

ALIENATION IN LAHIRI'S "AN INTERPRETER OF MALADIES"

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Lahiri's volume of short stories, "An Interpreter of Maladies" spans two continents, India and America. It is peopled with characters of Indian origin against the backdrop of India or America in varied hues and colors. The stories revolve around isolation and alienation, marriage, loneliness, transgression, shifting panoramas and unknown longings. The kaleidoscope is colorful and unfathomable; incisive, intriguing and riveting yet inconclusive; postmodern concerns. Alienation and estrangement run parallel in most stories revealing the deep chasm in the mind and spiritual make-up of Indians who have immigrated to America.

The primary story "An Interpreter of Maladies" is a story of a tour guide Mr. Kapasi who takes Mr. Das and his family from America on a tour to Konarak's sun temple. On the way, the confined taxi promotes intimacy between Mrs. Das and Mr. Kapasi. Mrs. Das reveals her most personal secret her clandestine intimacy with a distant friend which resulted in the birth of her second son. She has been carrying the burden of the secret for a long time and unburdens herself with alacrity: "About my secret, and about how terrible it makes me feel. I feel terrible looking at my children, and at Raj, always terrible" (*Interpreter of Maladies*, 65).

Mr. Kapasi who has been identified as the 'interpreter of maladies' since he works as an interpreter at a doctor's clinic translating the problems and illnesses of patients is appalled at her revelation. It pales his initial attraction for the lady who seems wrapped up-her self-interest unhampered by either her family or imminent danger to her son who is attacked by a posse of monkeys. She is tired of her secret burden: "I'm tired of feeling so terrible all the time. Eight years, Mr. Kapasi, I've been in pain eight years. I was hoping you could help me feel better, say the right thing. Suggest some kind of remedy." (*Interpreter or Maladies*, 65) However, Kapasi identifies her guilt and confronts her with it. It makes her treat him with contempt and disdain and he realizes that their earlier romantic interlude and his dream of being an "interpreter of nations" had come to naught when she carelessly loses his address at the end of the story.

Mr. and Mrs. Das are immigrant Indians on a tour to their native land which their parents left a long time ago. They have both been born in America and travel to India once in a few years. They have severe marital problems and they seem to be self-centered and self absorbed even when it comes to their children. The story opens with the parents bickering over who will take their daughter to the restroom. The mother "did not hold the little girl's hand" (*Interpreter of Maladies*, 43). The mother is extremely negligent when the puffed rice she scatters becomes the cause of an attack on her son by monkeys.

The significance of the malady encompasses all the stories in the book. Lahiri's spotlight on the maladies of immigrants caught between the cultures of two continents and two different ways of life and living are vivid. As Shea comments: "Take for instance, Interpreter of Maladies

by Jhumpa Lahiri, a text whose cross-cultural themes create a natural opportunity to compare the presence of juxtaposed cultural values...Through *Interpreter of Maladies*, 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...Lahiri uses her cultural background as an Indian American to create plots and characters that express the juxtaposition in her own life. She builds a balanced representation of her cultural group. She openly admits that *Interpreter of Maladies* is a reflection of her own experiences as well as those of her parents and their Indian immigrant friends.”(Shea, 1-2)

However Lahiri’s characters are not stereotyped. They are varied though their ethnic background is the same. They are also coming to terms with the crushing and pulsating turn of switching continents and embracing that which is essentially alien and alienating. When they leave Indian shores behind they leave behind a plethora of indivisible and intangible cultural parameters which they continue to seek in the land of their migration. However their journeys are labored, unfathomable and often searing-this searing alienation and deprivation comes from cross cultural encounters which beg for recognition and acceptance in a different land.

A telling example is Mrs. Sen in the story named after her. Mrs. Sen, the wife of an academic baby sits Elliot an eleven-year-old boy after his school every day. She struggles hard to adapt to the new culture in America. However she is obsessed by her own cultural background which she has left behind in faraway Calcutta, India. She is a first generation immigrant who cannot forget her Indian foundation however hard she tries to adjust: She constantly retells her life and relationships “at home” (India); “At home, you know, we have a driver” or the confession that “Everything is there” (Lahiri, 113). She surrounds herself with the past, her home in India and what she had done there.

Mrs. Sen cooks Indian food every day. Though there just the two of them, she and her husband who will eat the food she prepares elaborate dishes at home. Her cooking style and her interest in buying and cooking fish have strong associations with her homeland and her ethnic identity. She continues to use a curved blade with a wooden plank to cut her vegetables and fish refusing to adapt to a knife as normally done in the land of her adoption (114).

On one occasion she asks Eliot: “Eliot if I began to scream right now at the top of my lungs would someone come?”(116). It is difficult for her to fathom the stillness of the American town in which she lives or the loneliness and distance she faces from fellow Americans. The more alienated she feels, the more she tries to preserve her Indian ways and customs. She travels a long distance to buy her favorite fish. She continues to wear saris: “She wore a shimmering white sari patterned with orange paisleys, more suitable for an evening affair than for that quiet, faintly drizzling August afternoon.” (112)

As she wrestles and grapples to come to terms with the alien land and its customs she continues to learn to drive. However the experiment comes to naught when she meets with an accident. Mrs. Sen’s ardent struggles are traumatic and her attempts to adapt fail, however she continues to struggle. Her failure at driving signifies her difficulties of adjusting to America and American ways. Eliot is finally taken away by his mother and subject to being alone at home after school, without a baby sitter.

Shanthi says: “Lahiri whose aptitude for communicating the failures and achievements of humanity writes about the daily adversity which is seen everywhere and that which summarizes the human life. In fact the author herself here becomes the interpreter of the Indian experience. Her characters differ greatly from similar cultural backgrounds, groups that have identical difficulties in their lives. The general hardships and misinterpretations that people face in

connecting to one another and the universality within the human race interlink to for a theme using a sort of sagacious symbolism. The maelstroming theme of Interpreter of Maladies is the barriers of communication”(Shanthi, 1062). If alienation could be the root, then lack of communication and empathy could be the stems of this deep rooted malady.

In “A Temporary Matter” the couple, Shukumar and Shobha are trying to coming to terms with the loss of their child which causes a major rift between them and their relationship seems ship wrecked. They choose to sleep on different floors in the same house, become estranged and separated: “He thought of how long it had been since she looked in to his eyes and smiled, or whispered his name on those rare occasions they still reached for each other’s bodies before sleeping. (*Interpreter of Maladies*, 5)

However power cuts in their locality become the norm and this is an opportunity for the young couple to bridge their gap with long soul searching conversations. It ends with Shukumar’s confession that he was present at the time of their baby’s death and that he had cradled him before his death. They then realize their grief and loss which is mutual and understand the reason for their lack of communication and empathy. Finally their taut feelings thaw.

The breakdown of communication and the resulting estrangement can be seen in “Interpreter of Maladies” as well: Mr. Kapasi loses his ability to communicate with his wife and drinks tea silently leading to a loveless marriage. He also loses the ability to communicate in different languages which he learnt in his youth. Similarly the Das couple is locked in a loveless marriage due to Mrs. Das’s infidelity. The characters fight isolation, guilt, separation and misunderstanding. In “This Blessed House” Twinkle and Sanjeev find themselves to be complete opposites. Twinkle is careless, fun loving and lackadaisical while her husband Sanjeev embodies carefulness, seriousness and caution. Twinkle throws her things here and there- “They didn’t bother her, these scattered, unsettled matters. She seemed content with whatever clothes she found at the front of the closet, with whatever magazine was lying around, with whatever song was on the radio-content yet curious.” Or (142) “Now, in the second month of their marriage, certain things nettled him – the way she sometimes spat a little when she spoke or left her undergarments after removing them at night at the foot of their bed rather than depositing them in the laundry hamper.” He carefully cleans cooks and even makes elaborate and meticulous arrangements for their housewarming party. While Twinkle is engrossed in a facial and pedicure and her appearance for the evening, Sanjeev cooks rice, order the samosas and even rushes out to buy more champagne in case the case they had bought earlier falls short.

The husband and wife seem to work individually rather than together. Their main bone of contention is the Christian memorabilia they find around the house left there by a former tenant and which Twinkle refuses to part with. It irks Sanjeev initially and embodies their marital discord. Though the story is inconclusive about their future, the seeds of dissonance have been sown. Sanjeev dwells on how he had been cornered into saying he loved her, though he was not actually sure if he really did.

Saha says: “For Twinkle, her external exilic state suppresses her internal spiritual exile by giving her an alternative mode of belonging – to “fit right in.” Twinkle’s relic hunt in her newly possessed house provides her a mental connection with the past of the house to secure her sense of belonging. Salman Rushdie says that “the broken pots of antiquity, from which the past can sometimes, but always provisionally, be reconstructed, are exciting to discover, even if they are pieces of the most quotidian objects” (Rushdie, *Imaginary* 12). Though in Twinkle’s case the objects discovered are not exactly common and have no relation to her past, they still bring peace

to her mind; whereas, Sanjeev's psyche closes options for him, taking him to a spiritual isolation compounded by his external displacement. The psychological build up of each migrant is different and hence the varied responses to a similar situation. It is often seen that the physical shift from one's place of origin to a new place of residence does little in itself to arouse the sense of being in exile." (Saha, 5-6)

"He was getting nowhere with her, with this woman whom he had known for only four months and whom he had married, this woman with whom he now shared his life. He thought with a flicker of regret the snapshots his mother used to send him from Calcutta, of prospective brides who could sing and sew and season lentils without consulting a cookbook..." (*Interpreter of Maladies*, 146) Thus, Sanjeev is distraught at his partner, his wife and seeks to find a balance in their relationship which he knows is missing.

Sanjeev's cautious nature is related to his own worries about what other people think and the rituals he had established as a bachelor than anything positive for his marriage. His wife Twinkle's carelessness is ultimately connected with creativity and ingenuity as much as it is with selfishness. Sanjeev can recognize his wife's objective value via his friends, yet he is not able to value it. He dislikes the bust of Jesus that he finds in the attic since it symbolizes Twinkle herself:

"He hated its immensity, and its flawless, polished surface, and its undeniable value. He hated that it was in his house, and that he owned it. Unlike the other things they'd found, this contained dignity, solemnity, beauty even. But to his surprise these qualities made him hate it all the more. Most of all he hated it because he knew that Twinkle loved it." (156-157).

The story closes with Sanjeev carrying the silver bust to the living room mantel where Twinkle would like to place it; though Sanjeev dislikes this. The closing of the story is Sanjeev's balancing act to please his wife which can be interpreted variously: "Readers can interpret this as one of Sanjeev's last acts to please his wife or, in stark contrast, as indicative of an eventual balancing of their character differences and Sanjeev's following of Twinkle into a more spontaneous and playful approach to life." (Brada-Williams, 462)

"Sexy" is thematically different but again seeks to pinpoint the trauma of the identity crisis felt by many immigrants. Sexy is the story of a young woman, Miranda, who gets involved in an affair with a married Indian man named Dev. There is a strong sexual attraction between the Indian male protagonist Dev and the American female protagonist Miranda. Miranda is fascinated with Indian culture and continues to discover its many facets. She is intrigued and thrilled about this alien culture-even visiting an Indian grocery store or an Indian restaurant to discover and learn more about India and Indian culture.

Miranda's open straightforward nature makes her conducive to another culture and the people within this culture. She loves Dev and all his Indianness. However, Dev is not the ideal man and he views Miranda as an exotic woman of high sexual appeal all through the story. He is unable to sustain their relationship which eventually fails. The failure of their relationship is explained at the end of the story: "In spite of herself she longed for him. She would see him one more Sunday, she decided, perhaps two. Then she would tell him the things she had known all along: that it wasn't fair to her, or to his wife, that they both deserved better, that there was no point in it dragging on." (110)

Miranda is struck by the words of the young boy Rohin whose mother is facing a difficult situation because her husband loves another woman. And this other woman is 'sexy' which is interpreted by Rohin's mother to mean "a woman he does not know". So was she also a woman whom Dev did not really know? This troubles Miranda. Miranda also recalls that at the

Mapparium “all the countries had seemed close enough to touch” but was it really so? She is distraught and flustered at the deep chasm between Dev and herself embodied in the different cultures and the fact that Dev had a good-looking wife at home. Miranda is troubled at the duality of the situation, of Dev’s infidelity and her role in it as the ‘other woman’ with a distinctively different culture and identity: The gulf between is indeed yawning and she realizes that the countries may seem close on the map but the cultural difference and disparity between them was great and insurmountable.

Here again, Lahiri grapples with the inner vicissitudes of cultural differences of people with varied cultures and identities who may come together physically but their mental differences are overwhelming. The reader is once more left with unanswered, unrequited questions.

In “Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine” which is written from the point of a young girl Lilia whose parents have emigrated from India to America, the apparent discord is muted and subdued but nevertheless can be felt. While Mr. Pirzada and Lilia’s parents continue to obsess over the war in East Pakistan and the emergence of Bangladesh as a new nation in 1971, Lilia continues to study American history: “No one at school talked about the war followed so faithfully in my living room. We continued to study the American Revolution, and learned about the injustices of taxation without representation, and memorized passages from the Declaration of Independence.” (32-33) Lilia’s parents and Mr. Pirzada are consumed by the violence in the war against Pakistan by Indian forces while the second generation Lilia cannot fathom their ire or even interest in what is going on half way across the world. Here the disparity is between what is relevant to the parents is of little consequence to the girl who is being brought up on American soil.

“The Treatment of Bibi Haldar” set in India, pinpoints the alienation and rejection of a young woman who is beset by fits by her own family. She is ostracized and detested as well as isolated by her father and step-mother so that her “influence” does not unfavorably affect the unborn child of her parents. However, her fits miraculously disappear when she becomes impregnated by an unknown stranger. Bibi Halder redeems her bad luck and her isolation and loneliness come to an end at the end of the story. The alienation pictured here is the strong dislike of her own family who refuse to embrace her.

In “A Real Durwan” which is the other story set in India too we find the protagonist Boori Ma facing hardship and alienation working as a ‘durwan’ or gatekeeper at a multi-storied building. She is dependent upon the largesse of the occupants but they blame her when some small robberies take place at the building. She is thrown out of the building mercilessly, her past loyalty and work forgotten. The poignancy of the story increases since she has lost her life savings earlier at the market. Boori Ma is left alienated and estranged her honesty and trust forgotten in the face of petty crime which she has not committed. The story’s heartrending end strikes a chord of the loneliness of human nature and the fickleness of human temperament.

Thus, the various stories in “*Interpreter of Maladies*” by Jhumpa Lahiri draw the chasm which exists between countries, between cultures and between individuals. The chasm is deep-rooted due to the singularly different background of the individuals who people the stories. The struggle of the immigrant is realistically described as he strides two cultures, one side hungers for his familiar past mother country the other coming to terms with the culture of his adopted country. Lahiri’s characters are realistic, their troubles tangible and their fears fathomable. The gap or gulf is hard to encompass and the resultant grappling is all the more distressing since there are no answers to this dilemma which faces them. It is a quandary without answers.

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