

Jhumpa Lahiri's Interpreter of Maladies: A Critique

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Abstract:

Jhumpa Lahiri is a diasporic writer whose writings are mostly centred around the themes of identity crisis and cultural disparities which the immigrant Indians normally encounter. In her debut in piece of literature, **Interpreter of Maladies** she sketches the lives of Indians and Indian Americans who are caught between their roots and the "New World." The characters in the short stories are long for their Bengali nativity at the same time try to root deep into the soil of their current abode. In trying to sustain their place in the new environment they experience psychological agony. They live with Indian thoughts on an alien soil. The resignation to adopt themselves to the prevailing condition demands unshattered dedication which the characters fail to give. The problems encountered by them justify the place of origin but as individuals they must fight with these complications with the ingenuity true to their nativity. These stories interpret the melodies of reflections that normally echo in the heart of the individuals who live away from their native land.

Present paper is a humble attempt to construe the attitude of the characters in Jhumpa Lahiri's **Interpreter of Maladies** in trying to be genuine to their native ethnicity and their attempts to prove their adaptability in the foreign soil.

Key Words: Interpreter, Maladies, Melodies, Musings, ethnicity, attitude.

Interpreter of Maladies is a collection of nine stories like A Temporary Matter, When Mr. Pirzada Came To Dine, Interpreter Of Maladies, Areal Durwan, Sexy, Mrs. Sen's, This Blessed House, The Treatment Of Bibihaldar, and The Third and Final Continent. The present paper focuses on the first four stories included in the collection.

A Temporary Matter is a story of a young couple Shoba and Sukumar staying in Boston. The couple is occupied differently in their work and do not find free time to spare for a stroll or an evening walk. Shoba assists Sukumar, in his thesis related work. She is empathetic

enough towards him and provides him the required space to work. The couple is a happy but there is emptiness spreading between them. The death of their son makes Shobha adamant in building up a wall of indifference giving a scope for incompatibility in relationship. They live under the same roof, but slowly move apart in terms of their closeness with each other. They enjoy reflecting in loneliness rather than finding ways to cement the gap between them. The loneliness is but a precursor emptiness thrusting the individuals in the valley of distress. But nothing was pushing Sukumar. Instead, he thought of how he and Shoba had become experts at avoiding each other in their three-bedroom house, spending as much time on separate floors as possible. He thought of how he no longer looked forward to weekends, when she sat for hours on the sofa with her coloured pencils and her files, so that he feared that putting on a record in his own house might be rude. (p10).

The house turns into a mere boarding house, Shobha loses respect on the notion of home and its true meaning. The passionate attachment one experiences for a family disappears gradually in her estimation. This is apparently due to the thoughts that drag her into their fold. The change in her behaviour is the result of impatience that creeping into her due to overwhelming thoughts that keep stirring her conscience. Her thoughts take sway over her and thrill to an extent that no other priority draws her attention. The behaviour of an individual is indicative of the changes taking place in the thought process. The neutrality that crawls into Shobha's behaviour is the result of her dislike towards her obligations which fail to disperse the thoughts that plague her. The consolation a soul needs from during time of such turmoil is not meted out thrusting her into an abyss of loneliness. The courage of Shobha shatters at her giving birth to a lifeless babe which is symbolic with her own psychic condition where there is no place lively spirited ambience. She becomes a victim to apprehension and annoyance but tries to maintain composure and resist the emotions and tries to pull on with life .

Shobha appears as good wife and shows companion to Sukumar but this is not her natural condition, she becomes a personal coach to train herself to act tactfully. This borrowed condition cannot be retained by her forever they are sure get replaced by her original emotions. A woman by nature is fit to be a mother a slightest provocation is an enough force to assume the role. Shoba fails to maintain the composure when she gets the thoughts her son. The power cut which is denoted as a temporary matter in the story turns into a perpetual obligation in separating the relation between the couple. During the time of power cut they

disclose their enigmas which they dare not to reveal in light. The darkness is symbolic of the emptiness prevailing in their affair. Shobha's stay abroad makes her practical in managing her profession and domestic concerns. She even does not worry of Sukumar attending the academic conference during her labour. Her maturity does not save from becoming a victim to distress. The loss of the infant is an irrevocable fact which keeps her move to chamber of loneliness time and again. The mighty institution family provides no place for distressed and soul. " She wasn't this way before. She used to put her coat on a hanger, her sneakers in the closet, and she paid bills as soon as they came. But now she treated the house as if it were a hotel. The fact that the yellow chintz armchair in the living room clashed with the blue-and-maroon Turkish carpet no longer bothered her. On the enclosed porch at the back of the house, a crisp white bag still sat on the wicker chaise, filled with lace she had once planned to turn into curtains (11).

The death of the baby is the cruel play of the fate, Shukumar's absence during Shobha's labour is not a reason for mishappening, but it effects their thinking to extent that both exaggerate it to an extent that they assume that the entire drama rests on this very fact. Shoba suffers from the feeling of being betrayed and Shukumar becomes the victim of guilty conscience. He can no longer remains a mere spectator rather starts reading the changes taking place in their relationship. He learns to look at Shoba with a different angle. Each day, Shukumar noticed, her beauty, which had once overwhelmed him, seemed to fade. The cosmetics that had seemed superfluous were necessary now, not to improve her but to define her somehow (14).

Shoba and Sukumar grieve for the loss of the infant the reason to their grief is same but seek different modes of solace. They do not try to share their feelings together. This makes their lamentation a private reason than an emotion which can be shared and found solace with love to each other. The temporary power cut helps them to find an enduring solution for their problem. Their individual reflections miss the rhythm of a chorus which is often essential to sustain lasting vibration that helps to retain the melodies ringing in the hearts a right tune to be hummed to lull the grief-stricken hearts. " As he watched the couple the room went dark, and he spun around. Shoba had turned the lights off. She came back to the table and sat down, and after a moment Shukumar joined her. They wept together, for the things they now knew (p18).

The short story **When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine** is a true depiction of the sentiments of individuals who are thrown away from their aboriginal land and long to settle with all that describe real value of life to them. The narrator in the story is a young girl whose simplicity helps in understanding what it means to be away from one's family and home. Mr. Pirzada is a Pakistani Muslim from Dacca. He is a Botany lecturer who comes on a grant sanctioned by Pakistan government. As the grant is not encouraging enough to lavish upon his home and other comforts, he is encouraged by an Indian family to share food and other luxuries like watching TV. The civil war in Pakistan is a matter of anxiety to Mr. Pirzada as the destiny of his family is linked with the war. The host family, the narrator's family, empathise their feelings as they do have a feeling of being detached from their native land.

Liliahas, the young girl and the narrator, is too young to understand the priorities that define the sentiments of belongingness and separation as she is born in America. The premier primacies that really matter for her are the language and food habits which only define a real sense in a person's life. She feels embarrassed when her father prevents her from calling Mr. Pirzada an Indian. She does not understand what it means to be distinct from each other when they share same language and thoughts. According to her, geographical barriers are no strong walls to restrict the sense of oneness. She naïvely reflects on the point from her own viewpoint. Her reflections define the real meaning in human relationships. "It made no sense to me. Mr. Pirzada and my parents spoke the same language, laughed 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 a room, chewed fennel seeds after meals as a digestive, drank no alcohol, for dessert dipped austere biscuits into successive cups of tea (p 20).

Though the girl appears innocent, in fact she retains the wisdom to see the person and feelings separately. Liliahas is born in America to Indian parents this makes her appreciate life different from her parents. Her courses in the classrooms are on American history and geography which match with her place of birth. She is inherited with Indian sentiments that makes her sensitive towards the matters that call the awareness of any Indian driven by rationale thinking which is true to his/her blood. The considerations of the young girl on the stranger are important in the story as they give us a cue to frame estimation on Mr. Pirzada and people like him who live away from homeland and their beloved ones. The news on civil war worries the family members and Mr. Pirzada. The young girl is the one who is affected

by the changing circumstances. Her intuitions on the stranger are genuine to a degree that her actions show her concern for a relationship, though momentary in terms of its physical permanence but have a perpetual validity in the psychic world of a person, his conscience, where honest feelings are admired. She prays for the safety of the Mr. Pirzada's family and chews chocolates for their health.

Liliahas prays for Mr. Pirzada's family's wellbeing, so refuses to brush her teeth and wash her mouth as she is apprehensive of getting the good wishes and prayers swept away in the foam of her toothpaste. "That night when I went to the bathroom, I only pretended to brush my teeth, for I feared that I would somehow rinse the prayer out as well. I wet the brush and rearranged the tube of paste to prevent my parents from asking any questions and fell asleep with sugar on my tongue"(p 24). This shows how she prefers to protect her feelings from not getting disrupted by the quakes of internal and external volatilities. The world in which we live physically is distinct from our mental world. The little girl lived in America and studied about American Revolution still worried about the political changes happening in Pakistan and Bangladesh. She is smart enough to separate the outside world from the inside world. "No one at school talked about the war followed so faithfully in my Livingroom. We continued to study the American Revolution, and learned about the injustices of taxation without representation, and memorized passages from the Declaration of Independence" (24).

Liliahas despite being a young girl cannot remain indifferent to the grief of Pirzada. She sincerely likes to console and assure him of better days with the family. She feels upset at her self-regard when she fails to use the words of confidence for his benefit. "Don't worry, I said. It was the first time I had uttered those words to Mr. Pirzada, two simple words I had tried but failed to tell him for weeks, had said only in my prayers. It shamed me now that I had said them for my own sake", (25). These emotions being nurtured in the little heart carry the weight of agony. She realises the feelings of missing the dear ones after Mr. Pirzada's leaves the place. She appears to throw a challenge to policy makers of the nations who, just to prove their adamance, disturb the life of the citizens. The egocentric policies hardly consider the interest of people in the country. Her sentiments are worth valuing as they open gateways into the concept of true human relations outside the demands of self-interest and discrimination. "Though I had not seen him for months, it was only then that I felt Mr.Pirzada's absence. It was only then, raising my water glass in his name, that I knew what it meant to miss someone

who was so many miles and hours away, just as he had missed his wife and daughters for so many months. He had no reason to return to us, and my parents predicted, correctly, that we would never see him again. Since January, each night before bed, I had continued to eat, for the sake of Mr.Pirzada's family, a piece of candy I had saved from Halloween. That night there was no need to. Eventually, I threw them away".(26)

Interpreter of Maladies is story portrayed on the life of a couple who come on a sightseeing to Amritsar gold temple. Mr. Kapasi the tourist guide accompanies them on their excursion. The couple Mr & Mrs. Das, though seem young, are parents of three children. Kapasi's observation on the couple makes him understand that they differ from the normal Indian couple. They even appear to be different even as parents. " They were all like siblings, Mr.Kapasi thought as they passed a row of date trees. Mr. and Mrs. Das behaved like an older brother and sister, not parents. It seemed that they were in charge of the children only for the day; it was hard to believe they were regularly responsible for anything other than themselves (31).

Kapasi, the tourist guide, works as an interpreter at a doctor. The occupation though sounds bizarre, proves to be of some sense to him as it grants him to access the demands which are not meted out by the income generated by his guideship. It also sounds sensible to Mrs. Das as she needs an interpreter who can really translate her feelings and export them outside the province of her conscience. She readily appreciates him terming the job as romantic. "But so romantic," Mrs. Das said dreamily, breaking her extended silence"(32). The word romantic provokes some unconventional feelings in the heart of Kapasi. These feelings make the real crux of sentiments which are naturally stimulated in the instinct of an individual's reaction to an unexpected appraisal. Kapasi who does not seriously consider his profession, as an interpreter, embraces it as the only source of supplementary income he is capable of earning. He feels thrilled when he learns that his profession is sounds relevant to a young woman like Mrs. Das and excites romantic feelings in her. " Mr.Kapasi had never thought of his job in such complimentary terms. Tohim it was a thankless occupation. He found nothing noble in interpreting people's maladies, assiduously translating the symptoms of so many swollen bones, countless cramps of bellies and bowels, spots on people's palms that changed color, shape, or size.(p 32)

Kapasi gets exhilarated at the Mrs. Das's expression. His profession, the interpreter, gives a possibility for Mrs. Das to acknowledge her guilt. Passionate feelings in the heart of Kapasi

and confession to cleanse the conscience in Mrs. Das, two extreme emotions, run parallel in the story. She shows a kind of affinity towards the profession of Kapasi. “So, these patients are totally dependent on you,” Mrs. Das said. She spoke slowly, as if she were thinking aloud. “In a way, more dependent on you than the doctor.”(33). Mrs. Das’s tributes unleash the feelings which are buried in Kapasi’s heart. These confusions make him forget that he is after all the interpreter of maladies. He feels intoxicated by an infatuation towards the lady. He also needs solace and consolation as he has been a prey to frustration borne out of the feeling of being neglected. His wife seldom bothers to appreciate his talent as an interpreter, he longs to get appreciated but the encounters rejection. The intensity of his displeasure, for not being identified, is seen from his quick reaction towards the comment. He tries to preserve the sensation to an extent of getting ecstatic from the very feeling. “When Mr. Kapasi thought once again about how she had said “romantic,” the feeling of intoxication grew”(33).

Mrs. Das accepts him as a confession box and tries to discharge the feeling of guilt that weighed profoundly on her integrity. She asks for his version and craves for his help to disown the feelings that have been tormenting her. She guarantees her sincerity in the confession by revealing the secrecy behind her second pregnancy. She requests him to translate her feelings carefully so that she could encounter the disturbances with a poised deportment. She confides the secret to Kapasi not out of great respect to him but to get undisturbed by the feelings that march strongly on her conscience and thrust aside the legitimate pleasure that is due to her from her family. Kapasi is interested by the feelings of intense infatuation towards Mrs. Das. She instead perceives a paternal figure and a redeemer in him. Thus, the characters shuffle the feelings to an extent that they claim a joker in the game of life to declare the show to their advantage.

The story **A Real Durwan** is the story of an old woman, Boori Ma, who feels nostalgic about her good old days and spends her hardships with sweet memories. She takes the role of a durwan, a watch man, to a building which bestows lodging to her under its staircase. Her reminiscences bestow her air of certainty to paddle through the difficulties that the actuality poses her. Her deplorable conditions challenge and test her stamina to tolerate the currents of disappointments. “Aside from her hardships, the other thing Boori Ma liked to chronicle was easier times”(42). Her compassions are her real compatriots which accompany her always and entertain with desired bouts of good humour to face the surprising calamities darted

towards her . Despite weary nights that challenge her sleep she is cushioned by thoughts that pat her with hope. Her difficulties increase incessantly but she does not give up confidence and expects the better days. The Dala's family, who are a little considerate towards her, promise her new bedclothes which is an enough reason for her to cherish hope for rest of her life. "Her mornings were long, her afternoons longer. She could not remember her last glass of tea. Thinking neither of her hardships nor of earlier times, she wondered when the Dalals would return with her new bedding"(46).

Boori Ma is dislodged from her cottage for being careless in minding the building. Her appeals go in vain in convincing the inhabitants and she is finally left to herself to mourn for loss of past and present throwing her future in dilemma. The story depicts the troubles of an individual who is removed from the genuine right to be happy with minimum luxuries like reining the world of fancy. The cruelty of the situations take vengeance on an innocent woman like Boori Ma making her a stranger even to dreams.

Conclusion:

The short stories of Jhumpa Lahiri included in the collection **Interpreter of Maladies** present a panoramic view on the emotions of characters placed in an expatriate community. These feelings which sprout up in the conscience are the constant reminders to humanity making them vigilant towards the true concerns of life, guaranteeing them the due sense of ownership even in alien situations and places.

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