the complexity of political and cultural divides between the characters. Lilia's internal thoughts and her understanding of the situation are left largely unsaid, as is the connection she begins to form with Mr. Pirzada.

And when we observe "Mrs. Sen" in context of it then throughout the story, there are moments where Mrs. Sen's unspoken thoughts and frustrations with her husband are clear, even though they are never directly verbalized. She often expresses her dissatisfaction with her life in America and her isolation, but these sentiments are often buried beneath her polite conversation and actions. Her husband, in turn, remains emotionally distant and fails to understand the depth of her longing for home and connection. Their relationship is strained not because of open conflict but because of their inability to truly communicate their feelings. Mrs. Sen's silence speaks volumes about her emotional isolation, as she is unable to articulate her struggles with her husband.

At last, in "The Treatment of Bibi Haldar", these unspoken elements create an undercurrent of tension throughout the story, highlighting the complexity of human relationships and the difficulties of navigating a world that often prefers silence to confrontation. Bibi Haldar was an orphan since childhood and suffered from a hysterical disease of epilepsy. She was staying with her relative in Calcutta. While the story centers on Bibi's struggle with her mental health and her quest for independence, there are also subtle, unspoken truths about how others perceive her, and these often serve as a commentary on the broader themes of mental illness, gender, and social expectations.

Apart from it, in "Sexy", the theme of unspoken words is central to understanding the emotional complexity and internal struggles of the characters. The protagonist, Miranda, enters into a brief affair with a married man. While the physical aspect of their relationship is

clear, the emotional and psychological ramifications are much more complicated and often unspoken. Miranda's inner turmoil about her role in the affair and her complicated feelings about her own identity remain unaddressed, and she doesn't openly confront the moral or emotional aspects of her actions. This internal silence mirrors the disconnection between her and her lover.

Across the stories which *Interpreter of Maladies* consists, Lahiri deftly explores how unspoken words reflect deeper emotional truths and how characters grapple with loneliness, cultural identity, and personal insecurities. The absence of direct communication often allows Lahiri to highlight the subtle emotional barriers that exist between people, and how silence can both protect and isolate individuals.

Conclusion

The above study of Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* and *Interpreter of Maladies* poignantly depict the struggles of diasporic individuals navigating communication barriers. Where *The Namesake* suggests bondage, started and symbolized in a name which is instance of unspoken word as we learn in this research paper. It explores how Lahiri addresses the themes of names, immigrant identity, and the sense of belongingness. It also examines the concept of diaspora and its significance in the modern world, where issues like multiculturalism, is prevalent among Indian diasporic communities. And on another side, in *Interpreter of Maladies*, Lahiri points out that communication is essential not only for societies and for individuals but also for building healthy relationships. The brilliance of *Interpreter of Maladies* lies in how Lahiri leaves the endings open to interpretation, sparking a subconscious dialogue within the reader. She thoughtfully structures each story, offering readers the freedom to interpret while presenting a balanced portrayal of the society, she feels both compelled and delighted to depict. Then overall through linguistic, cultural, and emotional silences, Lahiri captures the complexities of belonging and connection in a diasporic context. These barriers not only shape her characters' lives but also resonate with universal themes of human relationships. By shedding light on the unspoken, She offers a profound exploration of the human condition, particularly in the context of migration and displacement.

References:

- 1) Assadnassab, A. (2012). Displacement, an Unknown Freedom: Cultural Identity in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*.
- 2) Ambrose, M. C., & Lourdasamy, A. (2022). Review of Displacement, Space, and Identity in the Postcolonial Novels of Jhumpa Lahiri, Rohinton Mistry and Manju Kapur. *International Journal of Management, Technology, and Social Sciences (IJMTS)*, 7(1), 354-372.
- 3) Kemper, B. (2011). The Language Of Diaspora In Jhumpa Lahiri's *Unaccustomed Earth*.
- 4) Parveen, B. (2013). Jhumpa Lahiri Emphasizes on Communication Within Relationships in "*Interpreter of Maladies*". *Shanlax International Journal of English*. 1(3): 2320 – 2645.
- 5) Patel V. (199). "Interview" with Jhumpa Lahiri, *The Maladies of Belonging*, Newsweek International Magazine, US.

- 6) Rathore, S. & Tiwari, O. M. (2017). “Search for Identity in the Writings of Jhumpa Lahiri”. The Creative Launcher. 2(1): 124-125.
- 7) Shanthi, S. (2015). Breaking Down The Barriers Of Communication In Jhumpa Lahiri's Interpreter Of Maladies. The Dawn Journal. 4(1): 1062 – 1071.
- 8) Farahmandian, Hamid. (2015). Diasporic Language and Identity in “Namesake”. Theory and Practice in Language Studies. 5(5): 952-956.
- 9) Shanwatiya, V. K, & Kumar, R. (2022). Cross-cultural Dilemma in Jhumpa Lahiri's the interpreter of Maladies. International Journal of Advanced Education and Research. 7(3): 10-13.