



Rift in Marriages: A study of Family Dynamics in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*

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Abstract— *Jhumpa Lahiri is a writer of South Asian origin who was born and brought up in the United States. She debuted with her short story collection Interpreter of Maladies. The stories in this collection glance at the Indo-American diaspora. All the nine stories in this collection are aligned with the recurring patterns. The institution of marriage, romantic relationship and Indian family system vs American family pattern has been focused at length. The subtitle of the novel goes perfectly with the themes of the stories. Geetha Ganapathy-Dore notes that "Indian people, films, novels, beauty-queens, food and spirituality cross borders easily." She adds that Lahiri's collection was originally sub-titled 'Bengal, Boston and Beyond' (58) The three stories chosen for study reflect a modern world that witnesses the assimilation of different cultures and problem of immigrants while living in an ethnic group. "Temporary Matter", "Sexy" and "Interpreter of Maladies" have been chosen to make the study specific. All of these emphasize on the life and circumstances leading to the rift in marriage and relationships deficit of love. This work also reflects the diaspora experiences of the Indian immigrants belonging to the first and second generation. The lucidity of language and expression are quite commendable.*



Keywords— *Diaspora, culture, immigrants, ethnic, marriage and relationship.*

Jhumpa Lahiri is an Indian American author well known for her truthful representations of diasporic experience; she debuted with her short story collection *Interpreter of Maladies*, in 1999. Soon after its publication, the collection became *The New Yorker* magazine's best debut of the year, and won the O. Henry Award, the PEN/Hemingway Award and the prestigious Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 2000. Her second notable work, *The Namesake* (2003), was also well acknowledged by the readers. It was later adapted into a film by Mira Nair in 2007. This too came up as a *New York Times* Notable Book and similar impressive awards. Her second novel, *The Lowland*, 2013 turned to be a crowning accomplishment by being shortlisted for the 2013 Man Booker Prize. The focus of study is Lahiri's first notable work *Interpreter of Maladies*. All the nine stories in the collection delve deep into topics of romantic relationships and marriages of Indians and those Indians living as immigrants in America. The characters are in a dilemma in the adaptation of a new

culture, hybridity in the cultures, assimilation and related issues. These themes are well aligned to the plot of the story. Lahiri's collection was originally sub-titled as 'Stories of Bengal, Boston and beyond.' The word beyond meant not only the geographical extensions but the entities of time and space as well in the post-colonial time. In an interview with Bookforum Lahiri says, "They just represent human condition" (Lahiri, "Migration, Assimilation and Inebriation")

This research paper seeks to explore the ways Jhumpa Lahiri portrays the institution of marriage and relationships. The rift visible in marriages includes lack of communication, alienation, isolation, repression of desire, lack of love and care in the relationship. Lahiri depicts marriage and relationships as a kind of malady that reflects many symptoms and conditions when the ways of life are in trouble. One such story entitled *Interpreter of Maladies* from which the name of the entire collection *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) is derived. In this sequence, I have chosen

three short stories from this collection. Lahiri has created a sensation in the literary world by winning the Pulitzer prize for fiction in 2000 with her debut short story collection. Being an Indian American author winning the prize was a rare achievement. The media critics wrote continuously about it, "It is rare for a debut book, especially a short-story collection, to achieve international best-seller status and to win such major literary honours as the Pulitzer prize and the PEN Hemingway Award. Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* achieved these distinctions." (West 258)

Lahiri's works are experiments with several techniques of narration, nationalities and characters showing genders. It is interesting to note that the topic of marriage is crucial and is given a significant place in nearly every work of Jhumpa. In an interview with Patel "As an Indian the idea of marriage loomed large in my life. There was always an awareness of who had a 'love' marriage, who had a 'negotiation' marriage." (Lahiri, "Maladies of Belonging")

The political and cultural bridges between two countries affect individuals and their circumstances. Jhumpa Lahiri's elegant stories revolve around the lives of Indians navigating between the traditions and life style of the native land and the new post world. She has intertwined several stories in her first published collection '*Interpreter of Maladies*.' The failing relationship rift in marriages, struggle for survival in the host land, circle faced by woman (homemakers), worries to earn for livelihood in an alien world. The backdrop of the stories is in varied places of US and Bengal in India. The spice, humor and elusive details of her universal appeal can be felt by anyone who has an experience of living in exile outside the native place or the emotional imbalance of the immigrant.

The story entitled *A Temporary Matter* is based on the relation between a couple Shoba and Shukumar. The efforts and struggles they cope to sustain their relation is at the core of the story. Things were running swiftly till the day of Shoba's delivery approached. Shoba always encouraged Shukumar for better future prospects. "He hadn't wanted to go to the conference, but she had insisted; it was important to make contacts, and he would be entering the job market next year." (Lahiri 03)

Though the couple is soon to welcome their baby still Shukumar feels troubled and filled with anxiety imagining parenthood and the liabilities after it; the reason can be his being a student at the age of thirty-five where he is still working hard to complete his final chapters of dissertation. The situation of dual anxiety one of instability in the hostland and another of bearing the role of a husband and would be father. Marriage and relationship in the present scenario has been shown being easily affected by the futile happenings and trivial incidents in life. Lahiri has depicted the same while

portraying Shoba and Shukumar "While he returned to Boston it was over. The baby had been born dead. Shoba was lying on a bed, asleep, in a private room...Her placenta had weakened and she'd had a cesarean." (Lahiri 03)

Shoba looks complacent for Shukumar and his presence in the house. Now it was no longer a 'home' instead a three-bedroom house where two strangers were spending their days as if in exile. That one thing they had learned perfectly and with an expertise was ignoring each other. "He thought of how long it had been since she looked into his eyes and smiled, or whispered his name on that rare occasion they still reached for each other's bodies before sleeping." (Lahiri 05)

Was Shukumar to be blamed for the mishapening of Shoba? If he had been present that day the situation would be something else? This crisis in relationship becomes conspicuous in the Diasporic Milieu. Shukumar has lost the zeal to complete his thesis the family situation seems to pull him back instead of pushing. The void created in between them can be a consequence of the aloofness living as expatriates and having a limited social circle to share and trust. The same happened with Shoba, after the death of her baby she became indifferent towards her husband and she rarely has a family or friend there to open her heart to. The author shifts our attention to the transnational communities and the problem they face at times in these personal and professional adjustments. The existential rootlessness and alienation has gripped Shoba so hard that she has believed Shukumar to be her enemy. They had no longer the desire to go back to each other or no longer waiting with hated breath for the weekends. It seems that life has been in a pause that too cannot be retrieved. Shoba was treating her home as if it were a hotel. The scattered clothes, shoes and unorganized closet and pending bills doesn't trouble her anyone. "He couldn't recall the last time they'd been photographed. They had stopped attending parties, went nowhere together." (Lahiri 15)

Now, they both eagerly waited for the time of temporary electricity breakdown, which was the only time to exchange confessions for all the resentment and offences they had been practicing advertently or inadvertently. They need darkness to sustain their relationship. They can't gather courage to look into the eyes of each other and open their heart. "Something happened when the house was dark. They were able to talk to each other again." (Lahiri 19)

The liveliness in the relationship was extinct. The comfort and cozy presence of each other was no more there. Though they had survived a difficult time still it was nobody's fault. Even after the electricity was restored Shukumar insisted on turning off the lights for a swift conversation. They hadn't made any eye contact lately.

Darkness (electricity breakdown) in the house symbolizes the exchange of confessions, dining together and spending few moments with each other. Eventually the time of separation arrived. Shoba discloses her looking for an apartment where she can shift without him. "It sickened Shukumar, knowing that she had spent these past evenings preparing for a life without him." (Lahiri 21)

This relation was about to collapse, under these pressing circumstances he revealed the truth to Shoba that truth which she always wanted to keep a surprise. The day they lost their baby, he came late from Baltimore and held the baby 'boy', grieved before the cremation. He still loved Shoba hence he had kept it a secret all these days. They were still unaware of the crisis to be faced. Both were in a quandary, they were ignorant about what turn their relation is going to take, they were trying to find a way out. Still the corners of their mind were occupied with finding the flaws and complications that has brought them to the verge of separation. It was difficult to figure out there were things that lead them to weep together for the mistakes and reasons of this crisis.

The third story in this collection is entitled as *Interpreter of Maladies*. Mr. and Mrs. Das an American Indian family are on their tour to India with their three children. They had planned to visit the Sun Temple at Konark. Mr. Kapasi their tour guide who also worked as an 'interpreter of maladies' in the clinic of a doctor. Mina Das found his job noble hence she developed a fascination about the job of Mr. Kapasi, her inquisitiveness about the same. Neither Mr. Das nor Mr. Kapasi found anything about his job. He interprets the problems of Gujrati patients to the Doctor who fails to understand the language. Mr. Das found the job 'romantic' and a responsible one. Mr. Kapasi himself had never thought about his job in such complimentary terms. He rather found it a thankless occupation. This discussion leads him to realize Mr. and Mrs. Das to be an unsuitable match as he and his wife were. Mr. Kapasi becomes confidante of Mina Das who reveals her secret to him during their visit to the Sun Temple. She told him to be guilty of infidelity to her husband.

Mr. Kapasi developed a feeling of intoxication whenever he thought of the word 'romantic' uttered by Mr. Das. He started connecting to her; he frequently glances at her through the rear mirror. During lunch Mr. Das offered him a place with his family. "Mr. Kapasi, wait. There's room here." (Lahiri 54) The couple also insists Mr. Kapasi to get clicked with them in one of the photographs. Mrs. Das asks for his address to send him the copy of the pictures they had clicked. Mr. Kapasi's mind raced for further conversation that will later place in future between him and Mrs. Das. Lahiri has shown the couples' interest in India not

as if they were longing to be here but merely as a tourist visiting for sightseeing. This may be because they both were born and brought up in America. Once they reached the Sun Temple the family was busy in observing the detailing of the architecture the wheels, designs of birds and animals, carved erotic position of women, men and women etc. Mr. Kapasi was anxious to be alone with Mrs. Das while gazing the topless women carved in the exterior of the temple architecture. He noticed the back of the legs of Mrs. Das. Mrs. Das explored the temple being ignorant about her husband and kids. She asked question about the carved pictures of Surya. Mr. Kapasi's grew over enthusiastic while explaining things to her. He thought of his dream coming true "of serving as an interpreter between nations." (Lahiri 59) while conversing in letters with Mrs. Das. He began counting. Mrs. Das's impression soon vanished from Mr. Kapasi's mind. The story reaches its climax at the sightseeing at Udayagiri and Khandagiri. Here Mrs. Das discloses a secret to Mr. Kapasi that she for kept eight years from Mr. Das. In spite of living in America for her entire life still she is attached to the Indian roots that is the reason of her feeling guilty while revealing that the father of her second child, Bobby is not Mr. Das but one of his friend who once came to live with them in New Brunswick. The influence of the western counting has not faded the values of the Indian culture inside Mrs. Das. After hearing the truth "Mr. Kapasi felt a prickle on his skin." (Lahiri 62) Mrs. Das has made him a confidante because she was in pain all these years and she found today a right person to suggest some remedy to this pain. "Her confession depressed him, depressed him all the more." (Lahiri 66)

He was shocked rather surprised with her confession as he thought Mrs. Das to be a woman who is indifferent to her husband and children. At an age of 28, she has found life devoid of love. Perhaps Mrs. Das could never understand and feel the love which she desires for not in her husband nor in any other man because she knows since her childhood that she will marry her Raj Das when she will grow up to the age of marriage. This hollowness of their relation yet the motherly affection for Bobby (child from Mr. Das' friend) was the new image of Das family. "It is really pain you feel, Mrs. Das, or is it guilt?" (Lahiri 66) asks Mr. Kapasi

The readers have the same question in their mind. The oriental values that she inherited since her childhood made her guilty to accept her involving physically with her husband's friend and that too willingly. Since, she lived and has been brought up in American Diaspora. Moreover, being the second generation immigrant she has an influence of the west and its culture which made her to accept and move on with having an unemotional physical relationship with someone. As soon as she reaches the Indian ground,

she finds in Mr. Kapasi a person in whose presence she can confess. The cultural hybridity, identity crisis and alienation of being in a new land incline to such condition. The dream that Mr. Kapasi cherishes of carrying on the conversation with Mr. Das from States seem to shatter as he saw "the slip of paper with Mr. Kapasi's address on it fluttered away in the wind. No one but Mr. Kapasi noticed." (Lahiri 69)

He took a sigh of relief when at the end he saw the family being united leaving behind all the guilt and pains and differences in between. The couple actively participated in receiving Bobby from a group of monkey's attending him.

The third selection in this sequence is the story entitled *Sexy*. The story finds fifth place in the collection *Interpreter of Maladies*. *Sexy* moves around the life and culture of a Bengali couple and their immigrating to America. Their family backgrounds and life in the host land indicates their adjustments and adopting life in an unknown land. The features of modern Boston locality are kept in focus to show the unusual breaking of a relationship and the disintegration of a family. The protagonist of the story Miranda is shown comparing her life with Indian people, immigrated to America. Lahiri has contrasted the life of immigrants who feels alienated from their family and in this sequence they become aloof from their present place. The author wants to show that Americans are less family oriented than the Indians because of the lifestyle and culture they are accustomed to be since their childhood. Dev proves their notion wrong and gets involved in an extra marital affair with Miranda. In the later course of the story when Miranda realizes during a conversation with a small boy, Rohin that such a relation is quite inappropriate and she is trying to find happiness in someone else's space. She accepted that love doesn't mean to be sexy but being loyal and true to someone. In a conversation with Miranda Rohin reveals about his father, "He sat next to someone he didn't know, someone sexy, and now he loves her instead of my mother." (Lahiri 108) She realises through the life of Rohin and his mother whose husband is having an affair with another woman that she is doing injustice to the wife of Dev.

The story shows the present day love which is based on lust not true love and loyalty. As a result the conjugal bond too becomes weak. Miranda and Dev were enjoying a shallow love of lust while parallel to it goes the story of Laxmi's cousin and her husband who too was having an extra marital affair. "Imagine. An English girl, half his age" told Laxmi to her friend Miranda. Laxmi's cousin was experiencing a miserable time. Often Miranda feels guilty of ruining the married life of Dev and his wife. She tries to escape the conversation centered to Laxmi's cousin.

Dev visits Miranda's place on Sundays. Saturdays are the worst for her since waiting becomes unbearable. Once Dev hints that his wife resembles the famous actor Madhuri Dixit listing this Miranda is taken aback. Soon she is surrounded with an unknown fear of losing Dev when his wife arrives. She feels shy to share their relation with her best friend Laxmi. The concept of love, marriage and relationship in Indian context is quite different from that in an American setting. By getting involved in an extra marital affair, Dev has proved that he too is less family oriented as Americans are. He forgets the Indian values and orientations. Miranda's relatedness with Dev inclines her towards Indian things. During her visit to an Indian grocery store she wants to purchase something for Laxmi, but she fears that Laxmi will get a sense of her relation with Dev. Deep in her heart Miranda knew that this relation will be judged by the society. It will remain unacceptable by the people. Dev's wife will gather all the sympathies and she will be targeted as a 'second woman' who had ruined the life of a couple.

In view of the above study we can conclude that Lahiri depicts marriage as a malady or a desperate condition that reapers throughout the collection of short stories entitled *Interpreter of Maladies*. Here the author plays the role of an interpreter just as Mr. Kapasi who interprets the problems faced by the couple/spouse in a relationship. Detachment, alienation, lack of communication, isolation, disinterest in the household chores and being ignorant for each other are some of the symptoms that require attention. All the nine short stories in the collection *Interpreter of Maladies* are unique in its own way. The progression of the themes, issues associated with the conjugal bond and the extra- marital relationship occupies an important place. Lahiri has focused marriage "as the unifying theme for the collection and marriage is indeed a key element of most of the stories." (Brada 455)

The characters in her works are basically Indian Americans who have their made their way across the assimilation of the culture in an alien land. They had adopted the practices of the place they had immigrated to. With the passage of the time new challenges are faced by these characters in their professional and personal spaces. The inability of the characters to maintain their married life and relationship has been depicted in all the three short stories selected for study: "Frequent denial of human communication can be found in all of Lahiri's short stories and indeed are the defining, structuring elements of her short story cycle." (Brada- Willims 454)

In *A Temporary Matter* Shoba and Sukumar leads an indifferent life. They had suffered a lot after the death of their infant, leading to the breakdown of communication and

to divorce when the relation becomes crumbled to a greater extent. They had become strangers while dwelling in the same flat. The breakdown in communication is visible in the short story *Interpreter of Maladies* too. Here, Mrs. Das is seen showing a calculated behavior and seldom conversing with her husband. Mr. Das is ignorant of such an indifferent behavior. Similarly, in the marriage of Mr. Kapasi, he and his wife are unable to change the routine of their non-conversation. The problem of alienation among the characters in their married life is the common malady of marriage presented by Lahiri. "Alienation has become their lot. The absence of the sense of belonging that these creatures' experiences make them resolved to achieve communication." (Swarup et al. 2)

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