

## **The Malady of Bewildered Relationships In ‘Interpreter of Maladies’**

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Jhumpa Lahiri a second generation immigrant won the 2000 Pulitzer Prize for her debut collection of short stories titled, *Interpreter of Maladies: Stories of Bengal, Boston and Beyond*. Through her nine simple stories Lahiri subtly presents an in depth study of the intricacies of psychological struggle faced by married couples and their bewildered relationships. Out of the nine stories of *Interpreter of Maladies*, three are set in India and six are set in America, focusing on the lives of first or second generation Americans of Indian origin. Lahiri challenges the categorization of immigrant Indians, the cultural conflicts of East and West and the existential problems of modern man. All the nine stories of *Interpreter of Maladies* focus on the psychological condition, maladies of the first and second generation Indian Americans. Lahiri minutely details their varied experiences, maladies, angst, loneliness, identity crisis and existential problems. Jhumpa Lahiri “explores human relationships that exist in the complex network of ethnicity, nationality, identity, cultural assimilation and rejection as well as hybridity in the Bengali community in the United States.”<sup>1</sup>

‘A Temporary Matter’ the first story of the collection *Interpreter of Maladies* is about the misery of a married couple, Shukumar and Shoba, American citizens of Indian origin, who find it extremely difficult to communicate with each other after the still born death of their first child. The extremely sensitive issue has completely numbed the couple, all their expectations and planning to welcome the newborn have been totally crushed. Their dreams of parenting were shattered at the birth of the still born baby, this was an unbearable loss for them. The enormous grief of Shukumar and Shoba leads to a communication barrier between them, which greatly affects their relationship. They avoid each other and become detached and unconcerned about each other’s feelings. “They had become

experts at avoiding each other in their three-bedroom house, spending as much time on separate floors as possible.”<sup>2</sup> The communication barrier had become so grave an issue that Sobha had to resort to a game strategy to communicate to her husband about her intention to move out. Every day when there was a temporary power cut of one hour they would tell each other something they never told before. Communicating in the darkness without confronting each other was the only resort of expression of their inner feelings. The game is an escapist tendency of Shoba, it acts as a catharsis. “In the darkness of the power cut, the silences between them melt away. They could speak out their minds to each other.”<sup>3</sup>

Finally towards the end of the story Shoba declares her intention of leaving Shukumar and musters the courage to state that, she had been on the look - out for a separate accommodation and finally she had found one. Shukumar who was trying his best to cope with the tragedy and attempting to make his wife comfortable was stunned to hear his wife’s statement, it made him dizzy having come to know that his wife had been planning to live by herself without him. Jhumpa Lahiri very remarkably projects the two different psychological responses to the same situation. Shukumar had never discussed the pain directly but made constant allusions to the tragedy by talking about insignificant things like his wife’s habits, about preparing dinner, about the cab in which Shoba went to hospital, about his efforts to cheer up his wife, his wife’s shopping habits and throwing surprise parties, etc. These simple mundane memories are the means of emotional escape for Shukumar. Jhumpa Lahiri narrates the story in a realistic manner, using very limited dialogues. Shoba’s crisis was her inability to deal with her anger and frustration of losing the baby for whose arrival she had planned elaborately. She distances herself emotionally and psychologically from her husband in her state of disappointment and self pity. The couple is able to understand each other only after Shukumar confesses his knowledge of the baby’s sex which Shoba never wanted to know. The confession affects Shoba so intensely that she breaks down emotionally. Letting out the pent up feelings certainly acts like a catalyst

in some ways. The marital discord is thus skillfully shown to be a temporary matter just as the interruption in electric power supply has been.

Jhumpa Lahiri's 'Interpreter of Maladies' is a short story of the collection of the same title having manifold connotations within the text. It deals with the understanding and analysis of the problems of the protagonists. The interpreter of maladies in the story is Mr. Kapasi who works part time in a hospital. His job is to translate the patients' problems to the doctors and to see that the patients' ailments are rightly diagnosed and they receive the appropriate treatment, thus in a way he is responsible for their lives. His other profession is that of a tour guide, in the story he is giving a tour to Mr. and Mrs. Das an American Indian family and their three children. Lahiri's story concentrates on the strained relationship of the Americanized couple which she projects through the observations of Mr. Kapasi. Mrs. Lahiri marvelously brings out the conflict of the couple, their inability to share or communicate with each other with the help of ordinary mundane incidents. Mrs. Das seemed to be engrossed in her own activities least concerned about her husband or children, her indifference and constant bickering with Mr. Das makes Kapasi comment that the Das couple behaved like older brother and sister of their children not like parents. Mr. Kapasi aptly titled as the interpreter of maladies carefully scrutinizes the Das couple's incompatibility, their lack of communication, their conflict and their hostility and attempts to analyze the situation as he himself has tremendous communication problems with his own wife and was living in a loveless marriage like the tourists. He is familiar with the awkward situation and its maladies as, "the signs he recognized from his own marriage were there - the bickering, the indifference the protracted silences."<sup>4</sup> Mr. Kapasi like Mrs. Das is alienated from his own spouse, suffers from communication problems and lives a disoriented life. His wife's intense sorrow at the loss of their young son and her anger towards Mr. Kapasi for working as an interpreter for the doctor who was unsuccessful in saving their son, are the factors responsible for their isolation from each other. The interpreter of maladies has no malady for his personal problems other than to languish in a meaningless, loveless

married life. In his conversation with Mrs. Das he expects to find a friend as she appeared to be the only person who seemed to understand and respect his profession. Both of them shared similar issues of communication problems and were unable to connect with their respective spouses; they were lonely and isolated, suffering from a sense of alienation and aloofness. Thus they could bond naturally and understand each other's situation. The conversation between the two develops a link, a connection, and a bond which both of them longed. Both Mr. Kapasi and Mrs. Das suffered from respective psychological dilemma, lived with their partner with communication barriers. The story can be interpreted as the psychological issues of the immigrants, their existentialism and quest for identity and a longing for psychological connect.

Jhumpa Lahiri's portrayal of the characters' intricacies while highlighting their serious communication issues is commendable. Simple plots are used to bring out the malady of confused, disorientated relationships of couples. The main bonding factor in a marriage is communication, failure of which is the cause of misunderstanding and loneliness. The story excellently and in a very delicate manner analyses the institution of marriage and the maladies that couples silently suffer. Lahiri subtly indicates miscommunication as the warning sign of the malady of marriage. The other indicator is their careless attitude towards their children which is presented from Mr. Kapasi's perspective. Mr. Das however seems ignorant of the problems of his relationship, of his wife's attitude, of her detachment, etc. which are closely noticed by Mr. Kapasi. Mr. and Mrs. Das over a period of eight years of marriage have lost interest in each other; they no longer seem to love each other yet they with their three children, Tina, Ronny and Bobby who are on a visit to India on a holiday. All the love, understanding and trust they had before the illicit relationship simply seemed to have disappeared. Mrs. Das's behaviour can be because of her stress of withholding a secret from her husband. She considers Kapasi to be the right person to confess her secret of adultery, an extra marital affair with her husband's friend and a child born out of that

relationship. She expects Mr. Kapasi to provide her with a remedy for her inner conflict and stress. She draws a strange sense of relief from her psychological pain after her confession about the brief affair. Mrs. Das discloses to Kapasi that one of her sons is not her husband's child and asks Mr. Kapasi for his help with this malady, her secret. The secret had been with her for seven long years and finally she could confess it. The only remedy that came to Kapasi's mind was that she should be honest and tell the secret to Mr. Das, however he does not suggest that. Kapasi questions her whether she feels agonized or remorseful about the fact of her adultery. Mr. Kapasi's question irritates Mrs. Das as she expected sympathy and a remedy for her tension. She walks away from him to join her family. Surprisingly her confession has a more far-reaching effect than expected. She is no longer the brooding and disinterested woman, she is released from her load of guilt for the first time in seven years. A sense of guilt was responsible for the lack of communication between Mrs. Das and her husband. Once she confessed her pent up feelings were let out and she felt relaxed. Mrs. Das's quest abruptly seemed to have ended. The interpreter of maladies, Mr. Kapasi has resolved Mrs. Das's problem merely by listening to her confession. Jhumpa Lahiri lays emphasis on communication problems of individuals. She does not concern herself much with geographical barriers which are visible but with the invisible barriers which are responsible for conflicts and stress. "Though the story ends on an optimistic, open end it is doubtful whether they will remain together forever, share and communicate accompany each other forever. But the confession unites them and restores their faith in marriage."<sup>5</sup>

Jhumpa Lahiri's careful examination of the gender roles in India and their reversal in the American Indians is interestingly portrayed in the story. Mrs. Das represents the typical American Indian with Americanized characteristics. She is reluctant to shoulder the responsibility of her husband and children. Several insignificant incidents are used in a very significant manner to reveal the character of Mrs. Das. She reluctantly takes her daughter to the washroom, blatantly refuses her husband's

requests to join him in sightseeing on several occasions and mocks at his enthusiasm for tourism. She most of the time during the sightseeing trip isolates herself from her husband and children; rather than being an encouraging and enthusiast mother she simply moves about in a detached manner. Mrs. Das does not represent the stereotyped Indian woman who invariably shoulders all the responsibilities of her family. However, Jhumpa Lahiri is not concerned with justifying or propagating any particular cultural values, she is merely presenting a cultural perspective. Her stories represent both the ethnic and Western cultural societies. The story is an interpretation of hybridity, diasporic struggle and relationships. “Jhumpa Lahiri’s novels deal with issues that appear banal and every day but raise questions about culture, identity, the position and condition of the subject in an Americanized neocolonial world.”<sup>6</sup>

All the stories in the collection, *Interpreter of Maladies* deal with simple ordinary events but are subtly concerned about much serious aspects of relationships. Jhumpa Lahiri’s collection of short stories is an in depth study of the cultural borders both seen and unseen which the characters have to violate in order to find their real self. Thus psychological conflict is an integral part of her fiction. The internal struggle is between a character and his/her own confusion, fears and existential quest. “Communication is the undercurrent theme of ‘Interpreter of Maladies’. The characters in the stories are tormented by maladies which accentuates the need for communication.”<sup>7</sup> Mr. Kapasi and Mrs. Das lead unhappy married lives because they cannot communicate without restraint with their respective spouses. The delicate inexplicable nuances of bewildered relationships are brought out with great ease of narration and sensitivity of emotions by Jhumpa Lahiri, the Pulitzer Prize winning writer.

**Works cited:**

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