

# RELATIONSHIPS IN THE DIASPORIC MILIEU: A READING OF JHUMPA LAHIRI'S SELECTED SHORT STORIES FROM *INTERPRETER OF MALADIES*

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## Abstract:

In all the short stories incorporated in the *Interpreter of Maladies* Jhumpa Lahiri has dealt with relationships among individuals. What is remarkable in her portrayal of characters is the struggle of the people in a land where they have not been born. The characters have immigrated to a country which has hosted them. In the process of adapting to the culture of a host country these characters face challenges which have obvious repercussions upon their relationships or family life. Moreover, the baggage of culture that they carry with them from their home country also undergo a lot of transformation as they try to assimilate into the culture and society of a foreign land. The sense of being torn in between two worlds is felt by Mrs. Das in "Interpreter of Maladies" too, as she feels guilty for her act of infidelity towards her husband till she confesses it to Mr. Kapasi. This sense of being an alien in the American soil also haunts Mrs. Sen in the story "Mrs. Sen's", which is evident in her efforts to recreate the Indian way of life in Boston. The difficulties encountered by the characters is visible when the protagonist of the short story "Sexy" cannot take the word "sexy" as a compliment from Robin because, being a Bengali girl from India she is not easy with such a term which according to her is not associated with the beauty of a woman. This paper thus seeks to explore the sense of loss experienced by the characters – the difficulties faced by them to adapt to the culture of the host country and their attempt to stay close to their relationships even though they were geographically considerably detached/distanced from their families and friends in India.

**Keywords:** culture, immigration, diaspora, relationships, assimilation, family values

## Introduction

The advent of globalization has given rise to rapid immigration to various countries all over the world. This trend is specially observed in case of migration to the United States which is often justified as moving in search of better prospects of life and future. Technology and the concept of globalization seem to have erased the physical boundaries to a great extent. But this cannot be held true in case of psychological boundaries that exist in the minds of the people. The immigrants are prone to suffer in the process of adjustments between the two worlds, one to which they originally belong and the other where they have shifted to. These can lead to traumatic experiences which finally results in identity crisis due to cultural dilemma. These experiences form the major themes in many of the diasporic writings of contemporary times.

After immigrating to their host countries the diaspora carry with them not just the cultural baggage they have inherited, but also the memories of the good and bad times spent in their native countries. These memories always affect their lives and experiences in their host countries. As a result of the shift from their familiar origins due to immigration, the women diaspora seem to feel some loss in the space they create as home in their host countries. Meeting people with varied origins and cultures alienates them. So they seek to get into terms with people from their native land to recreate their 'home'. Familiarity is what they constantly search for to rebuild their lost 'home(s)'. However, they are also acquainted with the reality that the homes they have left have undergone remarkable transformations with time. Here, an attempt would be made to focus on how the diaspora deals with their memories at home and, how they recreate those memories and form their "imaginary homelands" in order to guard their identities and their family values, their culture and traditions – which are pretty much different from their home country that is, India. Stanley J. Tambiah has rightly pointed out this condition of the diaspora, "There is an intensification in the creation of diverse diaspora populations in many locations, who are engaged in complex interpersonal and intercultural relationships with both their host societies and their societies of origin. Rather than being deterritorialized, they in fact experience and live in dual locations and manifest dual consciousness" (Tambiah 163).

The title story, "Interpreter of Maladies" is based on the silent sufferings of the character Mina Das who is guilty of infidelity. She belongs to Indian parents but born and brought up in the West, a product of the occident. The story is woven around an Indian American family consisting of the couple Mr. Raj Das and Mrs. Mina Das, their three children named Tina, Ronny and Bobby. It opens in the Indian soil, the city of Puri, where they have travelled to visit the famous Sun temple at Konark. They hire a taxi with a guide for their visit to Konark. "The first thing Mr. Kapasi had noticed when he saw Mr. and Mrs. Das, standing with their children under the portico of the hotel, was that they were very young, perhaps not even thirty. In addition to Tina they had two boys, Ronny and Bobby, who appeared very close in age and had teeth covered in a network of flashing silver wires" (Lahiri, 29). During their conversation, they get to know that Mr. Kapasi works as an interpreter in a doctor's clinic besides his present occupation. Mrs. Das is fascinated at this discovery and became inquisitive about Mr. Kapasi. He explained at length his job of translating the Gujarati spoken by the patients to the doctor who doesn't understand the language. Mrs. Das described it as 'romantic' to the surprise of her husband who failed to understand the romance in Mr. Kapasi's interpreter job. Even Kapasi's wife never found anything interesting about his job profile and never cared to appreciate his work. The sudden turn of interest Mina started showering on their guide intrigued him and he started fantasizing about being romantically linked up with her. The couple invites him to be included in their photographs and Mrs. Das even asks him for his postal address so that she could send him the photo prints from America. The climax of the story takes place when she discloses her past to Mr. Kapasi in the car. One of her son, Bobby is fathered by another man, a Punjabi friend of Mr. Das who stayed with them for a week. She gave in to his advances one day, enjoying every moment of the act. Her husband never doubted anything about Bobby or his friend and even the other man had no idea that the intercourse he had with Mina resulted in the birth of Bobby. All through the eight years, Mina has been suffering in silence, burning in the fire of guilt and anguish, unable to communicate the truth to none. This has badly affected her psychologically and reflected in her relationships. She seemed to have lost interest in her marital life and as well as life as a whole. It alienated her mentally and emotionally from her family members. No wonder this explains her personality in the story before her confession to Mr. Kapasi. The episode of extra-marital physical relation and the burden of maintaining the secrecy have resulted in her mental alienation and imbalance as the text depicts, "Don't you see? For eight years I haven't been able to express this to anybody, not to friends, certainly not to Raj. He doesn't even suspect it ----- 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. Don't you think it is unhealthy?" (Lahiri, 39). Mr. Kapasi was shocked at this revelation and failed to react in a desirable manner. She urged him to interpret her malady and suggest an acceptable cure or remedy for her pain, but all he could manage to ask was 'Is it really pain you feel, Mrs. Das or is it, guilt?' (Lahiri, 39). Mina had no answer to this question. Mina's consent to have sex with another man shows her values' inclination towards the West, where it is not regarded a sin to have such an emotionless physical relationship with somebody. It was her lonely and monotonous life that led her give in to the physical relationship with her husband's friend. This gets conveyed when the narrator says, "After marrying so young she was overwhelmed by it all, having a child so quickly, and nursing, and warming up bottles of milk and testing their temperature against her wrist while Raj was at work,..." (Lahiri, 38). If we are led to believe this then the question arises why she is now guilty and suffering because of her act. This is because of the Oriental values she had inherited from her Indian parents. She fought with herself throughout the eight years and finally gave in front of a stranger hoping to get some solace from her pain or guilt. She thought she can get relief from her malady by getting a remedy from the interpreter cum guide. Mina's infidelity is not the result of diasporic conditions. It is her guilt and realization in the next eight years that is the result of her cultural dilemma and identity crisis. Her disclosure in front of an Indian in the soil of India also leads us to believe her Oriental values and beliefs that created a sort of conflict between the assimilation of new culture of the West where she has been living and the inherited Oriental values from her Indian parents. The portrayal of the relationship of the couple also explains the conflict of their alienation from their cultural roots and assimilation of conventions of a different society. All the descriptions of the external glamour in fact contrast with their inner loneliness and cultural crisis. The story also portrays the emotional detachment of the second generation which can be found in the character of the young mother Mrs. Das caught between two worlds of culture and identity. The second generation is not completely freed from their origin of birth and native place. The occasional visits to the native place to meet parents and relatives reinforce this thought and feeling. The holiday of the Das family in India shows their responses and attitudes as a typically American family, "The family looked Indian but dressed as foreigners did, the children in stiff, brightly coloured clothing and caps with translucent visors" (Lahiri, 29). The holiday is part of their family visit to India as observed by Mr. Das. It is more of a detached and momentary interest they are showing towards place of visit as tourists. They looked lost and emotionally unable to connect to the place of their origin. The story ends with a positive note showing Mrs. Das finally fighting her way

back to the family fold when Bobby was injured by the monkeys. Mr. and Mrs. Das rushed to help him forgetting all the differences and cares, binding them all into one happy family. Mr. Kapasi felt relieved at this sight as he was burdened with the secret of Mrs. Das.

This shows that Mrs. Das could not easily accept what had happened although she had immigrated to a much liberal world. So, her Indian culture had somehow compelled her to purge her sense of guilt by confessing the secret in front of Mr. Kapasi. Though she belonged to the American diaspora, the culture that she had carried from her family in India remained with her, which made it difficult for her to justify her infidelity towards her husband. Moreover, she could not accept the American way of life where having intercourse with another man does not have such a psychological effect as to disrupt the mental balance of a person. Mrs. Das could overcome the rift between herself and her husband only after her confession.

Jhumpa Lahiri's fifth story "Sexy" dabs into the life and culture of the Bengali people and their journey to America. Lahiri portrays that four locations in two hemispheres, an ocean and a continent apart, indicate the world that people with family backgrounds in India share when they become Americans. These people, like millions of other immigrants, feel an immediate disconnection from their old lives and cultures. This story revolves around the modern Boston society, where the influence of a foreign culture and the disintegration of a family, is a common feature.

The protagonist Miranda consistently creates comparisons between herself and people of the Indian culture who she meets and builds relationship with while living in Boston. Many grown-up immigrants encounter the alienation from their close family and friends and automatically become an outsider to the people around them. Lahiri has contrasted the real life with the world of fantasy. While Americans are considered to be less family oriented in comparison to Indians, Dev proves this to be wrong when he allows himself to have an affair with Miranda, an American girl. And ultimately, Miranda's interaction with Rohin, a seven years old boy is a connection that brings her back to reality. Love does not mean to be sexy; it rather means being in each other's thought that is why at last Miranda came to realize that despite of her beauty and smartness she is not the one for Dev.

The story is a sad commentary on the weakening of the conjugal bond. In the present day context, the old morality is giving way to a shallow love of lust. The strong marital bond is shaken by the principle 'out of sight, out of mind'. The parallel story of Laxmi's cousin's husband is equally miserable.

Miranda eagerly waits for Dev. She waits for Sundays which take long time to come. Saturdays are the worst as this waiting becomes unbearable till then. On one of Dev's visits she asks him about the personality and appearance of his wife. When he informs her that she resembles the famous Indian film actress Madhuri Dixit, she is taken aback. She thinks for a moment that the Dixit girl known to her might be a relative of the actress. In fact, she is shocked to think that the arrival of the beautiful wife may take Dev away from her.

Miranda has a feeling of guilt or shyness as regards her relations with Dev. Whenever Laxmi talks of the misdeeds of her cousin's husband, Miranda tries to change the topic and to turn the conversation to some other direction. As her fascination for Dev increases, she gets more and more interested in Indian things. One day she goes to the Indian grocery in Central Square and views everything with keen interest. She wants to purchase something for Laxmi but on second thought she gives up the idea. She fears the fact that Laxmi would smell her relations with Dev which would be very embarrassing for her. The parallel of Laxmi's cousin's story forces Miranda to think her relation with Dev as something not frankly acceptable: "She thought about buying some for Laxmi, then hesitated, wondering how to explain what she'd been doing in an Indian grocery"(Lahiri99). Laxmi's cousin's husband completely refuses to come to his senses and the matter worsens day by day. Laxmi advises her cousin to go for a divorce as there are better men in the world. She arranges for a weekend to remove some of the monotony. Miranda meets the boy Rohin who plays an important role in the story.

After his wife's return from India, Dev loses interest in Miranda. He becomes a changed man. He goes on with his physical relations with Miranda but he loses warmth miserably. Miranda feels neglected and shocked. In this state of mind, she agrees to look after Laxmi's nephew for a day. The boy is an unhappy one and his unhappiness is joined by that of Miranda. The boy is young but experienced in the sorrows of life. He has a sad maturity around him.

Rohin behaves in a way which strikes Miranda time and again. On the one hand, he is exceptionally intelligent and on the other abnormally matured. He has memorized the names of the capitals of the major countries of the world especially those of Europe. He works with crayons like a mature artist. He asks for a cup of coffee. Miranda says that a little boy like him should not take coffee. He prepares a cup fit for a child. She is left utterly shocked when Rohin says that his father met pretty woman in the aero plane and he is reminded of the women by Miranda's presence. Perhaps he has the faint notion that all pretty women are perverse: "My father met a pretty woman on a plane, too". He looked at Miranda. His face darkened as he watched her sip. 'Can't I have just a little

coffee? Please?" (Lahiri102). Rohin's activities are not childlike. There is a certain seriousness or even sadness which accompanies his activities. He goes to the kitchen with Miranda and watches every item in her bathroom very carefully. He asks Miranda to draw things in the living room for him as they may not meet again in life and the pictures and would preserve the memories of their only meeting. He asks her to draw his own figure but she refuses. In fact it is not easy for her to draw the pictures of a queer child like Rohin.

The undercurrent of melancholy runs through Rohin's actions and words. When Miranda is not able to draw him, he moves away bored. He forces her to put on the silver cocktail dress. Miranda is utterly surprised. Rohin asks her to put on the dress in his presence as his mother does. He tells her that when one day his mother slept in his room he felt pleasingly soothed. In the absence of his father he is in dire need for warmth.

Miranda agrees to put on the dress of Rohin's choice but not in his presence as she is not his mother. She closes the door and makes the little boy wait outside. She opens the door without being dressed properly because she needs Rohin's help with the zipper. When she is finally dressed up, Rohin says the words which were earlier whispered to Miranda by Dev on the bridge. Miranda is shocked beyond limit. She hardly expected these words from a boy like Rohin. The intensity of her shock can be imagined from the fact that her heart missed a beat. Rohin's words mark the climax of the story.

Recovering from the shock Miranda asks Rohin the meaning of the word 'sexy'. She is almost sure that the boy does not know the real sense of the word. He might have heard the word on television or found it in some magazine. She forces him to come out with what he meant by the term. Rohin tries his best to evade the question but Miranda persists. Having no other way Rohin yields the sad comment as an interpretation of the word. For him it means loving someone one does not know: "Miranda's heartskipped a beat. Later, forced physically by Miranda to explain the meaning of sexy, Rohin whispers, 'it means loving someone you don't know'" (Lahiri8). Rohin goes on explaining the term and says that his father met a sexy woman on the plane and he has gone with her leaving behind him and his mother. He goes to the extent of calling every pretty woman sexy. Thus, the term has sad connotations as being sexy is being dangerous. It is this dangerousness which has deprived him of his happiness and his father. At this, "Miranda cried harder, unable to stop. But Rohin still slept she guessed that he was used to now, to the sound of a woman crying (Lahiri109). The realization dawns upon Miranda. Although the disillusionment is not palatable to her, she decides to break away with Dev and to discontinue the false love affair. When Dev calls her, she says that she is not in a mood to welcome or entertain him. She gives the reason that she has caught cold. The inner turmoil leaves her voice so congested that Dev hardly suspect that she is telling a lie.

Miranda's fascination for Dev is between the false show of love and the bitter reality of it. She tries strong that it takes three Sundays for her to break away with him at all levels. In other words, the shock of disillusionment is so strong that it is not easy for her to digest it. For a moment she decides to meet him one Sunday and to tell him that whatever he did was fair neither to Miranda nor his wife.

The realization triumphs over false love and the immoral bond is broken. Miranda has to accept the fact that being lovable is entirely different from being sexy. The characters of both Miranda and Dev are liable to criticism. Both of them know that they are moving on a wrong path which cannot lead them to a right destination. Thus, the story is one of the realization of the bitter reality that immoral love is acceptable nowhere. Thus, the story highlights the false notions of love and sex as the root cause of misery and deception in society.

However, the short story "Mrs. Sen's" is a little different from the "Interpreter of Maladies" and "Sexy". The two stories discussed above are about having immoral sex. "Mrs. Sen's", as suggested by the title, revolves around the life of Mrs. Sen in America. The story celebrates the Indian culture through the character in multiple ways. As a companion to her husband Mrs. Sen moves to Boston where he serves as a Professor of Mathematics in an American University. She perceives the unfamiliar life harassing and hostile. Being an immigrant, she feels isolated from her family and native place too, on the contrary she keeps on rereading the letters from India, decorates her home in Indian ways, drapes a sari always with vermilion parted the hairs of her head. This condition of the diaspora has been elaborately stated as:

...this idea of otherness as an inner compulsion changes our conception of 'cultural identity'. In this perspective cultural identity is not a fixed essence at all, lying unchanged outside history and culture. It is not some universal and transcendental spirit inside us on which history has made no fundamental mark. It is not-once-and-for-all. It is not a fixed origin to which we can make some final and absolute return. Of course, it is not a mere phantasm either. It is *something* – not a mere trick of the imagination. It has its histories- and histories have their real, material and symbolic effects. The past continues to speak to us as a simple, factual 'past', since our relation to it, like the child's relation to the mother, is always – already 'after the break'. It is always constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative and myth. Cultural identities are the points of identification, the unstable points of identification or suture, which are made, within the discourses of history and culture. Not an essence but a *positioning*. (Hall 113)

In an endeavour to adapt to the American ways, she involves herself in various household jobs; she takes the job of a baby-sitter. Eliot, a boy of eleven becomes her sole companion during her stay in Boston. Eliot, who has never caught sight of the Indian culture, thought her scalp is cut but later on he understood that it is some scarlet powder she applies everyday. She picks up Eliot everyday after school, shares her emotions, reminisces her days in Kolkata. Her way of cutting vegetables, urge for a whole big fish and the excitement for the letters amaze Eliot. He finds a different life style with the Sens. Unlike his parents who are parted now he has never seen them too close, he is their immutable company in every exposure. As Mrs. Sen spends a considerable time with Eliot and both of them develop some kind of bonding she tries to express all her sentiments to him and trusts him wholeheartedly,

She drives and asks.

How am I doing, Eliot? Am I going to pass? (Lahiri 65)

Eliot, the little master who has observed his mother driving tries to become her confidence. He guides her, tries to assist her but never utter a negative or skeptical word about her driving.

Here, Eliot learns to remove his sneakers before entering the house. He never objects but observes every minute activity of Mrs. Sen. When Mrs. Sen comes to know about the birth of her niece, she becomes excited, and she explores the nearby cafeteria with Eliot, mooched about the campus and conversed throughout the time. Eliot listens to her in an intriguing manner. In a melancholic tone she says,

My sister has had a baby girl. By the time I see her, depending if Mr. Sen gets his tenure, she will be three years old. Her own aunt will be a stranger. If we sit side by side on a train she will not know my face. (Lahiri 66)

Holding Eliot by the hand as they were walking she asks, "Do you miss your mother, Eliot, these afternoons with me?" (Lahiri 66). Such thought has never occurred to him, he never feels the absence of his mother. He easily says he would put his mother in a nursing home when she becomes old. The American life style has taught him to have a fulfilled individual life, of which Mrs. Sen is not accustomed to but being apprehended to the American value system, she never tries to interfere his thoughts although she continues to share her feelings and opinions with Eliot. However, he enjoys the moments with the Sens. He even accompanied her on the bus journey. He has no objection, in fact, he never discloses to his mother that Mrs. Sen tries not to leave any trace of her chopping because she knows that the Indian blade would shock Eliot's mother. Eliot helps her in crushing the newspapers that contain the peels and seeds.

Eliot comprehends the Sens gradually; he learns to answer every possible question about them. When his mother enquires him about the changes in Mrs. Sen's behaviour (it is because of her grandfather's death) he replies in defense of Mrs. Sen.

When eventually his mother asked him in the car if he'd noticed a change in Mrs. Sen's behaviour, he said he hadn't. He didn't tell her that Mrs. Sen paced the apartment, staring at the plastic covered lampshades as if noticing them for the first time. He didn't tell her she switch on the television but never watched it, or that she made herself tea but let it grow cold on the coffee table. (Lahiri 68)

The manner in which Eliot had kept certain things secret from his mother epitomizes his and Mrs. Sen's bonding of friendship.

Jhumpa Lahiri, herself being a diaspora, has understood the consequences faced by an immigrant in an unknown land. Her story *Mrs. Sen* represents the life of a lady who craves for her homeland in an American life-style. It is a young boy who comes to her rescue. Eliot tries to comfort her in every possible way with his presence. Her husband Mr. Sen is always busy at the university; they have little time to spend together. Eliot shares his day with her; they exemplify the relationship of a mother-son – baby, baby sitter and friends. Though the memory of homeland haunts Mrs. Sen, the presence of Eliot makes her engross with him. She finds immense pleasure in an unknown land in the company of Eliot.

From the reading of the three stories "Interpreter of Maladies", "Sexy" and "Mrs. Sen" the common aspects that has been highlighted by Lahiri are the sense of alienation resulting in a sense of loss as the protagonists try to adapt to the culture of their host country, which is remarkably different from the culture of the home country in many ways, their inability to shake off the traditions of their home country that have got embedded in their lifestyle and thought process and the growing sense of nostalgia when they realize that their roots lie in India. Although the diaspora characters physically they live in America, they try to recreate in their homeland around them – which is overtly depicted in "Mrs. Sen's" where Mrs. Sen dresses up, decorates and cooks as she did in India. Moreover, the moral values with which these women characters – Mina, Miranda and Mrs. Sen have been imbibed by their family in India do change or forgotten by them as they immigrate and become diasporas. The strong hold of the family values upon the psyche of the characters can be noted when Mina carries on the burden of guilt with her for eight years till she gives it a vent in front of Mr. Kapasi, Miranda too suffers from the sense of guilt for her relationship with a married man who hardly loves her – who only seeks to have physical relation with her, and Mrs. Sen

developing a bonding with Eliot as a son and imbue him subtly with the family values she has been received from her family. Thus, it is noteworthy that in all the three stories taken up for this study the various dimensions of relationship, especially the sense of commitment have been dealt with very deftly by JhumpaLahiri. The relationships and the moral values that these women characters have experienced in India is found to persist in their way of thinking even after they have immigrated to foreign land/culture and have acquired a diaspora status.

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