

IMPACT OF CULTURAL DIFFERENCES ON HUMAN LIFE IN 'INTERPRETERS OF MALADIES'

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A collection of nine stories in 'Interpreter of Maladies' offers reader a variety of experiences that are both familiar and unfamiliar. The collection concerns the Southeast Asia Indians, often Bengali, living either in India, or after transplantation, in the United States. All provide rich description of the details of Indian life, and of cultural values and customs. While the domestic routines, for example, Indian food and cooking provide an important backdrop in several stories, maybe unfamiliar to the readers, especially those of Americans, the style and the issues in Lahiri's collection are highly accessible, absorbing and moving. Most of the stories are written from a perspective that is between cultures. The characters are refugees but are negotiating a path in a country, in America, that seems to provide opportunities or places, as in 'Temporary Matter', 'The Third and Final Continent', 'Mrs. Sen's', 'When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine' and 'This Blessed House'. Ties to the Asian sub-continent may be strong or weak, but they seem to be haunting. Living between cultures lends an extra layer of complexity to situations and relationships. Her Interpreter of Maladies is an authentic example of displacement and rootlessness because most of the characters are first generation migrants. The title story 'Interpreter of Maladies' gives us the image of American-born Indian family on vacation in India, strangers to their own culture and heritage. Mr. and Mrs. Das are so distant from their Indian heritage that they need a tour guide. In the title story Mrs. Das is shown in balance and in total adaptation with American life and so are her children. The way she is wearing and the way she tastes and is treating the food, like strangers, and the way she avoids touching the drinks in the fear of infection are the representative of degree of assimilation that is heavily weighted in favor of American style of life.

Food is culture for immigrants and serves as an important part of their identity. When away from home, the food from one's land brings as much pleasure as mother's voice on overseas calls. It provides a link; it induces a sense of belonging in an otherwise alien world. Food becomes a motivating force in proportioning the group, the minority, as opposed to the expectations to conform to the mainstream culture in the target land. The first story 'A Temporary Matter' focuses mainly on alienation in a small Indian family with the food functioning as a binding factor. Lahiri's description of happy days of this small family includes inventory of food items which are mostly culture-dependent:

"The pantry was always stocked with extra bottles of olive and corn oil, depending on whether they were cooking Italian or Indian. There were boxes of pasta in all shapes and colors, zippered sacks of basmati rice,

whole sides of lambs and goats from Muslim butchers at Haymarket, chopped up and frozen in endless plastic bags.”¹

Whereas in the first story food serves a sense of belonging between a couple, in the next story, ‘When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine’, food comes as a precious soil from mother land. Not only does food serve as a slice of native life for Mr. Pirzada, but also it functions as a strong bond between Mr. Pirzada, Lilia and her family. Mr. Pirzada comes from Dacca, whereas Lilia’s parents are from India. However, the foods that they relish, as well as their eating habits, establish a bond of affinity:

“They ate pickled mangoes with their meals, ate rice every night for supper with their hands. Like my parents, Mr. Pirzada took off his shoes before entering a room, chewed fennel seeds after meals as digestive, drank no alcohol, for desert dipped austere biscuits into successive cups of tea.”²

In the story ‘Mrs. Sen’s’, Mrs. Sen is described as a typical Bengali woman for whom fish is the ultimate food. The arrival of fish at the local store is greeted as a piece of news from home and she is always too eager to hold it, to cook it and to serve it to Mr. Sen. Whenever fish arrives, she troubles her husband with the job of the transporting it from the store to her home. If the husband is busy, she will take the bus to fetch the fish. But the happiness eludes her because the other passengers object to the smell. Fish becomes the leitmotif in the story. Mrs. Sen’s survival in an alien land revolves around this food item. It gives her a sense of proximity to her people and to her community that are totally absent in the American culture. We learn about Mrs. Sen who sits on her floor everyday chopping vegetables in the same way she did in India, with the same knife she used there. Her adherence to an insistently Bengali identity is evident in the fact that she doesn’t even use a conventional western knife. She brings from India a special Blade “carved like the prow of a Vikings ship”³ used for cutting food ingredients. The blade which is called bonti in Bengali, is not a mere tool, it is in Mrs., Sen’s recollection ‘the symbolic center of a community of Indian women’. If bonti symbolizes Mrs. Sen’s Bengali identity, her vexed relationship with the car represents the failure to forge a successful Bengali-American self. Mrs. Sen’s stubborn refusal to learn driving can be seen as a subconscious way of her resistance to the dictated terms of this new world. Brought up in a culture where she could rely on a “Chauffeur-driven car”⁴, Mrs. Sen is simply unable to master the quintessentially American skill of driving. “To gain access to the fish she craves, she has to call her husband at work and coax him to go to the seaside shop that sells the fresh catch.”⁵ Mrs. Sen, early in the story, asserts of her home in Calcutta: “Everything is there....Here is nothing.”⁶ It suggests that Mrs. Sen’s psychological state is not conducive to adaptation and assimilation. Perhaps it is meant to see the story as a snapshot of a woman in the early years of her life as a struggling immigrant.

The last story in this collection, “The Third and the Final Continent” presents alienation and a gradual assimilation of a Bengali gentleman. He pursues his higher education in Britain and then his job takes him to America. Adapting to the ways of three continents, the man and his wife succeed in retaining his original cultural identity. Even in America “the smell of steamed rice marks a home as different from an apartment.”⁷ A dish of chicken made with fresh garlic on the stove makes a sumptuous meal. Not only food but the eating habits also become so dear because it induces a sense of belonging. Eating with hands gives pleasure as no spoon or fork does. Their son who attends Harvard University will also inherit this habit of eating steamed rice with his hands. This habit is a great favor with Indians settled abroad.

The clash between the two cultures and its effects in the experiences of displacement, rootlessness, isolation, discrimination, and marginalization is well found in the stories — “Mrs.

Sen's", "Sexy" and "The Real Durwan". It is quite certain that the native people of the host country often consider themselves superior and looked down upon the marginalized and immigrated people. Though not all, but most of them, directly or indirectly, humiliate immigrants in one way or other. Mrs. Sen who baby sits Eliot, an eleven year old American boy, at her own apartment is often questioned of her origin and background by his mother. The clash between eastern and western thinking is clearer when the American mother scorns her mannerism and food that she serves her as a mark of Indian hospitality. This hurts her many a time and makes her restless, though she knows that her relatives in India "think I live the life of a queen ..."⁸. This humiliation and the experience of marginalization is nothing but its effect on the life of Mrs. Sen. Similarly, Dixits in "Sexy" are mocked at by their American neighbors and their children are called "the Dixits dog shit"⁹ by the American children. However, it is not only in America that the Indian migrants undergo such humiliating and discriminatory experiences, the Diasporas experience such treatment in every dominant culture or in other nations. The predicament of Boori Ma in "A Real Durwan" substantiates it. She is a low caste Bangladeshi Bengali who is sent to Calcutta after partition. But she is left to the mercy of other. She earns her meager livelihood by doing small household works and sleeps under the stair of a big building. To seek a change from her routine, Boori Ma sometimes visits other houses in the afternoon. No doubt, she is welcome there and sometimes "a glass of tea, the cracker tin was passed to her direction"¹⁰ but "knowing not to sit on the furniture, she crouched, instead, in doorways and hallways and observed gestures and manners in the same way a person tends to watch traffic in a foreign city"¹¹.

In the story "When Mr. Pirzada came to Dine", Mr. Pirzada is an East Pakistani national who is on a Government scholarship to study the deciduous trees of New Zealand. He deeply misses his wife and daughters, and while taking dinner with Lilia's parents he keeps his pocket watch "set to local time in Dacca, eleven hours ahead ...on his folded paper napkin on the coffee table"¹².

However, among the second generation migrants we witness waning emotional ties with past or "home" as in case of Shukumar and Shoba in "A Temporary Matter" and Sanjeev and Twinkle in "This Blessed House". They are quite alienated from Indian culture and values; they stick to American life style. Moreover, their marital relations are also disturbed and seem to be crumbling. The cultural alienation of the second generation immigrants is well described in the story "An Interpreter of Maladies" in which Mr. and Mrs. Das (American born Indians) are on journey to their home (parents' home). They are quite strangers to the Indian culture and mannerism, and they learn about India only through "the paperback tour book"¹³ or through Mr. Kapasi's description of India to them while showing them the Konark Temple in Orissa. For being born and brought up in America, they face an unbridgeable cultural chasm in India which makes them displaced in their parents' motherland. They do not feel at home in the surrounding of Konark Temple and want to go back soon. This reveals that Lahiri endeavours to present the shifting concept of home and displacement in the successive generations of people living in diaspora.

The first generation migrants like Mr. Pirzada and Lilia's parents in "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine", Mr. and Mrs. Sen in "Mrs. Sen's" are not comfortable with their multicultural milieu and endeavour to adhere to their original Indian culture which hampers their interaction with the host culture. The cultural interaction is imperative to achieve prosperity and pleasure if one is placed in an alien land. But this is sometimes kept at bay for fear of losing one's own original identity. In such circumstances the practice of liberal multiculturalism stands in good

stead. Moreover, a lot depends on the individual decision/desire to interact/assimilate with others. Mr. Pirzada and Lilia's father are more obsessed with what happens in their homeland; they discussed the development of Indo-Pak War for the liberation of East- Pakistan (now Bangladesh). The fear of Lilia's father and Mr. Pirzada is quite obvious in the following lines when Lilia goes to participate in Halloween,-

“Don't go into any of the houses you don't know”, my father warned. Mr. Pirzada knit his brows together. “Is there any danger?” “No, no,” my mother assured him. “All the children will be out. It's a tradition.” “Perhaps I should accompany them?” Mr. Pirzada suggested. He looked suddenly tired and small, standing there in his splayed, stockinged feet, and his eyes contained a panic...”¹⁴

Jhumpa Lahiri expounds the necessary detachment between the originating culture of immigrant parents and the daily lives of their American born/raised children, an aspect of the second generation experience. In the story, “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine”, she uses the viewpoint of a ten-year-old daughter of Indian immigrant to point at the objective remoteness of the second generation from their parent's land and culture. In the background of 1971 Bangladesh political turmoil, the story depicts the evening visits of Mr. Pirzada, a Bangladeshi (then Pakistani) scholar studying in the States, to Lilia's home. Lilia's parents, living in a small university town in New England, had haunted his acquaintance,

“In search of compatriots, they used to trail their fingers, at the start of each new semester, through the columns of the university directory, circling surnames familiar to their part of the world. It was in this manner that they discovered Mr. Pirzada, and phoned him, and invited him to our home.”¹⁵

It is not astonishing that Lilia is confounded about Mr. Pirzada's nationality. She refers to him as “the Indian man” and corrected by her father about the differences between Indians and Pakistanis. Due to her distance from her parents' cultural root, she is not aware of the important historical and cultural precedents. She muses,

“It made no sense to me. Mr. Pirzada and my parents spoke the same language; laugh at the same jokes, looked more or less the same. They ate pickled mangoes with their meals, ate rice every night for supper with their hands. Like my parents, Mr. Pirzada took off his shoes before entering the room, chewed fennel seeds after meals as a digestive, drank no alcohol, for desert dipped austere biscuits in successive cups of tea. Nevertheless my father insisted that I understand the difference.”¹⁶

Lilia's schooling in America does not grant her an understanding of world history and ethnicity, or any knowledge of her own South Asian inheritance. Her father is disappointed by her lack of information and questions what she learns at school. Lahiri exhibits her anxiety through the character of Lilia's father, the significance of appreciating the unity in diversity within the larger cultural group of South Asian people, a characteristic of her cultural heritage. However, unlike Lilia's father, her mother dismisses Lilia's need to know everything South Asian, saying “We live here now; she was born here”¹⁷. She accepts the necessary detachment of the second generation from their cultural heritage, as they are actively forming their identities as American. Lahiri's depiction of the physical and psychological distance of the second generation from their roots owes a lot to her intercultural/multicultural experience. Significantly, Lahiri uses children as a catalyst for giving intercultural or multicultural message. She draws on children in a number

of stories to provide the readers with a more snooping insight, may be because she feels that her grown up characters might allocate into cultural dissimilarity and adjustment.

Having not yet learned to think of people in terms of cultural or geographical categories, Lilia responds to Mr. Pirzada in a simple and spontaneous way. She likes him because he is kind to her, and she empathizes with his concern for the safety of his family in Dacca. Not understanding the implications of his identity as Pakistani, Bangladeshi, or Muslim, she responds to him empathetically as one human being to another and instinctively understands the interdependency of human lives in a globalized world. Lilia's father's insistence on Mr. Pirzada's Pakistani identity is, of course, moot; over the course of the narrative, East Pakistan becomes Bangladesh, highlighting the constructed nature of national identities. The story also emphasizes the violence that normally pervades the birth of new nations. The violence of Partition is made explicit, as is the violence surrounding the emergence of Bangladesh:-

"In March, Dacca had been invaded, torched, and shelled by the Pakistani army. Teachers were dragged onto streets and shot, women dragged into barracks and raped. By the end of the summer, three hundred thousand people were said to have died"¹⁸.

As far as the studies are concerns, Americans seldom allowed the pupils to learn outside the text. This becomes clear when Lilia is sent to the school library to research an aspect of the American Revolutionary War for a report; she is gently reprimanded when the teacher finds "her looking at a book on Pakistan"¹⁹. The moment demonstrates the self-absorbed nature of nationalism itself: the conventional narrative of one's own nation becomes of paramount importance in the minds of its patriots, even when contemporary events elsewhere in the world ought to be of some concern.

References:

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2. Ibid 'When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine' page 25
3. Ibid 'Mrs., Sen's' page 114
4. Ibid 'Mrs., Sen's' page 113
5. Ibid 'Mrs., Sen's' page 129
6. Ibid 'Mrs., Sen's' page 113
7. Ibid 'The Third and the Final Continent' page 192
8. Ibid 'Mrs., Sen's' page 125
9. Ibid 'Sexy' page 95
10. Ibid 'A Real Durwan' page 76
11. Ibid 'A Real Durwan' page 76
12. Ibid 'When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine' page 30
13. Ibid 'Interpreter of Melodies' page 44
14. Ibid 'When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine' page 38
15. Ibid 'When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine' page 23
16. Ibid 'When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine' page 25
17. Ibid 'When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine' page 26
18. Ibid 'When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine' page 23
19. Ibid 'When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine' page 33

