



31

**INTERPRETER OF MALADIES: A DIASPORIC STUDY**

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**Abstract:**

*The present paper tries to analyze cultural and social themes that one faces in the fiction of Jhumpa Lahiri, one of the most dazzling authors of diaspora. The topic of culture is always a matter of interest especially when it has to do with an alien setting. Lahiri's characters represent different social walks of life and always find themselves caught in two different worlds, one that they have left behind and other in which they try to adjust and thus face a cultural conflict. This cross-cultural conflict is always present in most of her stories. The immigrants especially in America easily become accustomed to the tradition and culture and find it suitable to settle there but the craving for their homeland never goes from their head and heart. They see the America from the Indian perspective and it is the perspective which brings the conflicting thoughts though they get a better ambiance and opportunity.*

**Keywords:** Cultural Conflict, Diaspora, Immigration, Assimilation, Transnational, etc.

Jhumpa Lahiri's debut book, *Interpreter of Maladies: Stories of Bengal, Boston and Beyond*, is another milestone after Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*. Writers like Anita Desai, Kamala Markandaya, Jhabvala, Vikram Seth, and Salman Rushdie were born and brought up in India, though they are now living in England or America. Lahiri was born in London, of Bengali parents and grew up in Rhode Island, U.S.A. But her frequent visits to her parents' home city Calcutta has enabled her to give an honest and authentic picture of the lives of the Indians who have settled either in the USA or England.

The first story of the collection, *A Temporary Matter*, focuses mainly on marital alienation. Shoba and Shukumar are wife and husband. Shoba works in an office downtown where she searches for typographical errors. Shukumar is in the sixth year of his graduate school and would enter the job market the next year. He prepares his dissertation and goes to attend a conference in Baltimore on Shoba's insistence. While Shoba goes into labor three weeks before her due date and gives birth to a stillborn child. It has to be a cesarean. Shoba has changed drastically after the incident. Her love for Shukumar and caring attitude towards home has died down. Both have fallen out of love and are playing hide and seek with each other.

Their relationship continues to be formal. Shoba stays out putting in extra hours at work while Shukumar manages the household matters. They have never photographed, stopped attending parties, and went nowhere together, not confessed their feeling and disappointments, not exchanged ideas. Under such crisis a temporary matter crops up. The temporary matter is that their electricity would be cut off for an hour each evening for five days. This forces the couple to spend time together. Shoba begins a confession game between the two. She suggests, "How about talking each other something we've never told before."<sup>6</sup> Thus begins the journey of telling game. Shoba



tells him how she had stolen a look into his address book to see if he had written her address there. Shukumar in turn tells her how he had forgotten to tip the waiter when they had dinner for the first time and how the next morning he went all the way back just to tip the waiter. The whole affair turns into an exchange of confessions-the little ways they had hurt or disappointed each other. Shukumar also tells her how he ripped out a photo of woman from a fashion magazine and carried it in his books for a week when Shoba was pregnant.

The fourth night they walked carefully upstairs, to bed, feeling together for the final step with their feet before the landing, and making love with desperation they had forgotten. She wept without sound and whispered his name, and... he said hold me in your arms. All the while the reader has a feeling that the collapsing relationship between the two has a chance after all. They are coming closer but on the final day there is a blast. The electric company announces that the line had been repaired ahead of schedule and there would be no power cut on that evening. Shukumar is disappointed. But he keeps the room dark from eight p.m. and waits for the game. After the dinner, Shoba switches on the light and announces, "I have been looking for an apartment and I have found one." Living together act is over for her. She does not want to give herself any time for thinking and resolving the crisis. She takes the bold step of separation. A new Shoba seem to emerge who is prepared for an independent life. Shukumar is sickened to realize that the game of confession was purposely designed by Shoba only to make her matters easy. He then takes his turn and discloses something he had sworn he would never tell Shoba because he still loved her then. He tells the secret.

The story reflects the alienation and loneliness faced by the emigrants. The marriage bond, which is still considered sacrosanct in India, is slowly slithering down under the pressure of new needs under a different background. Nevertheless, one needs another's touch in an emotional crisis. That is why Shoba and Shukumar, failing to find any foothold of security, weep. The title story, "Interpreter of Maladies", is about the pain and guilt of a woman, Mrs. Das. It also sketches the character of Mr. Kapasi in a realistic and convincing manner. Mr. and Mrs. Das with their kids, Tina, Ronny and Bobby come to Orissa and visit Puri, Konark and Khandagiri, Udaygiri. The family lives in America. Every year they visit their parents who now live in Asansol. Mr. and Mrs. Das are complexive about their Indian origin and try looking as much American as possible. Mr. Das, in fact, is proud to be an American.

The couple quarrels on the issue of attending upon the kids. The husband is busy in clicking his camera and reading his travel guidebook. The lady is totally engrossed in her make-up and personal care. The children are on their own doing whatever they like. Mr. Kapasi is a travel guide as well as an interpreter of maladies. Being a doctor's assistant he translates and interprets the symptoms, pains and suffering of Gujarati patients to the non-Gujarati doctor. As a guide he takes the Bengali American couple to the Konark temple. On his way to the temple, Mr. Kapasi tells them about his other job, the job of an interpreter in a doctor's clinic. Mr. Das has never heard of anything like this. But Mrs. Das remarks that it is a romantic one, a big responsibility, as the patients are totally dependent on him. Mr. Kapasi has never received so much attention from any woman including his wife who had little regard for his career as an interpreter. She referred to his position by using the phrase 'doctor's assistant'. He, himself, has never thought of his job in such complimentary terms. To him it was a thankless occupation- a sign of his failing as he had dreamed of being an interpreter for diplomats and dignitaries, resolving conflicts between people and nations.





Mr. Kapasi is anxious to be alone with Mrs. Das and indulge in some private conversation. Mrs. Das, on the other hand, is interested in him as an interpreter of maladies. She even takes his address to send the photographs in which both of them are together. Mr. Kapasi's flights of happiness know no bounds. Mr. Kapasi is very happy. At Konark, they move together and engage themselves in seeing erotic sculptures while Mr. Das is busy with children in taking snaps.

This is further condensed when he interprets Surya's beauty and power in different postures in the niches of the temple facades. On their way back, Mr. Kapasi begins to dread the thought of dropping the family off. So he suggests visiting the hills at Udayagiri and Khandagiri. The family agrees to it. When they reach the hills, Mrs. Das refuses to get out of the car as she is tired. Whereas Mr. Das and the children go to the top of the mountain, Mrs. Das and Mr. Kapasi are left alone in the car. Mrs. Das comes to the front seat and sits beside Mr. Kapasi. Mrs. Das makes an astonishing revelation. She tells him the secret that Bobby, her third child, is not Raj's son. She tells him her relationship with her husband before and after marriage has very often left her lonely. She tells him that Bobby is the son of her husband's friend, a Punjabi gentleman who had come to stay with them for a week and he had made love to her in one afternoon when he learnt that a London based pharmaceutical company had hired him. Lahiri seems to suggest that the emigrant Indians are unable to get rid of their Indian consciousness that they should be honest and true to their married life. The concept of chastity haunts them like a ghost at noon. At the same time they cannot be westernized in their thoughts and feelings. This dichotomy is the predicament of the Indians settled abroad.

What is remarkable about these stories is that they only suggest future. The end of the stories is not rigid or fixed. They only indicate what might follow. This is the appeal of these stories. They have the wholeness of life within them. Lahiri is undoubtedly the first emigrant writer who is concerned with their maladies and tries to be an interpreter, of course, she is quite different from Mr. Kapasi. She is an artist and the artist's another name is an interpreter.

Throughout the tales in *Interpreter of Maladies*, Lahiri shows us characters that are in conflict, with themselves and with each other. Some of the stories have happy endings, some do not. We find characters like Mr. and Mrs. Das who are so distant from their Indian heritage that they need a tour guide, and we find Mrs. Sen, who sits on her floor every day, chopping vegetables in the same way she did in India, with the same knife she used in India. Love and tradition are always at the heart of the story, and the characters who find happiness are always those who can embrace their present circumstance while at the same time never forget their Indian roots.

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