

## Reading Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* from Diaspora Perspective

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### Abstract

Jhumpa Lahiri's short story collection *Interpreter of Maladies* presents a handful of characters whose situation is similar to diaspora conditions. Loss of identity and realisation of loss of belonging are two nagging problems of the diaspora community. Most of the characters in this collection are in away isolated from the mainstream living either because of their own condition or because of the one imposed by the society. Several ailments one comes across in this collection possibly could have only one treatment which is the unconditional love towards the affected as in the case of Bibi Halidar.

**Keywords:** Jhumpa Lahiri, *Interpreter of Maladies*, Diaspora- loss of identity- belonging nowhere feeling- ailments- sufferings- imposed by the society- freedom from clutches- unconditional love- correct interpretation of the sickness.

### Introduction

This paper is an attempt to explore the quintessence of human relationship under the shade of culture, as exhibited by Jhumpa Lahiri, in her debut short story collection *Interpreter of Maladies*. The characters portrayed in this collection strive hard either to establish a relationship or to free from the clutches of one. According to Lahiri the Indian society is still viewed as the one that nurtures relationships, whereas the western world, influenced by the consumer world, is unwilling to pester with a relationship beyond a limit. Lahiri is much preoccupied with her insistence for the need for humanness in both the societies than the diasporic themes like loss of identity, survival against the threats of new culture and acceptance of a different socio-political milieu. Some of these stories take place in India and some others in America exposing the diasporic mind set of the author. She strongly believes that 'love and care' is the elixir for all the maladies that is afflicting the society.

Some maladies interpreted in this collection are real and some are either feigned or forced. Boorima, an East Bengal refugee who acts as a *durwan* (house keeper) in a house complex and Bibi Haldar are normal humans but are victims of wrong interpretation by the society. Both Boorima and Haldar try their best to establish normalcy but estranged by the people near them. Lahiri also explores the marital relationship of some couples who were ready to be freed from the bond. What intrigues more is that both the arranged and love marriages head towards one destination called boredom. The extra marital affairs of some men and women as told in these stories, diagnose the absence of intimacy among relations. One can as well assume that Lahiri is of the view that intermingling of culture may lead to breaking of faith and normalcy in human life which she symbolically conveys in the titular story. The changed global scenario has given women the confidence to face the world alone. The western society has not found anything abnormal for a woman to lead a life independently without marrying, whereas the Indian society advocates 'Marriage' as a cure for all the maladies. It is not the bodily pleasure alone that counts but the familial relationship ensures normalcy among human beings. Interpreting these cultures wrongly may bring more maladies to the society.

### **Individual vs. Society**

Lahiri portrays the pathetic condition of a poor sweeper lady called Boorima in the story, *A Real Durwan*, who does some household works for the inmates of an apartment and completely dependent on them for her livelihood. Her residing place is a small space under the stairs of that four storied building. Her properties are a quilt, a bucket and a bundle of broomsticks. She served as the 'durwan' (House Keeper) of the apartment. Nobody appointed her as a 'durwan' but she voluntarily offered helps to almost all the families in that complex and in return received some food and clothing. She was sixty- four years old and becoming physically weaker slowly but never fails to sweep the two storied building twice a day. She often recollects the happy life she led with her husband and four daughters in East Bengal (Bangladesh) and how she lost it after the partition. As the remembrance of the past she still wore the keys of the *Almira* (a wooden case) in her sari ends, which serves her a great solace and bears witness of her stories. She tells these stories not to any one in particular, but mostly to as way to remember her past glory. Moreover she feels that during her chores they served as a sort of comfort that could possibly relieve her pain a lot. The inmates of the apartment never believed these stories. When they asked for details she would utter in a restless voice: "Why demand specifics? Why scrape lime from a betel leaf? Believe me, don't believe me. My life is composed of such griefs you cannot even dream them" (43).

Boorima patrolled the building in such promptness that no new visitor could escape her scanner eyes. The inmates were pleased at the presence of a *Durwan* inside their premises in the form of Boorima and felt that their possessions were safe, though most of them had nothing expensive to be safeguarded. Though a refugee, Boorima is never an unwanted guest in any of those families living in the apartment. Some families like Dalals took her as one of their family members and extended their care and concern for the old lady. But when the renovation work of the building started, she lost her habitat and the relationship with the people in the apartment. First, she shifted or was forced to shift her living place to the rooftop of the building. Then she slowly reduced her patrol

and not even worried about her food. She wandered places without connecting to any one in particular. Finally, her pathetic ending came fast when a robbery occurred in the apartment. She was accused of serving as an informer about the belongings to the outsiders. She prayed innocence but no one believed her as they used to, for her stories. Boorima who lost all her relations in her country was happy to be associated with the inmates of the apartment but lost them too to 'modernisation'.

In *When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine*, it is again a Bangladeshi man, who tries to establish a rapport with an Indian family. He is indeed a professor of Botany in Dacca University who has come to US on a Pakistani Scholarship to pursue a research on the 'foliage of New England'. He is a married man with seven daughters who feels that he misses his family, especially during the troublesome period. His regular communication through letters has taken a hit as the postal service could not function due to the ongoing riots. He was unable to contact his family for the past six months. His only solace in that foreign land was his new-found relationship with Lilia's family. Lilia's family used to invite any Indian they come across in their vicinity, to their house and develop friendship with them and Pirzada was their new Indian friend. The elders in the family had their own reservation about Mr. Pirzada because he is a Muslim and the family never forgets the partition. But the small girl, Lilia and Pirzada relish the company of each other and he often buys sweets to the lady of the house.

Mr Pirzada was in great dilemma about his future as the East Pakistan (Bangladesh) is fighting with the west. Reports about the riots disturbed him a lot and his main purpose of the visit to Lilia's house is to watch the six thirty news which carried lists of men killed in the violence. Lilia had imagined that he dressed majestically every day because he might receive bad news and he wished to put a bold face on that occasion. "I wondered if the reason he was always so smartly dressed was in preparation to endure with dignity whatever news assailed him, perhaps even to attend a funeral at a moment's notice" (24). During this period Lilia had developed a good bonding with Pirzada and enjoyed his frequent visits. Her intimacy has gone to such an extent that she made it a routine to pray for the safety of his family before retiring to bed. The ongoing tension between India and Pakistan over the Bangladeshi incident culminated to the point of war. Subsequently Mr. Pirzada returned home to end his long woe. Lilia's family members were a worried lot as there were a lot of news about the riots and killings in Dacca. Even after his return to Dacca they heard nothing from Mr. Pirzada about him and his family. It is only after several months later, when Pirzada has sent a greeting card that the family members of Lilia returned to normalcy. The emotional relationship that existed between the old man and the girl never fails to draw a parallel with the Tagore's story, *Kabuliwala*.

In the world of emotional shortcomings an individual's daunting task to overcome the emotional blackmailing, from the people surrounding her, is passionately told in *The Treatment of Bibi Haldar*. Bibi Haldar is a twenty-nine-year-old unmarried girl, an orphan who lives under the care of her Cousin Haldar and his wife. She helps her cousin in preparing cosmetics for the shop he owns and in return she is provided with food and shelter. She was suffering from an unidentified malady which her relatives and friends could not interpret and cure. In the Indian scenario such maladies are not uncommon, and many families have witnessed cases of 'hysterical women'. Bibi

feels that she is a neglected woman and her feelings are not respected by her relatives. She was very much a homely girl who expresses her desire thus: “Is it wrong to envy you, all brides and mothers, busy with lives and cares? Wrong to want to shade my eyes, scent my hair? To raise a child and teach him sweet from sour, good from bad?” (83).

Her neighbours did try to treat her as a normal human being thus trying to instil confidence in her. They took her for occasional outings and bought her whatever she wished. In the Indian society the last remedy for such an undisclosed malady is marriage. At first her neighbours were worried how to convince her for a marriage. Instead of refusing the proposal, Bibi was delighted by the diagnosis. But it is very difficult to find a match for an over-aged woman who is not ‘pretty’, who speaks ‘backwards’, who don’t know how to cook and moreover who is suffering from an ailment not known to anybody. Vexed by her unending ailment and futile attempts to get her married, her cousin disowned her. He vacated the house leaving her back in the apartment with a meagre amount. Bibi has put up a brave face by declaring that it is better to live alone than with relatives who never respected her feelings. She did live alone away even from the eyes of her neighbours. She came out of her private hiding as a pregnant woman and gave birth to a son. What shocked most of the people was that she happened to lead a very normal life, after becoming a mother without any symptoms of the malady. As is the custom in India, the only retreatment for any malady is love and care. She has become a normal person when she realised that there is a purpose to live. She even indulged in her cousin’s cosmetic business to feed her son.

### **Marital Mismatches**

The collections’ first story, *A Temporary Matter* analyses a marital relationship in the lights of western culture. A woman leading a family, permitting the husband to pursue higher education can happen only in a western country. Again, a wife permitting her husband to attend a conference when she is nearing ‘labour’ is certainly a new thing to the Indian society. The only Indianness about their marital relationship is that it was arranged by their parents. Despite many shortcomings both Shukumar and Shoba did lead a normal life. After the death of their unborn child, Shoba went into deep silence which disturbed Shukumar. He was struggling hard to re-establish their relationship. He did take advantage of the “power failure’ nights and tried to bring back the intimacy. But Shoba reflecting the characteristics US environment breaks the news that she is moving away from him to a different apartment. In *The Blessed House* an uncaring husband disrespects the sentiments of his wife in the name of religion. Sanjeev and Twinkle’s marriage was a love marriage but, in reality, he doesn’t know what love is. Her childish curiosity unsettles him. Unaware to exhibit true love he searches answers from his beloved.

### **Conclusion**

The characters in these stories are taken on a voyage to emotional frontiers. The sufferings they undergo resemble that of a diasporic one experienced by Jhumpa Lahiri. More than national, cultural or religious identity, what men need today is an unconditional love which could cure all their ailments. Being a woman of Indian society and having witnessed many maladies she very well

presents some through these stories. Her solution for the entire problem is an unconditional love which a materialistic society fails to produce.

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