

Identity Crisis, Ethical Selection and Ethical Consciousness in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*¹

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Abstract

Jhumpa Lahiri's short story *Interpreter of Maladies* describes the Indian American couple Mr. and Mrs. Das' visit to the land of their ancestors. Mrs. Das confides in Mr. Kapasi, the car driver and interpreter of maladies, that her husband has not sired the youngest son and seeks for a cure of psychic pain. This paper analyzes its ethical features from the perspective of ethical literary criticism. Specifically, it sees the interpreting of maladies as the major ethical line of the work and tries to decode such ethical knots as ethical environment, ethical choice, ethical identity, and ethical consciousness. Jhumpa Lahiri proposes the ethical burden as a cure for people in modern society in need of malady interpretation.

Keywords: Jhumpa Lahiri; *Interpreter of Maladies*; identity crisis; ethical selection; ethical consciousness

1. Introduction

In 2000, the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction was awarded to South Asian Indian American novelist Jhumpa Lahiri, who won the unanimous recognition of the judges for her collection of short stories, *the Interpreter of Maladies*. Before that, she also won many awards, such as Hemingway Award, New Yorker's Best Debut of the year and so on. Michiko Kakutani of New York Times commented that Lahiri announces herself as a wonderfully distinctive new voice.... [She] chronicles her characters' lives with both objectivity and compassion while charting the emotional temperature of their lives with tactile precision. She is a writer of uncommon elegance and poise...a precocious debut.² The title story, *The Interpreter of Maladies*, also won the O. Henry prize and was selected as the best short story in America in 2000. The critic

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² <https://www.litlovers.com/reading-guides/13-fiction/486-interpreter-of-maladies-lahiri?start=2>

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Sebastian Sdb said that “the story reveals how guilt ridden people like Mrs. Das seeks remedy for their ailments in the wrong place” (4). Mridul Bordoloi analyzes the protagonist’s migration dilemma from the perspective of cultural dislocation and home consciousness (28). Other scholars believe that “the interpreter of Maladies” is the author’s diagnosis and analysis of the life problems of Indian ethnic groups (Jin 203). Moussa Pourya Asl suggests that “What is notably absent in the scholarship is a study of the complexities of identity formation and the production of particular forms of subjectivities in Lahiri’s stories.” (3)

Lahiri tells the story of a Das couple (Raz and Mina), who were born in the United States and descended from Indian immigrants, returning to their parents’ hometown India to visit relatives with their three children. Lahiri’s writing reflects the writer’s concern for the Indian ethnic group in the United States and represents the voice of the Indian ethnic literature. “The rise of ethnic literature represents a demand for ethical reconstruction, which is essentially an ethical constitution” (He & Nie 9-10). During their visit to the Sun Temple, Mrs. Das told taxi driver Mr. Kapasi about her own adultery and the birth of an illegitimate child. She confessed her secret for eight years and tried to get a good treatment for mental illness from Kapasi, an interpreter of maladies. However, Kapasi, who can only interpret the physical pain, could not cure her inner pain, just as he and his wife could not get rid of the pain of losing their child. From the perspective of literary ethical criticism, along the ethical main line of "malady interpretation", this essay analyzes the ethical theme of the story by reproducing the wrong ethical choice in the ethical environment, depicting the ethical identity crisis and ethical confusion with the Sphinx factor conflict, and combing the return of ethical consciousness after ethical reflection.

2. The Wrong Ethical Selection

Ethical Literary criticism holds that “literature is essentially an ethical art... The objective ethical environment or historical environment is the basis of understanding, interpreting and evaluating literature” (Nie 2014: 13) Lahiri tells a story of moral anomie and ethical dislocation in essence. By showing modern people’s “psychological diseases”, the author shows his concern for individual living situation. In order to see through the anomie and dislocation of the protagonist, we must first understand the ethical environment of the story. In fact, what readers see is a panoramic picture of Indian American immigrant families lacking love, care and understanding.

As the second generation of Indian Americans, Mr. Das is homesick for India, but he has too much estrangement from his wife. Although they accompany each other, they are like passers-by. At the beginning of the novel, it says, “At the tea stall Mr. and Mrs. Das bickered

about who should take Tina to the toilet.” (49) As parents, they pass the buck on who should take their child to the toilet. Neither of them is willing to spend a little time on their own, and they do not show any love for their daughter. Finally, Mr. Das mentioned he had taken a bath for her yesterday as an excuse to leave the job to Mina. Even on the way to the toilet, Mina “didn’t hold the little girl’s hand” because she was reluctant to do these things. To a certain extent, this reflects that Mrs. Das did not fulfill her duty of caring for children, and also destroyed the normal human relations. Why are mothers so indifferent to their children? To further understand the reasons behind this, it is necessary to return to the ethical scene at that time, examine the reasons for this behavior from her standpoint in the objective historical context, and make a reasonable explanation from the moral level.

According to Ethical Literary Criticism, we should emphasize “the returning to the ethical scene of history and interpreting literary works from the ethical standpoint of that time” (Nie 2014: 14). Mr. Das and his wife are descendants of Indian immigrants. “The family looked Indian but dressed as foreigners did” (49). Born in the United States, they are proud of their identity. But they are inevitably influenced by Indian culture, most obviously their marriage. Since their parents are good friends, they naturally hope that the two young people will be united, so they got married when they were young. Although they have been educated in the United States for many years, they cannot escape from the traditional Indian arranged marriage. It can be seen from the story that there is not much happiness for the marriage arranged by the parents, but too much helplessness and pain.

At the same time, they have the sense of cultural vagrancy in a foreign country. Their marriage can be said to be a wrong choice for both of them. Due to the hardship of immigrants’ life and the gap between eastern and Western cultures, their life is limited in a small circle. The husband Das works all day and is busy making a living, while the wife Mina is occupied by household chores such as daily necessities. After they are far away from their parents, they have no place to talk about their sufferings and no friends to communicate with each other. The objective external environment foreshadows the protagonist's wrong ethical choice. It was in this objective environment that Mina had an affair with Das’ friend and was pregnant with his child. “She made no protest when the friend touched the small of her back as she was about to make a pot of coffee, then pulled her against his crisp navy suit. He made love to her swiftly, in silence, with an expertise she had never known.” (69) Mina’s indulgence in adultery is obviously an immoral ethical choice, which results in ethical confusion and tragedy. “Once a person is driven by primitive instinct, all kinds of moral norms established on the basis of rationality will be destroyed, and man will return to the era of beasts. This is not the liberation of human nature, but the loss of human nature.” (Nie 2014: 39) when facing the aggression of

Das' friends, Mina does not resist the temptation of desire and also loses her rational judgment that she can't cheat and betray, which destroys the existing moral and ethical norms and leads to the loss of human nature. What is more terrible is that they had an affair with each other and gave birth to their illegitimate son Bobby. He was like the scarlet letter "A" hanging on Hester's chest, constantly reminding Mina of her betrayal, making her feel guilty and guilty forever.

Mina's cheating behavior can be interpreted and analyzed by Sphinx factor. Ethical Literary criticism holds that "in the ethical sense, human being is an existence of sphinx factor, which is composed of human factor and animal factor. The Sphinx factor is the core content of ethical expression in literary works" (Nie 2014: 38).

The so-called human factor is the reason of human being's existence, whose core is rational will, which is reflected in the compliance with ethical order and ethical taboo. The animal factor is human's animal instinct, which is an irrational factor. Its core is natural will, which is reflected in people's desire for different desires. If the human factor controls the animal factor, people will become people with ethical consciousness; on the contrary, if the animal factor overcomes the human factor, people will be more reflected in the loss of ethical consciousness, the lack of morality and so on. Behind Mina's infidelity, it actually reflects the conflict between rational will and free will, and the opposition between human factor and animal factor. "The Sphinx factor is the core of understanding literary works. Different combinations and changes of Sphinx factors will lead to different behavioral characteristics and personality expression of characters in literary works. It forms different ethical conflicts and shows different values of moral education." (Nie 2014: 38) In this story, Mina gradually blurs her rational judgment of life in the long-term tedious affairs of her family life, and her character also changes. Therefore, in the face of infidelity, we can't take moral choice. Human factors immediately lose control in the conflict with animal factors. Free will and irrational will have the upper hand. Mina acquiesces in her betrayal, which leads to ethical conflict, and thus loses her ethical identity in the wrong ethical selection.

3. Identity Crisis and Ethical Chaos

As suggests by Prof. Nie, "Ethical choice is not only the choice of how to be a person in a specific environment or context, but also the construction and confirmation of a person's identity. Ethical choice activities are often determined by people's identity. People with different identities will make different choices, and different choices will construct new identities" (Nie 2020: 77). In fact, readers can see that the ethical issues depicted in the story are actually generated and developed around the constant change of the protagonist's ethical identity. Mrs. Das, Mina, had adultery with a friend from Punjab and gave birth to her

illegitimate son Bobby, which seriously violated ethical taboos and led to confusion of ethical identity. “The existence of ethical taboo guarantees the existence of family and society” (Nie 2014: 38).

On the contrary, the destruction of ethical taboos will inevitably lead to the chaos of normal ethical order and moral relationship. It is obvious and demonstrated clearly in Sophocles’ *Oedipus the King*. Similarly, the adultery committed by Mina is also a violation of ethical taboos. From the perspective of ethical literary criticism, this is an ethical event with turning point significance, which makes the ethical identity of the protagonists and the ethical relationship between them change fundamentally.

Mina has been suffering from adultery since she gave birth to her illegitimate son Bobby. As she confides to Kapasi, the interpreter of Maladies, “I feel terrible looking at my children, and at Raj, always terrible. I have terrible urges, Mr. Kapasi, to throw things away. One day I had the urge to throw everything I own out the window, the television, the children, everything.” (68) It can be seen that Mina’s inner world is on the verge of collapse. As Raj’s legitimate wife, she gave birth to Bobby with Raj’s friend, which is obviously not allowed by law and ethics. Mina’s behavior not only confuses her own ethical identity, but also confuses her ethical identity in family. Raj had no idea that one of his sons was not his own, but someone else’s son. He had no idea that his wife had an affair with his friend, and that he was the Indian fellow who exchanged photos every Christmas. Mina’s infidelity makes her lose her dream and expectation of life, just in the boredom and pain day after day. “He looked at her, in her red plaid skirt and strawberry T-shirt, a woman not yet thirty, who loved neither her husband or her children, who had already fallen out of love with life” (68). It can be said that the cheating makes Mina fall into a desperate ethical dilemma.

In despair, Mina lost her passion for life. During the journey, she was not willing to care for her children, nor was she interested in chatting with her husband. “She sat a bit slouched at one end of the back seat, not offering her puffed rice to anyone” (53). Along the way, she was just passing the time with nail polish, and even the scenery along the way could hardly attract her attention. When she heard that Kapasi was working as an interpreter of maladies, she changed her indifferent attitude and showed great interest. “Mrs. Das said dreamily, breaking her extended silence. She lifted her pinkish brown sunglasses and arranged them on top of her head like a tiara. For the first time, her eyes met Mr. Kapasi’s in the rearview mirror: pale, a bit small, their gaze fixed but drowsy.” (56) She then spoke enthusiastically with Mr. Kapasi, handed him gum and asked him to talk about the work of the disease interpreter. Mina thinks that Kapasi’s work is “romantic”, “interesting”, “too cool”, and even more

important than that of a doctor. Mina thinks highly of Kapasi's work because, in her opinion, explaining illness can help patients recover. More importantly, she needs to accept the explanation and treatment of mental illness. As a matter of fact, for Kapasi, explaining the disease is "just a thankless occupation" and "he found nothing noble in interpreting people's maladies" (57). He even thinks that "this job is a sign of his failings". (57) Because when Kapasi was young, he was full of ambition, taught himself many languages, and dreamed of translating for diplomatic envoys and religious dignitaries, calming the confrontation between countries and nations, and mediating the disputes that only he could understand the opinions of both sides. But after his parents arranged his marriage, it changed completely. Especially after his first son died of illness and his second and third children were born one after another, the pressure of survival suddenly increased. In order to support his family, he had to drive a taxi, explain diseases and other jobs, and gradually forgot the language he learned when he was young.

Mina's interest and praise in disease interpretation surprised Kapasi. She mentioned the word "romantic" to Kapasi, but her own marriage was not romantic at all. "Her sudden interest in him, an interest she did not express in either her husband or her children, was mildly intoxicating." (59) Kapasi began to look at himself in the rearview mirror, secretly congratulating himself that he put on the gray suit when he went out in the morning. He constantly tells Mina the story of disease explanation, and their conversation seems to be a "secret language" between them. The lunch time he usually looked forward to was a disappointment for him, because even at lunch he was reluctant to be too far away from Mina. Kapasi's intoxication culminated when Mina asked him for her home address. "She would write to him, asking about his days interpreting at the doctor's office, and he would respond eloquently, choosing only the most entertaining anecdotes, ones that would make her laugh out loud as she read them in her house in New Jersey." (61) Kapasi's fantasy of happy communication with Mina in the future stems from his confusion of ethical identity in the family. In the face of the disillusionment of his ideal, the unhappiness of his career, the misfortune of his marriage and the premature death of his son, Kapasi could not get the happiness of his family life, so he had to face life in pain. At the same time, after the death of their son, the Kapasi couple lacked communication and love, and their marriage life was in name only. And Mina's words awakened his sleeping fantasy of the future and made him feel the joyfulness of life. It's the same pleasure he felt a few months ago when he was able to read a French or an Italian sonnet fluently. "In those moments Mr. Kapasi used to believe that all was right with the world, that all struggles were rewarded, that all of life's mistakes made sense in the end." (60)

As the story continues, Kapasi's fantasy and desire continue to ferment, and he has a subtle feeling for this unhappy woman, which actually reflects his confused ethical identity consciousness and his transcendence of ethical norms. Kapasi lacks his wife's warmth at home, and Mina lacks her husband's love too. They feel pity for each other. He led the Das family to visit the temple of Konarak Mountain, watching the wheel of life and appreciating the sculpture. He was especially gratified that Mrs. Das was "very fascinated" by it. "He had never admired the backs of his wife's legs the way he now admired those of Mrs. Das, walking as if for his benefit alone. He had, of course, seen plenty of bare limbs before, belonging to the American and European ladies who took his tours. But Mrs. Das was different. Unlike the other women, who had an interest only in the temple, and kept their noses buried in a guidebook, or their eyes behind the lens of a camera, Mrs. Das had taken an interest in him." (63) Kapasi even longed to be alone with her and continue their private conversation, while he was nervous beside her. He is eager to write to each other about different things in the future. Fortunately, the piece of paper with the address is still in the straw bag. "When he pictured her so many thousands of times away he plummeted, so much so that he had an overwhelming urge to wrap his arms around her, to freeze with her, even for an instant, in an embrace witnessed by his favorite Surya" (65). But when Mina starts walking, Kapasi has no chance to express his attachment to Mina. Kapasi calculated roughly that he would receive a letter from Mina within six weeks. Thinking that the trip was about to end, he didn't want to wait for six weeks immediately. Instead of taking a shortcut, he proposed to visit the hills at Udayagiri and Khandagiri, which was naturally approved by Mina and others. Kapasi's series of wishful thinking behavior and fantasy can be said to be a lack of rational thinking, but also the lack of ethical awareness. Whether Mina's real physical infidelity or Kapasi's inner infidelity impulse, to a certain extent, are the embodiment of their own ethical identity confusion and chaotic ethical consciousness.

4. The Returning of Ethical Consciousness

"The fundamental purpose of literature is not to provide entertainment for human beings, but to provide moral examples for human beings to understand society and life from an ethical perspective, to provide moral guidance for human being's material and spiritual life, and to provide moral experience for self-improvement." (Nie 14) In the story, Lahiri describes the life of Indian American immigrants, depicts the protagonist's wrong ethical choice and chaotic ethical identity, and calls for the return of ethical consciousness. No matter Mina, Kapasi, Das or his friend, they are all "patients" in modern society. They need psychological treatment, help from disease commentators, and return to ethical consciousness through ethical reflection, so as to provide moral guidance for human life. As Madhoo Kamara suggests, "Lahiri's stories are the impressive exploration of the human conditions as it shapes and is shaped by the varying textuality of the human personality" (Kamara 129).

In the story, Mina confides her secret to Kapasi expectantly, and is eager to seek help from the disease narrator of the same age as her father. But she does not get any explanation and comfort, because Kapasi, as the disease interpreter, only plays the role of explanation and communication between doctors and patients with language barriers. As for how to treat the mental illness caused by derailment, he is obviously powerless. “She did not resemble the patients in the doctor’s office, those who came glassy-eyed and desperate, unable to sleep or breathe or urinate with ease, unable, above all, to give words to their pains” (71). However, Kapasi still decides to help Mina. He thinks that honesty and frankness may be the best strategy. He also needs to ask Mina whether she is suffering or guilty. Mina was disappointed with Kapasi’s helplessness, but when facing his rhetorical question, she was even more intolerable and had a sudden insight. “She turned to him and glared, mustard oil thick on her frosty pink lips. She opened her mouth to say something, but as she glared at Mr. Kapasi some certain knowledge seemed to pass before her eyes, and she stopped” (69). Mina didn’t say anything more, because it was superfluous. She opened the car door and staggered up the mountain. Soon she came to the place where Mr. Das wanted to take a picture, the stone chamber of monks’ hard work. Mina failed in seeking medical treatment, but she resolutely decided to return to her husband and children. This actually reflects that she is already treating psychological diseases. Perhaps, the best way to treat her inner diseases is to recover the family’s affection and warmth and reconstruct the family’s ethics and morality.

At this time, the Das family was about to take a group photo when they found that Bobby was missing. Mina harshly questioned them, contrary to her previous indifference to the children, which further shows that Mina’s inner world has undergone a huge change. When you find that Bobby is being besieged by monkeys, Mina is very anxious. She asks Kapasi to help save the child. Kapasi quickly drove away the monkey and brought Bobby. Mina quickly bandaged Bobby’s knee wound and took out a comb to clean his hair. At the moment, Mina’s great concern for her son Bobby shows that she has recovered her ethical responsibility and obligation as a mother, and also reflects maternal love and warmth. Just as Mina pulled out her comb from the straw bag, the piece of paper with Kapasi’s address was also taken out and floated away in the wind. However, no one but Kapasi noticed the scene. Indeed, this piece of paper, which once carried Mina’s great fantasy, no longer has any value from the moment when she has no hope of getting psychotherapy. Mina finally got the returning of ethical consciousness with the moral sublimation of self-discovery, and found the universal ethical norms of current life.

Similarly, after experiencing this special short-term emotional desire, Kapasi also realized the true meaning of life. At the end of the story, it says, “knowing that this picture of

the Das family he would preserve forever in his mind.” (74) After this trip to the temple, the Das family transformed from a fragmented family to a complete one, from a lack of warmth, care and understanding to a harmonious family. This is the family life that Kapasi should have. After eight years of suffering, Mina can resolutely return to her warm family. Why can't Kapasi find his happy family? For Kapasi and his wife, as long as they get rid of the pain of losing their children and liberate themselves from the “quarrel, indifference and long-term silence”, they can also find a good way to solve family problems and treat mental diseases.

“Literature is a unique form of expression of ethical concepts and moral life in a specific historical stage, and literature is essentially an ethical art.”(Nie 2014: 11) Through her story writing, Lahiri reflects various diseases and problems in the real life of the descendants of Indian immigrants in the United States, shows the ethical concepts of a specific historical era, reveals the wrong ethical choices of the protagonists in the novel, and depicts the chaotic ethical identity they encounter, as well as the return of the ultimate ethical consciousness. Just as Rani Neutill suggests, “Lahiri’s *Interpreter* does the work of passing on an awakening of loss to others, as an ethical burden of survival” (Neutill 129). It is true that Lahiri’s *Interpreter* provides a good medicine for the patients in modern society to treat their mental diseases.

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