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The Recurrent Theme in Jhumpa Lahiri's "*Interpreter of Maladies*"

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Abstract

Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* is a collection of nine short stories published in 1999. It won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in the year 2000 and also established her as a celebrated diaspora novelist of the 21st century. This paper is an attempt to analyse three stories from the book - *The Temporary Matter*, *Interpreter of Maladies*, and *Sexy*. The selected stories revolve around the theme of marriage. We have tried to analyse how Lahiri through her characters describe multiple facets of married life of the couples of Indian origin. She touches several aspects of the conjugal relationships while concurrently but subtly questioning social norms and acceptable and popular gender behavior patterns. Lahiri's stories in one way or another bring to fore the strength of the female gender despite all the uncertainties and flaws in relationships.

Keywords: gender, short stories, marital relationships, marriages, relationships, jhumpa lahiri, interpreter of maladies

Interpreter of Maladies, Jhumpa Lahiri's first-ever published collection of short stories established her as a celebrated diaspora novelist of the 21st century and won her Pulitzer Prize for the year 2000. Lahiri's book describes multiple facets of the life of Indian origin couples, who the western culture and traditions have transformed. The core theme of the stories pivot on the mental trauma, state of flux of the protagonists struggling to choose between the culture and values of the country of their origin and the country of their adoption. The

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unsatisfactory marital relations form the main central theme of the book. This paper is an attempt to analyze the impact of Western influence on marital relationships.

The first significant story *A Temporary Matter* is anchored around a temporary event of a notice from electricity department of an hourly cut-off for five days. The event has been referred as a temporary matter. This event - an hourly electricity cut-off, provides an opportunity for an otherwise long aloof couple – Shobha (wife) and Shukumar (husband) to communicate after a long hiatus. Lahiri beautifully uses the ensuing communication between the couple, made possible by this temporary event, to peep into the dwindling relationship of Shobha and Shukumar, who express, reveal and share their hidden feelings, thoughts, and secrets to each other for the first time in the course of their relationship, which was otherwise running on a weekend to weekend basis devoid of any sharing.

The marital relations of Shobha and Shukumar are no longer strong as they hardly spend any time and avoid each other in their large three-bedroom house under the pretext of being busy in their work. This story portrays how lack of communication, neglect and ignorance of the partners' feelings gradually leads to the loss of love, understanding, and warmth and reaches up to a complete breakdown in the relationship and a tough, stoic survival. Though the couple was under the same roof, they became singular entities who were merely connected by the physical space and otherwise living their individual lives in complete emotional and physical incoherence with each other akin to strangers. Sarangi also comments in this regard “*A Temporary Matter* portrays an ontological condition dealing with the conjugal crisis of a young couple-Shobha and Shukumar. The decline of their mutual attachment in Boston prepares the readers for the problem of self-exile.” (Sarangi 2005: 144) Though they are a married couple, they do not even maintain a friendly relationship; leave aside sharing joys and sorrows. There is no evidence of open quarrel, yet a cold silence pervades all over their relationship, making it more painful than an open confrontation. The silence feeds on mutual distrust and insecurity and keeps shredding and eating into their marital life.

Marital relationships are fundamental social institution of any culture and are governed by the pervasive social norms. But cutting across all cultural boundaries, marriages primarily rest on partners becoming emotional anchors for each other and bringing a sense of security, further nurtured and strengthened by the principle of mutual respect and sharing.

Shobha and Shukumar share a relationship which is completely devoid of these basic traits. Shukumar deliberately shifts his working desk and computer in a different room that was

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earlier intended for their baby (Khan 2005: 102). His wife, Shobha, avoids entering this room as it always hurts her and reminds her of her dead baby. Shobha always aspired for an ideal married life and wanted to become a mother, but the birth of a stillborn baby and inability to deal with the events afterwards changed her life. Shukumar was away from her during the delivery and she took him responsible for her baby's death but never communicated her feelings to him. During this period, she "silently bitterly blamed Shukumar for the tragic and unfortunate loss of their child" (Khan 2005: 103). In her state of deep sorrow and rage of anger for her partner, she even forgets that it was she who compelled Shukumar to attend the seminar, and is unable to acknowledge his pain and suffering at the loss of their baby. Her rage has rendered her blind and insensitive to her husband's suffering to the point where she considers him to be a stone hearted person, devoid of all feelings and emotions, and someone who never wanted to be a father, at the first place. On the other hand, Shukumar regarded himself more unfortunate of the two as he held his dead baby in his bare arms and underwent the torture without ever depicting his trauma and feelings to his wife. As a fact, neither of the two was responsible for the baby's death and it was the accumulated harbored grief and their hesitation and inability to find an emotional vent to release the same due to severely broken bond and a malfunctioned marriage which made things unbearable for both of them. Had these feelings of agony and sorrow found an emotional outlet to each other, it might have led to not only an objective appreciation of the circumstances and facts but also to a possible alleviation in grief putting life into the severed strings of a dying marital bond.

Inability to act timely on psychological problems and attitudinal differences among marital couples can quickly wear off any warmth and instead infest cold indifference. Shukumar and Shobha were not always like this, in Lahiri's words there was a time "when they were so thrilled to be married, to be living together in the same house they would just reach for each other foolishly, more eager to make love than to eat" (Lahiri 1999: 10) but then gradual degradation led the relationship into a phase as reflected in Lahiri's own words - "...now he had to struggle to say something that interested her, something that made her look up from her plate, or from her proofreading files. Eventually he gave up trying to amuse her. He learned not to mind the silences". (Lahiri 1999: 12) Lahiri subtly conveys that even if the marital issues and distances may seem insurmountable, communication between partners is the first step to break the ice, though the process could be laden with hurting details.

Shukumar and Shobha realized this when, due to the unavailability of electricity they had to sit together and they confessed their mistakes, indifferent attitude and actions, small or big. For e.g. Shobha confessed that once she had lied to Shukumar on the pretext of work at

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office to enjoy martini with her friends, while Shukumar, full of doubts and low on trust, imagined her confiding in Gillian and complaining about their marital discord. Similarly, Shukumar confessed that he sold off the sweater gifted by Shobha on their first marriage anniversary, to buy a bottle of wine. On another occasion, when Shobha was pregnant, he ripped a picture of the woman he adored from a magazine.

Lahiri, also brings forth the abhorrible but relatable human nature of the very rudimentary level where two disgruntled, indifferent beings fall into the trap of hurting each other to maintain one-upmanship. Shobha and Shukumar fell into the trap and revealed details hitherto unknown to the other with the sole aim of hurting each other for e.g. Shukumar was so hurt by Shobha's decision to live separately that he revealed the sex of their dead baby which he had sworn to never disclose. Unfortunately, when the distances have increased too far, at some point, even candid conversations may lose their appeal and effect to bridge and seal the gap, though they still clear the air, the damage is already done.

Lahiri is a champion in depicting the shattered and embittered marital relationship. Mr. and Mrs. Das, the protagonists in the titular story, *Interpreter of Maladies*, are another couple portrayed by Lahiri who fell in love at an early age, were married in America and are parents to three children, but now live together with a frozen relationship and as indifferent parents. The central theme of this story revolves around the interactions between Mr. Kapasi – a tourist guide and English interpreter for a local doctor who aspired to be a diplomat - and the Das family, especially Mrs. Das. Lahiri weaves the characters through their actions and brings to light contrasting cultural conflicts through the characters personal experiences.

Mr. Kapasi observes that the Das couple had little care for the children, and they behaved more like the elder brother and sister than parents to the children, or in Mr. Kapasi's words "...in charge of the children only for the day; it was hard to believe they were regularly responsible for anything other than in themselves" (Lahiri 1999: 49). Mr. Kapasi who is in his mid-forties, had an arranged marriage, and is in an unhappy relationship and he considers the reasons for the same to be sacred or acceptable, for e.g. he wistfully longs for appreciation for his profession and his command over foreign languages from his wife. This hidden unmet desire of Mr. Kapasi comes forth when he starts romanticizing Mrs. Das on simply hearing her reaction to his profession. She said "this is so romantic" (Lahiri 1999: 50). Mr. Kapasi, on the choice of words from Mrs. Das even wonders "if Mr. Das and Mrs. Das were bad match just as he and his wife were". (Lahiri 1999: 53). This event triggered a chain of thoughts in Mr. Kapasi and he started imagining them sharing and communicating about their

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marital lives through letters. He becomes conscious of his actions and starts developing feelings for her.

Lahiri's exquisite depiction of how even the basic human desires of love and longing wear a cultural lens is evident in how Mr. Kapasi views and interprets everything Mrs. Das says and does. Lahiri also highlights the vulnerabilities of marriages and how married couples find it difficult to remain relevant for each other. These vulnerabilities are across culture and countries and may manifest in different forms for e.g. for Mrs. Das, she needed someone to share her innate feelings and maladies with, someone who could try solve them and relate with her feelings without being judgmental, on the other hand, Mr. Kapasi who wanted to be appreciated, acknowledged, and respected for his daily routines and skill set.

Mrs. Das sees an opportunity in Mr. Kapasi to vent out her feelings and to satiate her desire to be heard, understood and not judged. She boldly reveals the secrets of her illicit relationship to Mr. Kapasi, a total stranger, something she has kept hidden in her heart for eight long years. She is utterly raw and honest in her confessions.

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. Don't you think it's unhealthy? (Lahiri 1999: 65)

She somewhere fears that her misdemeanors could be the cause of her fractured marital relationship, but then is undecided if they are the cause or the effects of the relationship. Her quandary and dilemma is quite visible in the details of her narration to Mr. Kapasi:

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, without the meaningful expressions and smiles..." (Lahiri 1999: 64)

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She also wonders if they were mature enough to understand true love at marriage as also observed by Trivedi “But this is not love, mere infatuation, only attraction of the opposite sex which does not last long. The true love appears in the adverse moments of life and here they both fail to love each other”. (Trivedi 2001: 82) One may assume and judge Mrs. Das for a weak woman who had uncontrollable desires laden with guilt and dissatisfaction, but to express and accept one’s dilemmas and truths, and own one’s actions in the past, requires immense courage. It is difficult, especially for a woman, to express such courage across cultures and countries. The hypocrisy in male behavior and the unwritten laws of the female image, which she needs to protect at all costs, is reflected in Mr. Kapasi’s sudden abhorrence for Mrs. Das and weakening of his feelings towards her.

Jhumpa Lahiri’s another short story ‘Sexy’ highlights the search for love of a lonely young working woman, Miranda, who is twenty-two years old and the story is about her longings, dilemmas, struggles, and realizations on the way. Lahiri is clever in the choice of name of her central character, Miranda, which subsumes Mira, striking a mythological chord, especially with the other central character being named Dev, which means god.

While Miranda, is still trying to search for a meaning in her love for Dev despite knowing its illicit origins, Dev is devoid of any such feelings and for him it seems more about satiating his physical desires and psychological inquisitiveness. The physical desires are met by his candid expressions of love with Miranda while the psychological desires are brought forth in the ways he behaves, experiments, and enquires her for vivid details from past experiences. As Sahu describes Dev’s behavior, “The female personae are no more than a rubber doll, a sex object”. (Sahu 2005:43) Dev clearly prioritizes the relationship with his wife over Miranda, shown by his never even mentioning the thought of divorcing his wife, attending her morning calls every day, and describing her as beautiful (similar to Madhuri Dixit, a heroine considered beautiful). For Dev, the relationship with Miranda was always ephemeral. In Lahiri’s words, “...at first Miranda and Dev spent every night together, almost. ...he left her apartment at two, three, often as late as four in the morning, driving back to his house in the suburbs”.(Lahiri 1999: 88) Lahiri is overtly casual about Dev’s attitude of the gross exceptions he is able to make in his married life and how he still feels comfortable about it. Dev’s comfort might have their roots in the way society treats men and women and how certain things are a taboo for one sex and a pardonable event for another. While Miranda is completely aware of the nature of their relationship, she still wants to constantly evaluate it and find its exact form and reasons for existence. In the beginning when she accepts the relationship she makes all the extra efforts remain committed to her thoughts and feelings.

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Later upon acquiring other perspectives, she exemplifies her progressive nature by being aware of her social surroundings and possessing the ability to rectify her mistakes upon realization, and accept the futility of her actions even if painful.

Thus, Jhumpa Lahiri's portrayal of the conundrum of marriage touches several aspects of the conjugal relationships while concurrently but subtly questioning social norms and acceptable and popular gender behavior patterns. Lahiri is a master of the art of weaving characters with minutest of the details embedded in a story traversing through crests and troughs of life while establishing temporality in quality of relationship, as well as any visible biases. Lahiri's repertoire and range is evident in her stories. In a Temporary Matter the brewing sadness and hopelessness due to loss and lack of communication between Shobha and Shukumar resulted in their marital discord to a point of no recovery. In the Interpreter of Maladies, the wistful desires and a strong longing for a relationship evaporates at the mere revelation of Mrs. Das' past highlighting how fragile female's image could be. Similarly, in Sexy, she unfolds the journey of the casual relationship of a married man with an equally casual unmarried woman, which grows but then diffuses in light of a serious, contemplating Miranda who evolves with time and experiences and has the strength to make tougher choices in life. Across her stories Lahiri, mixes and mashes experiences arising out of specific cultural dilemmas and also generalizable patterns of tilted social bias in favor of males, while she knits her stories and develops her characters with precision and detail, she also leaves the readers to answer enough, based on their experiences and grounding. But all the stories in one way or another brings to fore the strength of the female gender despite all the uncertainties and flaws in relationships.

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