

'Complexities of Conjugal Relationship in *Interpreter of Maladies* by Jhumpa Lahiri'

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Abstract

In the title '*Interpreter of Maladies* Jhumpa Lahiri signifies the deep divide between the culture of American born Indians and that of Indians living in India. She delineates the circumstances between married couples. They are so close yet so far. Lahiri has told the tales of man woman relationship with remarkable deftness. The relations between Mr, Sain and Mrs, Sain, Shukmar and Soba, Mr, and Mrs, Das, Sanjeev and Twinkle are delineated in a very realistic manner. The married protagonists in the stories making struggle to cope with one another or each other individually. They are perplexed in new environment and culture. They are facing multi facets complexities arise because of cultural hybridity. The stories explicitly reveal that communication plays major role to success or failure of relationships.

The first story *Temporary Matter* the two protagonists Soba Shukmar are like Railway Track. Lahiri narrates the problematic marital relationship in both first and second generation of Indian residing in United State of America. In another story Mr. Kapasi, who is the Interpreter of Maladies, as Mrs Das calls him, has lost his ability to communicate with his wife. Mr. and Mrs Das do not communicate because of utter disinterestedness towards each other.

Each and every time a character in *Interpreter of Maladies* fails to see the truth about another person. The main conflict of the stories centre on two people who romanticize each other. Mr. Kapasi sees Mrs. Das as a lonely house wife who could be a perfect companion for him in his own loneliness. The bigger world of conjugal relationship is constantly acted upon by a world of small incidents that involve both partners acting with the knowledge of their relationship. Lahiri possesses an aptitude for communicating the failures and achievements of humanity. More particularly, She writes about the daily omnipresent adversity that exemplifies human life.

Key Words: Communication, Romanticize, Loneliness, Hostile, Unflattering, Culture

Since the Post Second World War period, 'diaspora' as an expression and experience has expanded its terms, conditions and ramifications beyond imagination. It now signifies all migrations, settlements, journeys and movements "voluntary or forcible" of people and communities "from their homelands into new regions" across the world, both from the Third to the First World and vice-versa, from North to South and East to West, and even from one state to another within the same nation and much more. One distinct feature of diaspora people is that in physical and material space they live in one country but in imagination look across time and space to another and acknowledge that the old country-a nation often buried deep in language, religion, custom or folklore-always has some claim on their loyalty and emotions.

Communication breaks down repeatedly in Interpreter of Maladies, often with hurtful consequences. Mr. Kapasi, who is the interpreter of maladies, as Mrs. Das names him, has lost his ability to communicate with his wife, forcing him to drink his tea in silence at night and leading to a loveless marriage. He has also lost his ability to communicate in some of the languages he learned as a younger man, leaving him with only English, which he fears he does not speak as well as his children. Mr. and Mrs. Das do not communicate, not because of a language barrier but because Mrs. Das hides behind her sunglasses most of the time and Mr. Das has his nose buried in a guidebook. The children do not listen to their parents, nor do they listen to Mr. Kapasi about the monkeys.

All these frustrated attempts at communicating with one another lead to hurt feelings. The Kapasis are trapped in a falling marriage. The Dases are openly hostile to each other. The Das children run rampant over their parents and everyone else. And Mr. Kapasi and Mrs. Das are unable to reach a level of friendship that they both may have sought, if only they could speak with one another openly. When Mrs. Das loses Mr. Kapasi's address at the end of the story, it marks the termination of the possibility that they could reach out to each other and the definite end to all communication between them.

Every time a character in Interpreter of Maladies fails to see the truth about another person, the results are in some way harmful. The main conflict of the story centers on two people who romanticize each other, although in different ways. Mr. Kapasi sees Mrs. Das as a lonely housewife who could be a perfect companion to him in his own loneliness. He misses or ignores cues that she may not be interested in him for his own sake because, at some level, he wants her to be his companion.

He sees many details about her, such as her bare legs and Americanized shirt and bag, but he passes over others, such as the way she dismisses her children's desires and her selfishness with her snack. Such unflattering details do not fit with his conception of her. Likewise, Mrs. Das wants Mr. Kapasi to become a confidant to her and solve her personal and marital difficulties. She views him as a father figure and helper and misses or ignores indications that he may not fit those roles. For example, she doesn't notice that he is uncomfortable with her personal revelations 'and presses him for help even when he explicitly tells her that he cannot give it to her.

Society reflects the social mode of life. The social mode of life depends mostly upon such variables as language, customs, education, economic background, attitude, value system, etc., which are usually covered by the blanket term 'culture'. Cultural contacts are made between real human beings and not between abstractions.²

Besides romanticizing one another, the characters also romanticize their surroundings,

resulting in insensitivity and danger, Mr. Das, for example, photographs the Indian peasant whose suffering he finds appropriate for a tourist's shot. He sees only what he wants to see-an interesting picture from a foreign land-not the actual man who is starving by the roadside. Even when Bobby is surrounded by monkeys, in genuine distress, Mr. Das can do nothing but snap a picture, as though this scene is also somehow separate from reality. Throughout their trip, Mr. Das fails to engage with India in any substantial way, preferring to hide behind the efficient descriptions in his guidebook. His romanticized tourist's view of India keeps him from connecting to the country that his parents call home

*"Don't touch it," Mr. Das said. He glanced up from his paperback tour book, which said "INDIA" in yellow letters and looked as if it had been published abroad. His voice, somehow tentative and a little shrill, sounded as though it had not yet settled into maturity.*³

Each character in the story has a distorted way of seeing the others, as each views others through some artificial means. Mr. Das views the world through his camera. His camera is always around his neck, and he sees even harsh realities through its lens. For example, he takes pictures of the starving peasant, even though doing so blatantly ignores the peasant's essential reality. Mrs. Das hides behind her sunglasses, seeing the others through their tint and blocking others' view of her eyes. Additionally, her window does not roll down, so she cannot directly see the world outside the taxi cab. Mr. Kapasi watches Mrs. Das through the rearview mirror, which distorts his view of her and prevents him from looking at her directly.

*In all these instances, this secondary pleasure of the imagination proceeds from that action of the mind, which 7 compares the ideas arising from the original objects, with the ideas we receive from the statue, picture, description, or sound that represents them.*⁴

Mr. Das's camera represents his inability to see the world clearly or engage with it. Because he views the world through his camera, Mr. Das misses the reality of the world around him, both in his marriage and in the scenes outside the cab. Mr. Das chooses to have Mr. Kapasi stop the cab so that he can take a photograph of a starving peasant, wanting the picture only as a souvenir of India and ignoring the man's obvious need for help. His view of the man's reality is distilled because he sees the man only through the camera lens.

Mr. Das snaps pictures of monkeys and scenery, taking the camera from his eye only when he turns back to his guidebook. Rather than engage actively with the India that surrounds him, he instead turns to the safety of frozen images and bland descriptions of ancient sites. He has come to visit India, but what he will take away with him pictures and snatches of guidebook phrases-he could have gotten from any shop at home in New Brunswick, New Jersey.

*"Doesn't it get tiresome, Mr. Kapasi, showing people the same thing every day?" Mr. Das asked, rolling down his own window all the way. "Hey, do you mind stopping the car. I just want to get a shot of this guy."*⁵

Mr. Das also uses the camera to construct a family life that does not actually exist. His children are insolent and his wife is distant, yet Mr. Das tries to pose them in pictures that suggest harmony and intimacy. When Mrs. Das refuses to leave the car when they visit the monastic dwellings, Mr. Das tries to change her mind because he wants to get a complete family portraitsomething, he says, they can use for their Christmas card. This "happy family" that Mr. Das aspires to catch on film is pure fabrication, but Mr. Das does not seem to care. He would rather exist in an imaginary state of willful ignorance and arm's-length engagement than face the disappointments and difficulties of his real life.

Kapasi is merely fantasising that Mrs Das' polite interest indicates something deeper. His attempt to prolong their tour only prompts an unwanted admission from Mrs Das that her son is not her husband's. He is dismayed to find that she thinks of him 'as a parent' rather than a potential partner, and that she has only felt comfortable in confessing to him because of his 'talents' as an interpreter. Each person has seen the other as a kind of saviour, only to be disappointed. Kapasi feels 'insulted' at being used by Mrs Das, while Mrs Das realises that he is 19 merely an unimportant tour guide after all, irrelevant to her family.

*Anticipation began to plague her with such ferocity that the thought of a husband, on which all her hopes were pinned, threatened at times to send her into another attack. Amid tins of talc and boxes of bobby pins she would curl up on the floor of the storage room, speaking in non sequiturs.*⁹

In 'Mrs Sen's' the boy, Eliot, functions as a foil to demonstrate Mrs Sen's inability to assimilate into American culture. Although Mrs Sen. dominates the story, Eliot becomes a figure who not only illustrates the balance between the cultures, but also develops as a character who grows through experiencing other customs. Eliot is an eleven-year-old white American boy; while Mrs. Sen, the next in a line of Eliot's after school baby-sitters', is hired because she is a 'Professor's wife, responsible and kind'. She is, of course, much more than this as Eliot is soon to find out. She is a traditional Indian wife who feels isolated and lost in the foreignness of American culture. We perceive Mrs Sen through the eyes of Eliot, who notices the striking differences between the domestic life of these Indian immigrants and his own. Through his thoughts, we are given detailed descriptions of the Sens' apartment, suggesting (although he is in no way judgmental) that he perceives the family as strange. Indeed, his ability to absorb and enjoy this alternative way of life becomes a rich learning experience for him.

*It develops under the conviction that the basic aim of Philosophy is to cultivate a world-view. This requires an awareness of the existential condition of life as also the consciousness of life's ultimate ideal, viz., redemption, not only of the individual, but of the total human race. It emphasises the ultimacy of spiritual values; yet it demonstrates that the roots of spiritual life lie in conditions that are essentially existential.*¹⁰

Eliot, in fact, compares the lushness of Mrs Sen and her beautiful attire 'she wore a shimmering white sari patterned with orange paisleys' favourably against his mother's 'cropped hair her shaved knees and thighs too exposed'. Unlike Eliot's own home, Mrs Sen's is welcoming and her apartment is warm. He soon comes to look forward to watching her 'as she chopped things, seated on newspapers on the living room floor'. He is fascinated with the knife she uses, 'curved like the prow of a Viking ship'. But Mrs Sen is so alienated from her new life, and so starved for company, that she allows Eliot to become her confidante. During this process, he learns not only to accept another person's culture, but also to shield Mrs Sen from her fear of living in a world that is alien to her. Through her, Eliot comes to understand the anxiety that ensues from being cut off from one's family and friends, and the frustrations of being unable to prepare the food that ties one to a particular culture.

*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.*¹¹

After Mrs Sen's car accident, Eliot is left at home as a latch-key' child and feels, for the first time, the sterility of his own culture in contrast with the richness of Mrs Sen's. Both have

benefited from their mutual association.

In contrast, the seven-year-old boy in 'Sexy' acts as a catalyst for Miranda to realise that her relationship with the married Dev is neither appropriate nor beneficial to her. She is swept into her liaison with Dev, attracted by his difference and lured by his Indian heritage. Their story runs parallel with that of Laxmi's cousin, whose husband has absconded with another woman whom he sat next to on a flight from Delhi to Montreal'. His son, we learn from Miranda's friend Laxmi, is very bright but badly affected by his father's dereliction of his family. When Miranda's friend asks her to look after him, She is startled by his perceptions. When the boy asks Miranda to wear the special dress she has bought to wear with Dev, he unexpectedly describes her as 'sexy'. We discover the depth of his pain when he explains that being sexy 'means loving someone you don't know'. With this remark, he reveals how badly affected he has been by his mother's constant emotional outbursts and his father's abandonment.

After thinking about the boy's words, Miranda understands the significance of the betrayal represented by her affair with Dev. The boy's pain has made her realise that it wasn't fair to her, or to his wife, that they both deserved better'. The child's experiences have pointed her towards the reality of the emotional suffering inevitably involved in such a deceitful relationship.

Lahiri sees tolerance as essential both to cultural harmony and within relationships. Through 'This Blessed House', 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. Sanjeev obviously prefers his bachelor existence 'when he would walk each evening across the Mass. Avenue bridge' and need not consider anyone else in his solitary evenings. He and Twinkle are completely mismatched he prefers an orderly existence, while Twinkle is lazy, slovenly and careless of convention.

Lahiri shows her sense of the absurd. To make a marriage work, especially from culturally diverse backgrounds, she shows that a great deal of adjustment and compromise must take place on both sides, and also that tolerance extends beyond a mere shared passion for an author: Twinkle is not interested in the complications of Indian cookery which, she complained, 'was a bother', preferring a more American style of food. Sanjeev's admission that her cooking is 'unusually tasty' suggests that he is prepared to tolerate her differences. Sanjeev is humbled both by Twinkle's love for him and by the respect shown toward him by his friends and colleagues. His irritation at Twinkle and the feelings that overwhelm him are finally dissipated by the pang of anticipation he feels at the sight of Twinkle's shoes. Although, he does not share Twinkle's taste in Christian paraphernalia, he knows that they will be together for the rest of their days. He loves her because she is unique, and their relationship will be cemented because of their ability to compromise.

Conclusion

Lahiri's precise and spare prose is stripped of any florid phrases, and the adjectives and adverbs provide specific details rather than merely embellishing her writing. For most of her stories, Lahiri has chosen a third- person omniscient narrative structure. In this way, she can present her characters from an outsider's point of view. Lahiri builds her characters around the immigrant experience and the cultural divide between America and India. At the same time she paints, with sympathy and understanding, indelible characters who experience the pain and suffering of ordinary people.

She continues her story by plotting her motive of exclusion, loneliness, and search for

fulfillment as the central issue. Another impressive aspect of Lahari writing is her ability to write in the voice of both genders. The stories all draw upon different aspects of Lahiri's Indian background. Each of the stories is affected in the in some way or another by India. some of the stories take place in India. Almost every story is about second generation of Indian Americans, like Lahari herself.

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