



Portrayal of Woman Roles from Jhumpa Lahiri's 'Interpreter of Maladies'

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Abstract

This paper is an abecedarian study of Lahiri's description of women characters from her short story collection – "Interpreter of Maladies". The core objective of this paper is to demonstrate how Lahiri's depiction of female roles, by and large, deal with Indians settled abroad negotiating between two cultures; with varying degrees of success, their attitudes, their concerns and their life styles set in Bengal and Boston. This paper is also a perceive about women roles of the nine stories which concern themselves predominantly with social preoccupations like cultural multiplicity, identity crisis, love marriage, breaking of marriage, extra marital affairs, old age etc.

Key words: Abecedarian – rudimentary, primarily
Perceive – study, observation
Predominantly- Mainly

Introduction:

Jhumpa Lahiri deals really with generalizations in her "Interpreter of Maladies" in which many of her women characters depicted in diasporic situations. Her women characters, which are related to husband and wife roles within marriages, are sympathetic in description and they are found as stereotypical of Indian culture by the American readers. Married woman characters of Lahiri often deal with confusions of marriage such as; relation to cooking, working outside the home, and bearing children. As she generalize the Indian marital culture, her women According to Lahiri's generalizations of Indian marital culture, women are merely conscientious for cooking and doing



household responsibilities, as well as becoming totally cultivated with the arrival of children. Her male characters are only permitted to work apart from their women; like monetary income. Certain cultural shocks, specially the question of sexuality, are found among the female characters of both second and third generations of Lahiri's fiction which seeks to analyze her motives and methods to discuss gender and sexuality in terms of diaspora citing with her "Interpreter of Maladies." Khushwant Singh is full of praise for her. He says: "Without striving to impress, without a witty twin of phrase, Jhumpa manages to hold the readers' interest. She reminded me of Somerset Maugham".

A Temporary Matter is a story of a young couple, Shoba and Shukumar. Shoba gives birth to a dead child; this tragic incident dramatically changes the lives of Shoba and Shukumar. Suddenly love and warmth evaporates from their lives. They become 'experts in avoiding each other in their three bed room house, spending as much times as possible on separate floors. Shukumar no longer looks forward to the weekends as Shoba spend hours on sofa with her colored pencils and her files. Shukumar would fear to break the silence. It had been a very long time since she had looked into his eyes and smiled, or whispered his name. She stops taking interest in the house under such state of affairs, crisis in their married life continued when a temporary matter in the form of a notice of electricity cut, informed about five days' power cut for one hour from 8 pm. This unexpected announcement provided them a chance to come closer. Unable to think anything in particular about spending an hour in darkness, Shoba turned nostalgic and her immigrant sensibility overpowered her when she said, *"It is like India, sometimes the current disappears for hours at a stretch. I once had to attend an entire rice ceremony in the dark. The baby just cried and cried. It must have been so hot."* Shoba further added being more nostalgic, **"I remember during power failures at my grandmother's house, we all had to say something like a little poem, a joke or a fact about the world."** For them five nights turned into nights of confession. Shukumar told her that he has cheated in an exam and had forgotten to tip a waiter, admitting that he had been 'distracted' by the thought of marrying her one day. He confessed he had exchanged the sweater, a wedding gift by Shoba, for cash and had 'gotten drunk alone in the middle of the day and had once torn a picture of a woman from a magazine and had an "intensive desire" for her. Shoba too, made her confessions and she told him of peeping into his address book to see if her name had been entered and how she had let him speak to the "chairman of his department without telling him that he had a dab of pate on his chin. She also



confesses that she had Martini with Gillian, when his mother had come visiting and had found his only published poem 'Sentimental'. Four nights in darkness turned into an exchange of confessions... the little ways they'd hurt or disappointed each other, and themselves. The darkness somehow helped them to communicate with each other. In fact, they were also able to make love. On the third night Shukumar began kissing her awkwardly and on the fourth night they made love with a desperation they had forgotten. On the fifth night the electricity has been repaired, Shukumar is disappointed, because it was only in darkness they were able to communicate, and share their lives together. In a quick move, Shoba blows out the flickering candle and switches on the light, and tells Shukumar about her plans to shift to another apartment as they had been through enough. Shoba did not know the sex of her baby and this enabled her to seek refuge in a mystery. She thought it was a mystery for Shukumar as well. The story ends with the words, "they wept together for the things they now knew" The story reflects the alienation and loneliness that the emigrants face in a foreign land. The decline of their mutual attachment in Boston prepares them for the problems of self-exile. Memories of India come again into their intimate conversation.

The title story '**Interpreter of maladies**' is one of the much acclaimed stories in the anthology which highlights the psycho-analytical study of the female protagonist, Mrs. Das. Mr. & Mrs. Das family of five members came to Orissa for sightseeing from America. They engaged Mr. Kapasi as their guide, a learned man who due to some bad fortune ends up taking the profession of an interpreter with a doctor for Gujarati patients. Mrs. Das from the very beginning seemed to be an egocentric character, which hardly showed any affection towards her children and any love or soft feelings towards her husband, Mr. Das. They came to see Konark temple. They had complexes about their Indian origin and tried to look as much American as possible. Mrs. Das develops a deep interest in Mr. Kapasi's job as an interpreter of maladies. She even takes his address to send the photographs in which both of them are together. Mrs. Das gets attracted towards his professional acumen and she seeks a remedy from him for her secret pain as she was illegitimately impregnated by her husband's friend, a Punjabi who had come to stay with them for a few days. The guilt she committed in a moment's passion made her obsessed with it. For this she requested Kapasi: *"Don't you see? For eight years I haven't been able to express this to anybody, not to friends, certainly not to Raj. He doesn't even suspect it. He thinks I am still in love with him. Well, don't you have anything to say?"*



..... *About my secret and about how terrible at my children, and at Raj, always terrible, I have terrible urges, Mr. Kapasi, to throw things away one day I had the urge to throw everything. Don't you think it's unhealthy?* (65) Mrs. Das's seeking of Kapasi's help to interpret her malady is only to get redemption from her sins and to purify her soul. But Mr. Kapasi's sympathy for Mrs. Das ends with a hesitation and detachment as an obvious question gets to the heart of the matter and he asks *"Is it really pain you feel, Mrs. Das or is it guilt?"* (65) Mr. Kapasi, the interpreter of people's maladies, fails to offer any remedy to Mrs. Das's malady. A multiple identity may be a reason for Mrs. Das's queer behavior this shows her cultural up rootedness. Most of the emigrant Indians suffers from different type of maladies and as Indians they are unable to get rid of their Indian consciousness that they should be honest and true in their married life. At the same time they cannot be completely westernized in their thoughts and feelings. This dichotomy is the predicament of the Indians settled in abroad.

'Mrs. Sen' is the sixth story of this collection in which Lahiri has portrayed proficiently and successfully the problems of immigrants such as displacement, restlessness, discrimination and marginalization in the migrated country, even after having found a place to settle in. This story exhibits the troubles faced by an Indian wife in a foreign culture. Mrs. Sen is one of two main characters in this story. She is a friendless woman who hopelessly misses her native place Calcutta, her home. Her husband took a job as a professor in a New England town. Life is very different for her there. She refuses to learn to drive because it's not her interest, but the rejection also limits her experiences in her new country. She becomes a babysitter for Eliot, who comes to her house after school. The two share an unspoken loneliness. Eliot's mother is alienated or divorced from her husband, trying to keep her life intact. Her sadness is evident to Eliot, who knows she skips lunch and drinks too much wine and isolates herself. Mrs. Sen who works as a baby sitter for Eliot, an eleven year old son of an American working woman who lives alone and wants someone to be at home with Eliot. Mrs. Sen is a housewife and the wife of a university professor of Mathematics. Mrs. Sen develops an intimacy with Eliot as she has no friends in America. Her husband has no time to accompany with her so she feels isolated and is displaced in an unfamiliar place. Mrs. Sen would like to return to her native place where she misses her family. She reads letters eagerly from them time to time and listens to her fantastic music of Ravishankar. Mrs. Sen starts practicing driving but she gives



it up as it is difficult so she prefers going by bus rather than car to go to office. She met with an accident and finally leaves the job accepting defeat as well as asserting her will which shows ambivalence in her final action where she cries bitterly shutting herself up in her room. Thus, Mrs. Sen's thoughts and attempts at self-Americanization end in tears and silence. She abandoned finally the job of baby sitting as well. As sense of estrangement preoccupies the hearts of these people culturally as well as geographically cut off from their homeland. A sense of loss runs all through the story.

The narrator of '**When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine**' is Lilia, ten years old girl in the year 1971 when the story takes place. She is a first generation American of Indian descent. Through the visits of Mr. Pirzada, she learns about the troubles of Pakistan, the history of India's violent independence experienced by her parents, and the war between the formerly united countries. From the safety of her home, she worries about Mr. Pirzada's daughters. When he returns, she learns what it is to miss someone who lives across the world.

Boori Ma, in '**A Real Durwan**', is an old woman who sweeps the stairs and lives on the roof of a Calcutta apartment building. Her tales of the lost luxuries of her life before separation entertain the residents, though they suppose that the tales hold on a few rudiments of truth. Boori Ma is accused of alerting robbers when a recently-installed basin is stolen from the stairwell. She is dependent on the power of her memories (or delusions) and on the kindness of her neighbors. When she loses the latter, she cannot maintain the former. A kind woman who browbeats her husband in '*A Real Durwan*' is Mrs. Dalal. Despite her soft spot for Boori Ma, Dalal lets her discontent with her life be known. She is kind to Boori Ma, and offers to buy a new set of bedding for the old woman. But while Mrs. Dalal is a major figure in Boori Ma's life, the old woman is just a footnote for Mrs. Dalal. She forgets about the new bedding after the arrival of the basins. Most probably, she would have prohibited Boori Ma's exclusion had she not been out of town.

Miranda in '**Sexy**' is a major woman character who has an affair with a married Indian man after moving alone to Boston. He is the first person who acts like a man in her life and also the first person to call her sexy. The affair is a taste of the matured love she craves. Though the affair comes to a usual end, Miranda is more certain in her new city and in her skin. Laxmi is Miranda's co-worker at the public radio station. Laxmi is distressed by her cousin's marital troubles and gossips about it to



Miranda. She denigrates her cousin's husband for having an affair, not knowing that Miranda herself is sleeping with a married man.

The central character of **'The Treatment of Bibi Haldar'** is Bibi who suffers from an epilepsy-like illness that causes seizures. She is left in the very little care of her eldest cousin and his wife. Despite her desires, her family does not help her look for a husband. When Haldar's daughter becomes ill, they blame Bibi. When they move away, it is up to the women to suppose her care. Bibi withdraws from society until the women, fearing she is ill, find her peculiarly pregnant. She soon fixes up her cousin's cosmetics stall and provides for her son. She keeps the character of the father a secret. Earlier to her pregnancy, Bibi was extremely lonely and depressed, but it is obscure that despite the possibly non-consensual idea of her son, his birth gives her life focus and purpose.

Mrs. Twinkle In **'The Blessed House'** is the wife of Sanjeev who are newly married after only a four-month courtship but their moving in process is marred by growing pains. Twinkle's wonderful obsession with the Christian iconography left behind by earlier tenants irks Sanjeev. He thinks that she is childish and happy in a way that he cannot understand. She is childlike and full of wonder, pleased by every leftover religious item she finds in their new home. She is optimistic and hopeful. Though they make up before their housewarming party, Sanjeev is left with enduring doubts of whether or not they love each other. However, her surplus pair of high heels fills Sanjeev with expectation. But in the end, he feels resigned to the idiosyncrasies of his wife.

Mala is another woman character and the narrator's wife in **'The Third and Final Continent'**. At first, the division from her family caused by her wedding caused her sad. When she meets her husband in Cambridge six weeks later, she no longer cries but they are still strangers. Through time and shared experience, she becomes habituated to her new country and new life. Mrs. Croft is the elderly woman in this story and she owns the house in Cambridge where the narrator lets a room. Born in 1866, she is surprised by the moon landing as an unthinkable achievement. Mrs. Croft is scornful towards modern times and manners, and declares the narrator a gentleman and Mala a lady. She is self-sufficient and likely quite obstinate. Helen, Mrs. Croft's daughter, is more modern in dress and emotional response than her mother and also more practical and distant than the narrator.



Conclusion

Lahiri's fiction reflects the multiple identity of women roles. Her yearning for the Indian sensibility bears the stamp of a vagrant searching for her lost home. She is as if in self-exile. Thus, the collection of short stories by Jhumpa Lahiri are based on the predicaments and inner turmoils of Indian immigrants in the United States. These characters have been uprooted from the secure life mode of a traditional set up and are struggling to cope with the new environment by learning new strategies and cope up methods, but in order to provide an alternate life mode, such learning has to be lived and experienced at first hand. Her fiction establishes a certain Indo-American cultural link, in the post colonial context. She had made a search for identity with an emotional empathy through her female protagonists. The greatness of her writings is in making the tale of human idiosyncrasies thought-provoking and soul searching. Jhumpa Lahiri does not explicitly points out the remedy. She has presented all women characters as they are in real life, but these characters, in one way for the other, teach the lesson of humility and equality, and motivate us to retain the good of the past in the face of the challenge of life with the head held high almost all the stories end on a positive note, with the hope of a tomorrow.

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