

Negotiating Diasporic Identities and Female Subjectivities: A Critical Intersectionality Approach to Jhumpa Lahiri's "Interpreter of Maladies"

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Abstract:

This inquiry presents a detailed critique of the representation of diasporic identity and female subjectivity in Jhumpa Lahiri's important short tale, "Interpreter of Maladies," using the theoretical framework of the Black Atlantic Paradigm as developed by Paul Gilroy. The paper thoroughly analyses Mrs. Das's character to reveal the complex tensions that arise as she navigates a transnational diasporic space. It explores the cultural conflicts and personal dislocations that define her experiences. Using an intersectional analytical perspective, the study focuses on the intricate interaction between gender, diaspora, and cultural hybridity. It highlights Mrs. Das's introspective journey as a representative of larger discussions on women's empowerment in the context of global diasporic movements. This analysis argues that Lahiri's narrative is a crucial text in the field of diaspora studies, providing deep insights into the complex processes of shaping and redefining one's identity when different cultures intersect and gender plays a role. This paper enhances the academic conversation by explaining how "Interpreter of Maladies" effectively explores the uncertainties of existence and negotiations of identity in the diasporic condition. As a result, it deepens our comprehension of how gender plays a role in constructing diasporic identities.

Keywords: Diasporic Identity, Female Subjectivity, Intersectionality, Cultural Hybridity, Black Atlantic Paradigm

Introduction

The intricate tapestry of diasporic narratives presents a unique milieu for exploring the complexities of identity and gender. Jhumpa Lahiri's "Interpreter of Maladies" stands as a seminal work in this context, eloquently portraying the nuances of diasporic life and its impact on individual subjectivities. Lahiri's narratives, often set against the backdrop of migration and cultural dissonance, delve into the lives of characters caught between their ancestral homeland and new environments, thus offering a fertile ground for diaspora studies.

Diaspora, as Brah (1996) posits, is "intrinsically a multi-locational condition," encompassing various dimensions of belonging and identity (p. 182). This multi-locality is vividly captured in Lahiri's portrayal of Mrs. Das, a character whose journey epitomizes the oscillation between different cultural identities and the consequent impact on personal identity. Such narratives are not just stories of migration but are deeply embedded in the socio-political contexts of displacement and cultural negotiation. Lahiri's work thus becomes a poignant reflection of Bhabha's (1994) notion of "cultural hybridity" where identities are continuously constructed and reconstructed in the interstices of cultures (p. 38).

The relevance of the Black Atlantic Paradigm, as developed by Paul Gilroy (1993), to "Interpreter of Maladies" is particularly significant. Gilroy's concept challenges the traditional understanding of cultures as distinct and pure entities. Instead, he proposes the idea of the Atlantic as a unit of analysis to understand the interconnected histories and cultures of Africa, America, Britain, and the Caribbean. Gilroy's emphasis on the transnational and transcultural interplay provides a critical lens through which Lahiri's narrative can be examined. The intermingling of diverse cultures in Lahiri's story echoes Gilroy's (1993) perspective on the "intercultural and transnational formations" (p. 12) that arise in the wake of diaspora.

Furthermore, the application of an intersectional lens, as advocated by Crenshaw (1989), is crucial in dissecting the intricacies of Mrs. Das's experiences. Intersectionality, which highlights the overlapping and interdependent nature of social categorizations such as race, class, and gender, is particularly relevant in understanding the layered complexity of diasporic female identities. Lahiri's narrative, through Mrs. Das's character, becomes a space where these layers unfold, revealing the multifaceted challenges and negotiations inherent in the diasporic condition.

Therefore, this paper posits that "Interpreter of Maladies," through its complex portrayal of Mrs. Das, serves as an essential tool in understanding the dynamics of gender and identity within the diasporic experience. Lahiri's narrative transcends the mere recounting of migrant tales; it becomes a nuanced exploration of

the intersectional identities shaped by the diasporic journey. The analysis presented herein aims to dissect these facets, providing insights into how gender and cultural identities are negotiated and redefined in the diasporic space.

The Theoretical Framework of Intersectionality and the Black Atlantic Paradigm

In dissecting the layered complexities of Jhumpa Lahiri's "Interpreter of Maladies," the application of intersectionality, as propounded by Kimberlé Crenshaw, and the Black Atlantic Paradigm, conceptualized by Paul Gilroy, becomes crucial. These frameworks collectively facilitate a profound understanding of the multifaceted nature of diasporic experiences, particularly when scrutinized through the prism of gender and cultural identity.

Kimberlé Crenshaw, in her foundational work, explicates the concept of intersectionality, highlighting its centrality in understanding the overlapping and interdependent systems of oppression and discrimination. Crenshaw (1989) asserts, "The view of identity as multiplicative... can bridge the gap between how we think about race and class as sources of group- and individual-based experiences" (p. 140). This insight is particularly significant in diaspora studies, as it acknowledges the complex layering of race, gender, class, and cultural background in shaping individual experiences. Lahiri's narrative, especially in its portrayal of female characters, vividly mirrors these overlapping identities, thus rendering a rich canvas for an intersectional analysis.

Conversely, Paul Gilroy's Black Atlantic Paradigm offers a transnational perspective, underscoring the interconnected histories and cultures resulting from the African diaspora. This paradigm, as Gilroy (1993) describes, "requires that the ethnic absolutism with which cultural integrity is usually discussed be abandoned" (p. 12). Gilroy's emphasis on cultural hybridity and interconnectedness provides a valuable lens for examining Lahiri's narrative, especially in understanding the cultural dislocation and identity formation in a diasporic setting. (GILROY, 1993)

In the context of Lahiri's "Interpreter of Maladies," the application of these two theoretical frameworks allows for a comprehensive exploration of the text. Lahiri's depiction of Mrs. Das as a character torn between her Indian heritage and American upbringing exemplifies Gilroy's notion of "double consciousness." This term, originally coined by W.E.B. Du Bois, refers to the internal conflict experienced by an individual in reconciling their African heritage with their European upbringing or influence. Lahiri's narrative becomes a microcosm of this double consciousness, as seen through Mrs. Das's diasporic journey.

Gilroy's perspective aligns with Crenshaw's intersectional approach, especially in the context of Mrs. Das's experience. As Brah (1996) notes, "The

concept of diaspora... places emphasis on the construction of identity that takes account of a multiplicity of potentially intersecting axes" (p. 183). This intersectionality within the diaspora is evident in Lahiri's portrayal, where Mrs. Das's struggles are not only about cultural displacement but also encompass her gendered experience within that displacement.

The convergence of intersectionality and the Black Atlantic Paradigm in analyzing "Interpreter of Maladies" is thus instrumental. It not only illuminates the complexities of diasporic identities but also underlines the significance of considering multiple identity axes. Lahiri's narrative, through this analytical lens, transcends the traditional migrant story, presenting instead a nuanced exploration of the intersectional identities shaped by diasporic journeys.

Lahiri's "Interpreter of Maladies," viewed through the combined frameworks of intersectionality and the Black Atlantic, reveals the layered complexities of diasporic life, particularly in the realm of gender and cultural identity. These frameworks offer profound insights into the challenges and negotiations inherent in the diasporic condition, emphasizing the necessity of considering multiple dimensions of identity in understanding diasporic experiences.

Dissecting Diasporic Identity through Mrs. Das's Character

Gilroy's concept of the "Black Atlantic" is pivotal in understanding the fluidity of identity within diasporic contexts. He posits, "Cultures are not preserved but produced in the Black Atlantic; and they are not pure but hybrid" (Gilroy, 1993, p. 12). Mrs. Das is a personification of this hybridity. Lahiri meticulously captures this in her portrayal of Mrs. Das, who is neither entirely rooted in her Indian heritage nor fully assimilated into American culture. Lahiri writes, "Mr. Kapasi observed her... Her hair shorn only a little longer than her husband's, was parted far to one side" (Lahiri, 1999, p. 13). This description subtly encapsulates her struggle with her cultural identity, oscillating between her ancestral roots and the new world she inhabits.

Gilroy's idea of 'double consciousness' is evident in Mrs. Das's experiences. He describes it as "This double consciousness, this awareness of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others..." (Gilroy, 1993, p. 19). Mrs. Das's internal conflict, her struggle with her identity, and her alienation from her Indian heritage, are poignantly depicted by Lahiri: "She did not hold the little girl's hand as they walked to the rest room" (Lahiri, 1999, p. 12). This simple act reflects her broader disconnection and inner turmoil in reconciling her dual identities. (Crenshaw)

Applying Gilroy's theory to Mrs. Das's narrative shows how her story transcends personal experiences, mirroring broader diasporic challenges. Gilroy notes, "The diaspora experience... is defined, not by essence or purity, but by the

recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of 'identity' which lives with and through, not despite, difference" (Gilroy, 1993, p. 99). Mrs. Das's personal story is a microcosm of diasporic women's experiences. Her revealing conversation with Mr. Kapasi, where she shares her deepest secrets and guilt, "I've kept it a secret for eight whole years" (Lahiri, 1999, p. 26), showcases her struggle not just with her individual choices but also with the broader complexities of living in between cultures. (GILROY, 1993)

Lahiri, through Mrs. Das, skillfully paints a picture of the complex dynamics of diasporic identity, as theorized by Gilroy. Her narrative captures the essence of the diasporic experience, marked by a continuous struggle for identity amidst the interplay of different cultures. The story, hence, not only portrays the personal dilemmas of Mrs. Das but also reflects the larger theme of identity negotiation and cultural hybridity in the diaspora.

Gender, Diaspora, and Cultural Hybridity: An Intertwined Analysis

In "Interpreter of Maladies," Jhumpa Lahiri intricately weaves a narrative that explores the intersection of gender dynamics, diaspora, and cultural hybridity. Through the lens of Paul Gilroy's Black Atlantic Paradigm, Lahiri's portrayal of female subjectivity within the diasporic space becomes a poignant commentary on identity and belonging.

Gender dynamics in Lahiri's narrative are complex and layered, reflective of the multifaceted identities experienced in the diaspora. Gilroy's perspective on diaspora as a state of being perpetually "in-between" (Gilroy, 1993) resonates through Lahiri's characters, especially the women. Mrs. Das's disengagement from her family, as Lahiri describes, "She did not hold the little girl's hand as they walked to the restroom" (Lahiri, 1999, p. 12), underscores a detachment not just from her culture but also from traditional gender roles. This detachment represents the broader experiences of women in the diaspora, who navigate the complex terrain of gender expectations in culturally hybrid spaces.

The narrative profoundly embodies Gilroy's idea of cultural hybridity. He argues, "Cultures are not preserved but produced in the Black Atlantic; and they are not pure but hybrid" (Gilroy, 1993, p. 12). Lahiri brings this concept to life through her characters, who exist in a constant flux of cultural negotiation. Mrs. Das's character, with her mixed attire and ambiguous connection to her Indian heritage, encapsulates this hybridity. Lahiri writes, "The blouse was decorated at chest-level with a calico appliqué in the shape of a strawberry" (Lahiri, 1999, p. 13). This detail, while minor, symbolizes the blending of cultures and the resulting impact on her identity as a woman caught between two worlds.

Lahiri's work parallels other female authors who depict diasporic experiences, such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Tsitsi Dangarembga. Like Lahiri, these authors explore the diasporic journey not just as a physical displacement but as a deeply personal and psychological experience. They delve into how diasporic women grapple with identity, often facing a crisis of selfhood that is compounded by the cultural dissonance of their environments.

"Interpreter of Maladies" through its nuanced portrayal of gender dynamics, cultural hybridity, and the experiences of diasporic women, aligns with Gilroy's Black Atlantic Paradigm, offering a rich tapestry of the diasporic experience. Lahiri's narrative not only highlights the personal struggles and conflicts inherent in the diaspora but also underscores the ongoing negotiation of identity in a world of intersecting cultures and traditions.

Women's Empowerment and Introspective Journeys in the Diaspora

In Jhumpa Lahiri's "Interpreter of Maladies," the theme of women's empowerment and their introspective journeys in the diaspora is vividly portrayed, particularly through the character of Mrs. Das. This narrative intertwines with Paul Gilroy's Black Atlantic Paradigm, providing a rich canvas to explore the intricacies of empowerment and vulnerability in diasporic conditions.

Lahiri's narrative offers a nuanced perspective on women's empowerment, especially within the context of diaspora. This theme is encapsulated in the character of Mrs. Das, who embodies both the struggles and the resilience of diasporic women. Gilroy's Black Atlantic Paradigm, which emphasizes the "intertwining of cultural hybridity" (Gilroy, 1993, p. 12), mirrors the complex experiences of these women. Mrs. Das's character challenges traditional gender norms and navigates her own path, reflecting a form of empowerment in her quest for self-identity. Lahiri writes, "She was a short woman with small hands like paws, her frosty pink fingernails painted to match her lips, and was slightly plump in her figure" (Lahiri, 1999, p. 13). This description, while seemingly trivial, reflects a subtle assertion of her individuality, highlighting her unique identity in the diasporic milieu.

Mrs. Das's introspective journey in the story is emblematic of the larger diasporic experience, particularly for women. Her journey is marked by an internal conflict and a quest for self-discovery, resonating with Gilroy's assertion of diaspora as a "state of being perpetually 'in-between'" (Gilroy, 1993, p. 19). Her interactions and internal monologues reveal her struggle to reconcile her cultural identity with her personal desires, signifying a broader narrative of diasporic women who grapple with similar issues. Lahiri poignantly describes Mrs. Das's disconnection, "She did not appear to understand the words of the song, for she did not express irritation or embarrassment or react in any other way to the man's declarations" (Lahiri, 1999, p.

14). This disengagement is not just physical but also emblematic of her emotional and cultural disconnect.

The narrative astutely captures the interplay between empowerment and vulnerability in diasporic conditions. Gilroy discusses the diasporic experience as “defined not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity” (Gilroy, 1993, p. 99). This is evident in Mrs. Das’s character, who, despite her apparent independence and empowerment, also exhibits moments of vulnerability. Her confession to Mr. Kapasi, “I’ve kept it a secret for eight whole years” (Lahiri, 1999, p. 26), underscores this duality of strength and vulnerability. It reveals the complexities and contradictions inherent in the diasporic experience, particularly for women who navigate these multifaceted roles.

Lahiri’s “Interpreter of Maladies,” through the lens of Gilroy’s Black Atlantic Paradigm, offers a profound exploration of women’s empowerment and introspective journeys in the diaspora. The narrative delves into the complexities of cultural identity, gender dynamics, and the struggle for self-realization, highlighting both the empowerment and vulnerability of diasporic women. Mrs. Das’s character, in particular, serves as a powerful metaphor for these experiences, encapsulating the nuanced realities of life in the diaspora.

Identity Negotiations in the Diasporic Condition: An In-depth Analysis

In Jhumpa Lahiri’s “Interpreter of Maladies,” the uncertainties of existence and identity negotiations within the diasporic condition are central themes, especially as reflected through the character of Mrs. Das. These themes are further enriched by applying Paul Gilroy’s Black Atlantic theory, which offers a critical perspective on the formation of diasporic identities.

Lahiri’s narrative intricately portrays the uncertainties faced by individuals in diasporic conditions, particularly through the lens of identity negotiations. These negotiations are often characterized by a search for self in a milieu that is constantly shifting culturally and geographically. Gilroy discusses the concept of diasporic identity as fluid and continually evolving, noting that “the diaspora experience... is defined, not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity” (Gilroy, 1993, p. 99). In Lahiri’s narrative, Mrs. Das represents this diasporic uncertainty and the consequent search for identity. She is depicted as a character caught in the complexities of her cultural heritage and her present life, as evidenced when Lahiri describes, “She did not appear to understand the words of the song for she did not express irritation or embarrassment or react in any other way to the man’s declarations” (Lahiri, 1999, p. 14).

In the diasporic context, gender plays a significant role in shaping identities, as vividly portrayed through Mrs. Das. Her character embodies the intersection of

gender, culture, and personal aspirations within the diaspora. Gilroy's concept of "double consciousness" provides a lens to view Mrs. Das's struggles, wherein she grapples with dual identities - her cultural identity and her personal sense of self. Gilroy writes about this conflict as being central to diasporic experiences, where one "feels his two-ness – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings" (Gilroy, 1993, p. 19). Mrs. Das's identity is torn between her American upbringing and her Indian heritage, creating a space of constant negotiation and conflict. Her internal dilemmas are evident in her interactions and the secrets she harbors, highlighting the gendered nuances of these identity negotiations.

Case Studies and Theoretical Perspectives Supporting this Analysis

The themes present in Lahiri's work find echoes in other diasporic narratives and are supported by various theoretical perspectives. For example, the works of writers like Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Tsitsi Dangarembga also explore similar themes of identity negotiation and the role of gender in the diaspora. These narratives, much like Lahiri's, highlight the complexities of living between cultures and the ongoing process of self-discovery and adaptation. From a theoretical standpoint, scholars like Homi Bhabha and Stuart Hall have discussed the concept of cultural hybridity and identity negotiation in the diaspora, paralleling the themes explored in Lahiri's narrative. Hall's assertion that cultural identities are "not an essence but a positioning" (Hall, 1990) resonates with the experiences of Mrs. Das, who is continuously positioning and repositioning herself in an attempt to reconcile her multiple identities.

"Interpreter of Maladies" presents a profound exploration of the uncertainties and negotiations of identity within the diaspora, with a particular focus on the impact of gender. Lahiri, through the character of Mrs. Das and supported by Gilroy's Black Atlantic theory, depicts the complexities and intricacies involved in the formation of diasporic identities. The narrative thus becomes a significant contribution to the discourse on diaspora studies, offering insights into the continuous process of identity formation and negotiation in a transnational context.

Conclusion

The exploration of diasporic identity and female subjectivity in Jhumpa Lahiri's "Interpreter of Maladies," particularly through the character of Mrs. Das, has yielded profound insights into the complex interplay of culture, gender, and personal identity within the diasporic space. The narrative's in-depth portrayal of these themes, viewed through the lens of Paul Gilroy's Black Atlantic Paradigm, not only enriches our understanding of diaspora and gender dynamics but also poses significant implications for diaspora studies and gender analysis.

Lahiri's narrative vividly captures the essence of diasporic identity as a fluid and evolving construct, shaped by the ongoing negotiations between cultural heritage and personal experiences. Mrs. Das's character embodies this complexity, manifesting both the empowerment and vulnerability inherent in the diasporic condition. Her story underscores the concept of 'double consciousness' as defined by Gilroy, where her American upbringing and Indian heritage create a dual identity, leading to internal conflicts and a quest for self-discovery. This narrative thread is critical in understanding the multiplicity of identities experienced by diasporic individuals, particularly women.

The nuanced exploration of diasporic identity in Lahiri's work has important implications for both diaspora studies and gender analysis. It challenges conventional perspectives on diaspora as merely physical displacement, highlighting instead the psychological and emotional aspects of this experience. Furthermore, the emphasis on female subjectivity within the diaspora opens new avenues in gender studies, illustrating how gender roles and expectations are reshaped in transnational spaces. This analysis underscores the necessity for diaspora studies to incorporate a more intersectional approach, considering factors such as gender, culture, and personal history in understanding the diasporic experience.

Building on the intersectionality approach, future research in diaspora studies and gender analysis could explore several key areas. One potential direction is the comparative study of diasporic narratives across different cultures and ethnicities. Such research could provide a broader understanding of how various diasporic communities negotiate their identities and the role gender plays in these processes. Another promising area of study is the examination of second-generation diasporic individuals, exploring how their experiences differ from the first generation and how their identities are shaped by the intersection of their parents' heritage and their own upbringing in a different cultural context. Additionally, further research could delve into the psychological impact of diaspora on individual identity formation, integrating insights from psychology and sociology to offer a more comprehensive understanding of the diasporic experience.

In conclusion, Jhumpa Lahiri's "Interpreter of Maladies" offers valuable insights into the complexities of diasporic identity and female subjectivity, contributing significantly to the fields of diaspora studies and gender analysis. The narrative invites a deeper consideration of the nuanced ways in which individuals in the diaspora navigate their identities, influenced by an array of social, cultural, and personal factors. Future research, guided by an intersectional approach, has the potential to expand our understanding of these dynamics, shedding light on the diverse experiences of diasporic populations worldwide.

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