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Bewildered Relations in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*

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“Exiles, emigrants or expatriates are haunted by some sense of loss, some urges to reclaim to look back at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt.”

(Salman Rashdie:1983: 75)

Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* depicts the displaced immigrant protagonists and second-generation Indian-American characters searching for a way to fit into a community. The book is a collection of nine short stories concerning with the diasporic postcolonial situation of the lives of Indians and Indian-Americans whose hyphenated Indian identity has let them to be caught between the Indian- American traditions. It underlines the centrality of cultural translation in the process of possessing and re-possessing the past and the present both chronological and spatial in a meaningful way. It also outlines a strategy of diasporic as well as gendered resistance towards existing colonial and patriarchal hierarchies in the post-colonial through the effort of imagination.

Interpreter of Maladies directly/ indirectly speak about the South Asian diasporic community with the notion of identity loss. Diaspora literally refers to the dispersal or scattering of a people

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who feel alienated in their host country resulting to the identity loss or identity crisis as well. This living *in-between* condition becomes painful and marginalizing for these diasporas. There is yearning for 'home' to go back to 'the lost origin' and 'imaginary homelands' are created from the fragmentary and partial memories of the native place. Though the children born to migrant peoples enjoy better settlement and place in that country *but "their sense of identity borne from living in a diaspora community is influenced by the past migrant history of their parents or grandparents."* (McLeod: 2000: 207)ⁱ

The 2000 Pulitzer-Prize winning volume *Interpreter of Maladies* is an interpretation of the meaning of hybridity and talks clearly about a failed relationship. It depicts the experience of diaspora and acquaints its readers with the complexities and nuances of such an experience. The world that Lahiri portrays is set in motion against the cultural tension, anxiety and resultant dialogues that take place when two very different sections of the world. Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* abound with male and female characters struggle to survive in the unfamiliar surroundings they are entangled in. Lahiri shows the diasporic struggle to keep hold of culture as characters create new lives in foreign cultures. Infact *Relationships, language, rituals and religion all help these characters maintain their culture in new surroundings even as they build a 'hybrid realization' as Asian Americans.* (Katrak: 2002: 05)ⁱⁱ

The book represents themes of cross-cultural which create a natural opportunity to compare the presence of juxtaposed cultural values. Lahiri recounts the lives of Indians and Indian Americans who are caught between the culture they inherited and the world in which they now find themselves. She herself struggles to understand Indian culture, she admits: *"I am lucky that I'm between two worlds...I don't really know what a distinct South Asian identity means. I don't think about that when I write, I just try to bring a person to life"*. (Farnsworth: 2000: 06)ⁱⁱⁱ

Interpreter of Maladies mirrors forth how sometimes the differences between the people can't bridge the gaps thus the gulf that exists between people and their often detrimental attempts to bridge them. The collection also looks at loneliness and how people try to avert it. Within stories

Lahiri sets up contrasts between characters to highlight her views about human nature and relationships. The collection transmits cultural knowledge through literature-as-rhetoric that depicts variety of plots and the diverse society of immigrants. The characters react quite differently to their family friends and enemies comprising an unbiased illustration of how varied Indian immigrants' personalities are despite their common ethnic background. It attempts to focus on many different characters, places and plots within the same historical and cultural context. Lahiri could not escape her inheritance because it is within her genetic material and she subconsciously constructs a short story collection that juxtaposes her two social groups literarily, symbolically and rhetorically. She states:

"I always say that I feel that I've inherited a sense of that loss from my parents because it was so palpable all the whole time I was growing up, the sense of what my parents had sacrificed in moving to the United States, and in so many ways, and yet at the same time, remaining here and building a life here and all that entailed". (Farnsworth: 2000: 18)

Lahiri represents the theme of universality within the book. In each story almost all characters feel isolated as they search for their place. In *A Temporary Matter* a man and a woman search for their place in their relationship after the still-birth of their child. In *Interpreter of Maladies* a tour guide operator in India searches for his relationship to the world when he leads an Indian-American family on a tour. In *Mrs. Sen*, Mrs. Sen feels isolated from her large extended family which is in India and she searches for a place in suburban America; the American boy she watches each afternoon is more at peace with his isolation. The book has *"double perspective – between the ancient traditions of her ancestors and the sometimes baffling prospects of the new world."* (Dubey: 2002: 26)^{iv} These characters exquisitely detail the thoughts of one individual about a period of his or her life. They are defined by isolation of some form or other like husbands is isolated from wives; immigrants are isolated from their families and their homes; children are isolated from their parents; and people are isolated from the communities in which they live. The lives in these stories end with a sense of loss. The significant reason for this is that these lives do not have grand passions and tumultuous relationships. In their isolation they feel that they are missing something vital to their identities. It is this missing *something* that defines them. It seems that few characters in these stories have any idea of who they are or where

they are going in life. Lahiri seems to foretell that her stories will be about the hardships of communication and relationships. The book:

"...explores the ethnic character and history of a community as a reflection of a personal odyssey of displacement and as a search for self and community". (Davis: 1997: 07)^v

Critics focus solely on the adult aspects for example marriage, sexuality, the immigrant experience and bridging the gap between Eastern and Western culture. The characters have left behind their Indian identity and face an ongoing struggle to adjust between the two worlds of the two cultures. Lahiri's characters defy simple explanations of what their problems are that somehow defines their lack of self-understanding. She vividly shows the estrangement and isolation that often afflict first- and even second-generation immigrants. Although the immigrant experience is central to her work, it is not her exclusive concern yet through her characters she suggests that there are 'maladies' that trouble all of us.

Lahiri herself suffered from an *identity crisis* which enables her to write about identity crisis of expatriate communities. Her characters suffer from loneliness, alienation and longing for a lost world as she did. Lahiri's background is important for her writings too. Asha Chobey, an Indian critic remarks: *"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 parentheses in her life, the fact she is at heart n Indian cannot be denied. The stories collected in her debut anthology Interpreter of Maladies deal with the question of identity."* (Choubey:2001:Postcolonial Web)^{vi}

Lahiri's protagonists try to find a way to reconcile their desires to be with a person they love with their desire to be secure. Her characters come to peace with the compromise they have made. The pushing and pulling between cultures results in much tension in the protagonists' lives as they attempt to mediate between old-world demands of tradition and new-world demands of contemporary living and relationship. Lahiri is adept at creating characters with

credible emotions and feelings, and who exhibit realistic and believable attributes. The power behind Lahiri's writing comes from the fact that "*her stories record the experiences of both first and second generation Indian immigrants and majority of her characters, like her, have relatives in India but their home, in unambiguous terms, is northeastern United States*". (Dubey: 2002: 22)

The first story of the book *A Temporary Matter* is the story which heads us out in Lahiri's world of Interpreter of Maladies. This story shows the cold and harsh realities of the humanity. At the beginning I had the idea that Lahiri made this story into a classic Indian one which is seemingly predictable where a boy marries a girl, boy works and earns, and wife cooks and they live happily ever after. This is not a typical Indian story as a matter of fact it's quite the contradictory. Here Sukumar and his wife Shoba commits to spend their life together and find them unable to even utter a word with each other. Yet it seems to be a common sort of marital strife. Lahiri must have created this story with a very down to earth and realistic state of mind. The setting she shows was integral to the plot and the characters of the story. The story reflects the alienation and loneliness that the emigrants face in a foreign land. The marriage bond which is still considered sacrosanct in India is slithering down under the pressure of new needs under a different background. That is the reason that Shobha and Sukumar failing to find any foothold of security.

When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine examines the differences between Pakistan and the U.S. through a way a family lives and dines with Mr. Pirzada. This story is told from the perspective of a ten year old child Lilia. It is based upon the time of Indo-Pak conflict in 1971. It is a story of Mr. Pirzada who is a professor from Bangladesh and doing research in America. He was always worried about the safety of his family in Bangladesh during 1971 war as he had left his wife and seven daughters without anybody to look after them in case of an eventuality. Mr. Pirzada always looked worried and restless. It seems throughout the story that he feels to be left alone. The story ends with his returning back to Bangladesh living with his family.

The title *Interpreter of Maladies* itself reinforced precisely and tells the story about a family visit to India. The crux of the tale is not nostalgia for the homeland or conversely a deep-seated cultural loss because the Indian in America sound so totally deracinated. The crux is located in the relationship between husband and wife on their way to Konarak with the taxi driver cum guide Kapasi is an interpreter of maladies. Mr Kapasi is a character who signifies the deep divide between the culture of American born Indians and that of Indians living in India. His other job is as a translator in a Doctor's surgery. There he explains people's illness to the Doctor who does not understand the language of these patients. A compliment made guide and tourist share secrets as Mrs Mina Das confesses about her second child Bobby. At this point the interpreter is silent and he can not quite see the significance of the confession to a total stranger. The character of Kapasi demonstrates that human misunderstandings and not merely cultural divides can lead to misinterpretation. He "*is a man who has given up his dreams to support his family and who only yearns for some recognition and interest in his life.*"(Brada-Williams: 2004: 458)^{vii}

A Real Durwan is the story of Boori Ma, a watch woman of the stairwell in an old building in Calcutta who was deported to Calcutta after partition. In the story the residents of the building chuck Boori Ma out of the building after a thievery suspicion. The people forget her honesty and her truthfulness. Her only fault was her garrulousness and her boasting of her rich past and rich parents.

Sexy is the story based on extra-marital relationship. This is a story of an American Indian girl Miranda who unaware of his marital status falls in love with a married Bengali man Dev. Emigrant Indians living abroad raise their eyebrows at this but cannot escape from it. Miranda is entitled sexy by Dev. Love does not mean to be sexy; it rather means being in each other's thought that is why at last Miranda came to realize that despite of her beauty and smartness she is not the one for Dev.

Mrs Sen's is the story of another emigrant in America whose husband is a professor of mathematics in a university. The family is keenly observed by an American boy of eleven years named Eliot who is looked after by Mrs Sen while his mother goes to work. 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 that grows through experiencing other customs. He also tries to determine his identity. His lack of understanding towards his mother and his own life is mirrored by Mrs Sen's frustration at the new world she finds herself in. Eliot feels the warmth in her voice and in her gait that he finds lacking in his mother. The greater tragedy is that he cannot relate and share his present sense of dislocation with her.

The Blessed House is the story of a young Asian couple Sanjeev and Twinkle who have just started their married life in USA. The tenderness of love can be figured out and explored in this story. Sanjeev doubts if he truly loves his spouse or not. Sanjeev, an executive in a firm has no time to be bothered by her emotions and sentiments. Twinkle as a student of literature wanted to treasure the antic monuments whereas sanjeev hated and disapproved of Twinkle's idea. He hated things just because Twinkle likes them. Lahiri sees tolerance as essential both to cultural harmony and within relationships. Through *This Blessed House* (Lahiri: 136–57) 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.

The Treatment of Bibi Haldar is a story regarding a woman bibi haldar who has lived her entire life in desolation. It is a poignant story that focuses on the plight of this lady Bibi who suffered from a baffling disease which made her family members exasperated and ultimately she left alone to suffer. She found herself stricken to a grave syndrome but in the end she somehow gets pregnant, delivers a baby boy and her ailment is healed.

The Third and the Final Continent is the last story in the collection that moves from London to Boaton and gives to the readers a different taste. Although the same emigrant themes the initial hurdles to settle, to adjust and after sometimes trying to be more native-- the story tells the readers the strange encounter of a Bengali commerce graduate who moves from Calcutta to London and then to Boston with an old woman of more than 100 years Mrs. Croft in whose house he lodges as a tenant. The narrator left her home and moved to a new apartment when his wife came from India. She was alone and her daughter Helen made weekend visit to her. All the time there was the feeling of being alienated. This story encloses moving pictures of life.

In contrast the seven years-old boy in *Sexy* (Lahiri: 83–110) acts as a catalyst for Miranda to realize 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. The young boy in *Sexy* by contrast is precocious, yet knows less of himself than Eliot. He is in the throes of establishing a new sense of self using the language and attitudes of his absent father in an attempt to work out who he is. The first-person speaker of *When Mr Pirzada Came to Dine* (Lahiri: 23–42) is a ten-year-old girl Lilia who finally comes to understand the pain caused by separation from one's family. Mr Pirzada is a Moslem Bangladeshi who is trapped in America when the war of separation breaks out in western India. In *A Temporary Matter* the character Shoba and Shukumar play of revealing secrets, readers learn that deception has been a theme in their relationship. They have lied to each other, and the lies have been selfish ones told not to spare the other's feelings but to allow the person telling the lie to escape some discomfort or sacrifice. The author provides readers with two conflicting sets of clues as to how it might end.

Lahiri's collection focuses not only on men and women's struggle to create connection but also on the loss of connection between people. Grief or an intense sense of loss can cause a breach in connection. Relationships that are built on a connection that is not mutual or stable have a minimal chance of success. Her characters regardless of this instability search for a sense of connection to people, they hardly know for the sense of security it provides. These characters are not able to shape their realities not because they don't have the ability but rather because they

don't know how to place themselves in their world. The children in the book too seem to be searching for an identity. They don't necessarily choose one by the end of the story but are still in wonder and awe at the choices available to them

Interpreter of Maladies ends with *The Third and Final Continent* a story not of death but of new life not of loss but of gain and growth. Lahiri extends the idea of cultural disparities beyond the traditional conception of culture. Her characters encounter intense situations like deaths of children, severe illnesses, extramarital affairs, and immigration and are involved in significant relationships. The ending of each story comes much like the ending of any occurrence in real life – not quite hemmed in but with a feeling of closure and growth that gives “*a sense of exile and the potential for -- and frequent denial of -- human communication that can be found in all of Lahiri's short stories.*” (Brada-Williams: 2004: 454-55)

Many of Lahiri's stories feature an underlying pattern of human compassion for example Shoba and Shukumar eventually develop mutual compassion in *A Temporary Matter*. Lilia learns compassion through Mr Pirzada's enforced separation from his family in *When Mr Pirzada Came to Dine*. Miranda learns to value herself through her feelings of compassion for the boy Rohin in the story in *Sexy*. Eliot feels compassion for Mrs Sen although, in contrast, his mother does not, *Mrs Sen's*. The narrator, although he does not fully understand her, feels a connection with Mrs Croft based on compassion in *The Third and Final Continent*. It is true for that “*Lack of communication and miscommunication often lead her characters to feel emotionally isolated and to suffer from cultural displacement. It depends not only on the capacity for empathy or the ability to listen to others and learn their language or take their point of view, but also on having a voice and having a language*”. (Gilligan: 1982: xix-xx)^{viii}

This is particularly correct for immigrants who feel divided between the customs of their homeland and those of their adopted society. Lahiri's stories are endowed with a strong sense of identity to the narrator and their Diaspora experiences. This much heralded collection is largely

celebrated, and correctly so not for its examination of diasporic anxieties but for its exploration of human relations where she successfully explores the communication barriers, incompatible distinctions, isolation and dislocation in relationships.

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