

BREAKING DOWN THE BARRIERS OF COMMUNICATION IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S *INTERPRETER OF MALADIES*

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ABSTRACT

A noticeable feature of contemporary Indian English Literature is the rise of a galaxy of writers among whom Jhumpa Lahiri highlights the important aspects of our individual and social life from a feministic point of view that helped her to achieve prominence and recognition through various prestigious awards and honors. She displays a full spectrum of themes and techniques ranging from the victimization to protest to self-assertion. The present study of her short story *Interpreter of Maladies* elucidates how the Indian characters in a far-off land, away from their motherland take pains to adapt themselves in a foreign land and learn to tackle the issues of cultural identity and communication barriers and thereby succeed in surviving through their Indian attitude which is intrinsically built in them. There is a magic in the way Jhumpa Lahiri weaves her nine tales in the *Interpreter of Maladies*. Her choice of subject is exemplary; her keenness of observation is astonishing and her style taut and sincere. Her short story whether set in Boston or Bengal, sublimely understates the stories, spiced with humour and subtle detail, and speak with universal eloquence to anyone who has ever felt the yearnings of exile or the emotional confusion of the outsider.

INTRODUCTION

Interpreter of Maladies a collection of nine short stories by Jhumpa Lahiri details the experiences of both first and second generation Indian immigrants in the United States. As Dr. Sharada Iyer has aptly stated it is the maladies both accurately diagnosed and misinterpreted, matters both temporary and life changing, relationships in flux and unshakeable, unexpected blessing and sudden calamities and the power of survival that shapes the themes of Lahiri's extraordinary Pulitzer Prize winning debut collection of short stories. 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 form a theme using a sort of sagacious symbolism. The maelstroming theme of '*Interpreter of Maladies*' is the barriers of Communication. The characters in the stories are tormented by maladies which forces the need for communication. Shuchen rightly observes: "The nine stories have in common certain themes and motifs, such as exile, displacement, loneliness, difficult relationships, and problems about communication." *Interpreter of Maladies* is all about gaps in communication, even between people who speak the same language. The characters in Lahiri's stories often struggle to communicate balancing huge cultural differences from their Bengali/Indian and American backgrounds.

Communication-the essence of humanity

The theme of communication in "*Interpreter of Maladies*" is illustrated in several ways. Each character communicates in his or her own personal way. In the title story of the book *A Temporary Matter* the couple seems to struggle to come to terms with the loss of their child that causes the major disharmony in their marital life and remains a major reason for the breakdown in their relationship. The communication gap reached to that extent that both of them chose to sleep on separate floors though living in the same house and became completely estranged with each other except a few instances in which the wife speaks a couple of sentences like "don't work too hard" (*A Temporary Matter* -8) and would eventually sleep. Due to unspoken matters between them and the sorrow of the lost child persuaded monotony to rule over in their lives. Lahiri writes:

He thought of how he no longer looked forward to weekends, when she sat for hours on the sofa with her colored pencils and her files, so that he feared that putting on a record in his own house might be rude. 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 (*A Temporary Matter* 4-5)

Shukumar could only reminisce the just by-gone days to reconcile himself but fortunately the frequent power cuts give them an opportunity to fix up their issues. The confession of the secrets of each other becomes a major form of communication between them. The husband Shukumar takes the initiation by lighting the candles and starting a conversation which was limited only to the appreciation of the food. His long awaited interaction with his wife broke up when Shobha carried forward the conversation that paved a way to brighten up the atmosphere. They engaged themselves by playing a game which involved sharing of the secrets of their life every night. The game broke the ice between the couple and took them closer to each other, finally ending up with the shocking revelation that Shukumar

was present at the time of their baby's death and that he had held him close before cremation. Only through communication with each other were they able to realize that the grief of losing their baby adversely affected both of them.

The story titled *When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine* shows the importance of communication that is once again underlined. The story is set in the backdrop of the civil war of Pakistan and the fight of the Eastern front for autonomy. Mr. Pirzada a professor of Botany who lived in the three storied home in Dacca is now in Boston for research. Even though he spent few years in America he continued to write letters and send comic books to his seven daughters back home. The narrator of the story speaks:

"Each week Mr.Pirzada wrote letters to his wife, and sent comic books to each of his seven daughters, but the postal system along with almost everything else in Dacca, had collapsed, and he had not heard word of them in over six months." (*When Mr. Pirzada came to Dine,24*)

The relationship between Mr.Pirzada, Lilia and her family becomes very much intimate as he comes to their home for dinner and to know the updates on the eastern front of Pakistan. In due course of time a strong relationship rooted in them. Though they were of diverse nationalities on one hand and the war between India and Pakistan- on the other hand, Mr.Pirzada and Lilia formed a close bond between them. In the title story of the book *Interpreter of Maladies*, dormancy and the urge for communication is passionately revealed. Mr. Kapasi, a tour guide and the interpreter at a doctor's office met the family of Das a second generation Indian American family. At the very initial conversation itself Mr. Kapasi realizes that the couple lacked communication and are stuck up in a loveless marriage that reminds of his own grief. Mr.kapasi reflects:

"The signs he recognized from his own marriage were there –the bickering, the indifference, and the protracted silences." (*Interpreter of Maladies-53*)

He recollects how his married life went through a tough situation when they lost their child. His wife regretted his job under the same doctor whom she held responsible for the death of their child. More over his wife always underestimated his profession as an interpreter. The barrenness in their marriage was quite immense. There was no scope of sensuality in their physical relationship. He could realize the same monotony in Das couple. In order to break this void in his heart of hearts Mr.Kapasi infatuates Mrs.Das, but suddenly he fears silence:

"Ordinarily he sped back to Puri using a short-cut, eager to return home, scrub his feet and hands with sandalwood soap, and enjoy the evening newspaper and a cup of tea that his

wife would serve him in silence. The thought of that silence, something to which he'd long been resigned, now oppressed him." (*Interpreter of Maladies-60*)

The silence and the absence of communication in the marital lives of both Mr. Kapasi and Das couple made them inept to bring forth any fruitful social relations. Mr. Kapasi's expression of his pent up frustration shows that he is a sadist when he sternly questions Mrs. Das, "is it really pain you feel Mrs. Das, or is it guilt?" (*Interpreter of Maladies-66*). Had he communicated properly with his wife and patiently solved the problems, he would have been leading a cheerful life. Similarly Mrs. Das who is hiding behind her sunglasses and vanities and Mr. Das who engages himself in reading books prove that they spent little time with each other and did not share a bond with each other. As a result, a marital discord breaks in their lives, leading Mrs. Das to get involved in an illicit relationship that almost killed her conscience all the time. In her conversation with Mr. Kapasi she admits that: "I feel terrible looking at my children, and at Raj, always terrible. I have terrible urges to throw things away. One day I had the urge to throw everything I own out the window, the television, the children, everything. Don't you think it's unhealthy?" (*Interpreter of Maladies-65*). Lahiri is of the view that a harmonious relationship is rooted upon mutual understanding and trusts which can only be ensured with mutual interaction and doing away with the differences rather than silence and camouflaging the issues. It can be noticed that in *A Temporary Matter*, Shukumar and Shoba were able to come out of their grief and regain their marital bliss which was possible through communicating the unspoken truth. Ultimately their separation was only a temporary matter; whereas the Das couple failed to maintain the harmony in their marital life that led Mrs. Das to utter despair and eventually mess up their husband- wife relationship.

A Variance in Their Mode of Communication

Mr. Kapasi, the interpreter, communicates through spoken language. Mr. Das communicates through his photographs while Mrs. Das communicates visually, through her appearance and clothing. Written text and physical actions were also forms of communication that several characters touched on. These sort of separate methods of communication resulted in a lack of a common form of communication, which is discovered to be physical.

At the first outset, the Das family touring in India shows a relatively banal situation. When delving deep into their family as a whole it is noticed that something is missing between the Das couple. The two did not seem to communicate but occasionally argued like children, and did not talk a great deal. Not once did they exchange the signs of love and affection. A conversation between Mrs. Das and the Interpreter, Mr. Kapasi, takes place during most of the tour. Their conversation manifests the two ways through

which they communicated. Mr. Kapasi communicated primarily through spoken word signaling that he is an interpreter while Mrs. Das communicated visually. She applies nail polish to enhance her appearance and wears “a red-and-white-checked skirt that stopped above her knees, slip-on shoes with a square wooden heel, and a close-fitting blouse... decorated at chest-level with a calico appliqué in the shape of a strawberry” (851). Besides this, she communicates to Mr. Kapasi through the rear view mirror. “Her eyes met Mr. Kapasi’s in the rearview mirror” (854). This visual communication turned out to be an effective tool to Mrs. Das. She flirts through these two methods with Mr. Kapasi. Everything about Mrs. Das seems to be thoroughly constructed to communicate a specific idea. The color of red and the strawberry appliqué throughout her outfits communicates femininity.

Mr. Das is quite different in his method of communication. Mr. Das is a visual communicator in a sense, but he communicates through pictures and text. He carries a camera and a guidebook and often consults his guidebook and sometimes instructs by “reading from his book” (857). The guidebook may be Mr. Das’s form of Mr. Kapasi. Mr. Das takes several pictures during the tour. At one instance, their communication comes into conflict. When Mr. Das wants to take a picture, Mrs. Das complains, “why did you have to wear those stupid shoes?” Mr. Das said. ‘You won’t be in the pictures.’” (860). In this example, Mr. Das is yelling at Mrs. Das specifically because she is communicating in her own way and not communicating in his way giving a hint to not participate in the picture. This is more than a lack of communication between the two and a conflict in form of communication. A common form of communication must therefore be established in order to resolve the conflict in the story.

Mr. Kapasi and the monkeys provide two common forms of communication. Mr. Kapasi’s form of spoken communication does not work so well, it only seems to draw the two apart. Mrs. Das ends up flirting with Mr. Kapasi, and Mr. Das looks forward to further communication through other means, both writing and pictures in the mail but this friendly communication did not last long. Mrs. Das winds up by revealing a secret to Mr. Kapasi, which she “hasn’t been able to express... to anybody” (862). This makes the situation worse because Mrs. Das started drawing even closer to Mr. Kapasi and farther away from her husband. Mrs. Das also says “express” instead of “tell” or “say” because she does not feel that she expresses herself primarily in this way.

It is apparent that communication breaks down repeatedly in “*Interpreter of Maladies*,” often with heart-rending outcomes. Mr. Kapasi, the interpreter of maladies, as Mrs. Das calls him, lost his ability to communicate with his wife, and drink his tea in silence at night leading to a loveless marriage. He also lost his ability to communicate in some of the languages he learned as a younger man, except English, which he fears he does not speak as well as his children. Mr. and Mrs. Das do not communicate, not

because of a language barrier but because Mrs. Das hides behind her sunglasses most of the time and Mr. Das with his nose buried in a guidebook. The children do not listen to their parents, nor do they listen to Mr. Kapasi about the monkeys. All these frustrated ventures at communicating with one only paved way for outrageous feelings. The Kapasis are trapped in a failing marriage. The Dases are openly showing aversion to each other. The Das children become uncontrolled over their parents and everyone else. And Mr. Kapasi and Mrs. Das are unable maintain a level of friendship that they both may have wished for, if only they could speak with one another openly. When Mrs. Das loses Mr. Kapasi's address at the end of the story, it marks the termination of the possibility that they could reach out to each other and that it could be the definite end to all communication between them.

The Vicissitudes of Communication

Jhumpa Lahiri's story "Interpreter of Maladies" takes the reader to examine the difficulty of communication between adults and how the characters in the story had to fight isolation, guilt, separation, and misunderstanding.

Mr. Kapasi playing a dual role as the travel guide and interpreter of maladies is trapped in a comfortless marriage. Mr. and Mrs. Das do not interact and there is no bond with each other or their children. This failure to communicate extends into the relationships within the story that ends up in grievous moments. The turning point reaches when his life has been impacted by the death of his young son. Not only does he suffer from the loss of his son, but the resentment of his wife for his job with the doctor whom she blames for the death of her son. His wife separates herself from Mr. Kapasi and makes him feel like a failure because he has to work in this position. She does not talk to him or even listen. Her separation from him has left him searching for human connection. Lahiri threads the need to talk to and to connect with people into her story by showing that no matter where people are from they need that human correspondence. Humanity needs to communicate its messages in order to feel whole.

A *Real Durwan* is the story that depicts the plight of old women becoming the victims of despicable time of the expatriation of several Bangladeshis. Here, Boori Ma's fortunes quickly flip sided after the partition of Bengal. The story is an emotional description of the communication between the exiled citizens and the present society in which they now live in. Boori ma the sweeper of the stairwell of a building fabricates her possession of the wealth in the past but her present position as a sweeper never makes the residents of the building believe in her. The residents of the building call her as "Bechareh who

constructs tales as a way of mourning the loss of her family” (A Real durwan-72). She becomes an object of mock, pity and laughter which many times aroused her pain that she reflects in these words: “Believe me, don’t believe me. My life is composed of such grief’s you cannot even dream them.”(A Real Durwan-74). Ironically this society corners off the downtrodden and displaced people. They are always critically gazed by the host society. In spite of appreciating her best services, she is thrown out of the building and is accused of robbery, though she did not commit it. It is important to note that the story highlights the gaps of rich and the poor and that generosity and compassion between individuals can bridge the wide gap.

Jhumpa Lahiri very intricately enumerates the story *Sexy* about the pain of disloyalty and its deep effect on Rohin, a young boy of seven years old. It also uncovers many layers of intimate conversation between the characters. All the characters of the story converse with each other among which the conversation between Laxmi and Miranda, Miranda and Dev, Rohin and Miranda, and Laxmi’s cousin’s dialogue with her husband is presented sharply. Laxmi’s communication with Miranda is usually about her cousin’s tensed relationship with her husband who eloped with a woman whom he met on a plane, forgetting their sanctity of marriage. On account of this she goes infuriated and always reproaches him. Miranda becomes a baby-sitter for Rohin, Laxmi’s cousin. Her days with him make her realize the pain of a wife and the betrayal of his own parents. Rohin having seen his mother’s pain calls Miranda as “sexy” interpreting the word as “loving someone you don’t know” which stupefies Miranda. She is perplexed to see the impact of how an extramarital relation on a family completely shatters the harmony of its members. She could see the traces of it on the psyche of this unblemished young boy that has badly affected and lose his innocence. She finally resolves to break up her relationship with Dev. The communication between Rohin and Miranda is so powerful and vitalizing that she determines to take off a different direction in her life.

The story entitled *Mrs.Sen’s*, powerfully communicates the pain of exile through the conversation of Mrs. Sen, and an eleven year old boy Eliot. Mrs. Sen, the wife of a Bengali professor of Mathematics at America takes up the job of caretaker of Eliot, an American boy. She misses everything about her home and refuses to learn how to drive-the one activity her husband thinks will broaden her life in America. The only solace Mrs.Sen can find is the fresh fish and letters from her country. But this happiness did not last for long on account of Mr. Sen’s rudeness and dry behavior. The absence of good communication with his spouse dimmed the hopes of a good relationship. Eliot’s narration aptly illustrates the distancing between them: “They drove in silence, along the same roads that Eliot and his mother took back to the beach house every evening. But in the back seat of Mr. and Mrs. Sen’s car the ride seemed unfamiliar, and

took longer than usual.” (Mrs.Sen’s-126).The couple lacked warmth and commune in their relationship. Thus, the communication between Eliot and Mrs. Sen is mostly a nostalgic description of her home land and also the communication between Mr. and Mrs. Sen calls for better interaction and understanding of each other’s emotions.

Another very interesting story of the collection is *The Blessed House that* underlines the importance of effective communication between the newlyweds Sanjeev and Twinkle touching on some of the satirical implications. In reality, The Blessed house is not blest and a house not home. A house becomes home when people who live there respect each other’s sentiments and live in harmony which is absent in the case of Sanjeev and Twinkle, the lead couple of the story. Unfortunately, the ineffective communication between them causes major issues between them. Married after only four months of courtship, their moving in process is marred by growing pains. Twinkle’s gleeful possession with the Christian iconography left by previous tenants irks Sanjeev. Sanjeev is orderly and self conscious by nature while Twinkle as her name suggests is free spirited and very much fastidious. The tiny issues of conflict in terms of orderliness and nicety become deep impressions in the mind of Sanjeev as he is unable to communicate them. Hence, only an effective communication and a mutual understanding could shun away the troubles in the life of this newly married couple with different personalities.

The Treatment of Bibi Haldar is told from the view point of the women of Bibi’s village. Bibi is gripped by a mysterious illness for which the only cure is believed to be marriage. Her cousin Haldar and his wife determine her to be a damaged good and do not indulge her fanatasy of marriage. The conversation between Bibi and the surrounding neighbourhood remains her only hope .They sympathetically listen to her problems and strive to lessen her pain. Her pain bursts out many a times. Her cousin and his wife make her life much more miserable. The neighborhood women who are narrators of the story console Bibi time to time and give an ear to her outbursts. As true well wishers they always give her valuable suggestion to attract the prospective grooms. After the news of her pregnancy instead of spreading rumors or defaming her they helped her in the upbringing of the child. The story emphatically asserts the Indian culture of helping- hand neighborhood. Bibi’s silence over the atrocities committed on her by her cousin and his wife presents the grim picture of an amenable Indian woman who is subject to torture and bears everything silently. Had she raised her voice against her tormentors and come out openly against their decision of not getting her married her situation would have been different. Her mental disease due to her pent up frustration leads her to violent fits. She is very much afraid to reveal the name of the man who disgraced her and the cause of her pregnancy. Thus, Bibi’s story clearly is a pathetic description of the lamentable position of women in Indian society. It also underlines

the need for communication in the marginalized section of society in order to empower them.

The final story of Lahiri *The Third and Final Continent* as seen from the first person narrative wonderfully captures the immigrant experience and complications of arranged marriage. The narrator recounts the first six weeks of his life in America in 1969, balancing a new job, a new wife and a new country. While awaiting his wife's green card, the narrator lives in the spare room of an old lady-Mrs.Croft who is stuck by his kindness. The narrator acclimates to his new life, cherishing Cambridge and of his new beginning. However, he is nearly indifferent to the arrival of his wife, Mala. At first they are strangers. When he takes Mala to meet Mrs.Croft, a moment of intimacy and understanding between the two bridges their divide. The narrator then speaks from the present and marvels at the journey of his life. Their acquaintances with other Bengali friends not only made them familiar in a new land but also the communication with his son inspires him to overcome difficult situations.

CONCLUSION

The above study of the short story *Interpreter of Maladies*, Lahiri points out that communication is essential, both for societies and for individuals within society. Much of her writing is concerned with communication and its absence. Miscommunication or unexpressed feelings weigh on several characters, destroying their well-being. In a nut-shell, A Temporary Matter is the best example of secrecy taking its toll on a marriage. Shukumar and Shoba, lost in their grief, cease communicating with one another. Blackouts allow them the freedom to share secrets they never shared. They are unfailingly honest and can no longer maintain the illusion that their marriage is still viable. Mrs.Das tries to unburden herself by telling Mr.Kapasi the secret of Bobby's conception. But only Mrs.Das can absolve her of her guilt. At the end of the story, nothing has changed in their marriage because she is not able to communicate her lack of love for her family to any other than a stranger. Twinkle and sanjeev have different outlooks on life which cause initial discord between the newlyweds. Therefore, communication is necessary for healthy relationships and Lahiri employs it as a major theme in the *'Interpreter of Maladies'*.

In all her stories the character's maladies are the consequences of their ineffective communication or the communication breakdown and silence. Whether it be the relations between husband and wife or the feeling of being in exile, silence and marginalisation of the downtrodden society all the stories emphasize the power of communication for the individuals as well the society especially in the case of immigrants who suffer emotional isolation and cultural displacement and that is the reason she made the short story *Interpreter of Maladies* a symbol of her own existence along with others of the Indian immigrant social group. The beauty of *Interpreter of Maladies* is that she leaves the closure up to the

reader and creates a discourse in their sub-consciousness. She unreservedly gives interpretative freedom by placing each story carefully to provide the readers to absorb a balanced representation of the society she feels obligated and pleased to narrate. Brada William's quote is here worth considering: "a sense of exile and the potential for and frequent denial of human communication can be found in all of Lahiri's short stories."

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