JHUMPA LAHIRI AND PSYCHOLOGICAL DISLOCATION IN "INTERPRETER OF MALADIES"

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Abstract

As a postcolonial female writer, J. Lahiri's favorite themes spin around nostalgic lament for her Indian origins, psychological dislocation, cultural disjunction and the trauma of self-transformation through immigration. The inability to see the world clearlypoints toto the characters' impossibility of communicating due to unspoken truths that deform reality and hence hinder interpretation and understanding of feelings. In*Interpreter of Maladies,* Lahiri advocates for a second generation immigrant character, whose hybrid condition allows him to communicate across gender, linguistic, and cross-cultural borders. Unfortunately, her characters fail to translate and interpret this liminal space. Despite Lahiri'ssearch as a lonely child and later as a writer, she has not founda remedy for this chronic, spiritual malady of this breakdown of communication yet. Her message in the short story "Interpreter of Maladies" is that you can be a foreigner in a new land or even within one's family.

Keywords: psychological dislocation, nostalgic postcolonial lament, human communication, cultural disjunction, hybrid culture.

"I've inherited a sense of that loss from my parents because it was so palpable all the time while I was growing up, the sense of what my parents had sacrificed in moving to the United States, and yet at the same time, building a life here and all that entailed".
(Jhumpa Lahiri)

Introduction

Jhumpa Lahiri, a second generation Indian-American immigrant female writer, was born in London and raised in new York by her Bengali parents.

Interpreter of Maladies (1999) is a collection of nine stories, which won the Pulitizer Prize for Fiction (2000). It was a blockbuster, over fifteen million copies being sold. It was chosen as the New Yorker's Best Debut of the year; it is on Oprah Winfrey's Top Ten Book List. The volume was selected as a New York Times Notable Book as well as a Publishers' Weekly Best Book.

As an postcolonial writer, Lahiri's favorite themes were connected to questions of identity and the trauma of self-transformation through immigration. All her interviews and books highlight the nostalgia for her native land, India and the fact that she never felt fully American. She tackled themes like: psychological dislocation, cultural disjunction, assimilation versus alienation/isolation/estrangement, otherness, class and familial issues, gender roles, the dichotomy of care and neglect, the danger of romanticism (motherland versus American Dream), liminality and broken identities, community relationships, crossculturalism and human coomunication.

Spiritual Maladies and Remedies

The title short story of the volume, "Interpreter of Maladies" has as main characters The Das family and Mr. Kapasi. Raj Das and Mina Das are a couple of first

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generation Americans of Indian descent who come to visit India with their three children, Ronny, Bobby, and Tina. Bobby is not Raj's son, he was born out of an illicit relationship with the Punjabi friend of Raj, Tina's husband.

Another important character in the short story is Mr. Kapasi, a middle-aged Indian tourist guide over weekends and an interpreter of maladies in a doctor's office over weekdays. He works at a doctor's clinic in India, a clinic that previously failed to cure his son of typhoid fever.

The Das family hires Mr. Kapasi, the Indian tourist guide, for their visit to the Sun Temple at Konark. Throughout the visit, Mr. Kapasi is burdened with the responsibility of *interpreting* the malady of Mrs. Das, who confesses her eight-year hidden secret about her son Bobby, the offspring of an extra-marriage one-meeting affair with a friend of her husband. She tells Mr. Kapasibecause she hopes he can *interpret her feelings* and make her feel better as he does for his patients, *translating without passing judgment.* A bad translator, with bad linguistic skills, when he interprets the maladies of patients from their native tongue, Gujrati, into the language understood by the Doctor, he also fails as a translator of the *transcontinental gap* between them. He cannot suggest some remedy to relieve her from the "terrible" feeling. *Human communication* fails, they both being at a loss for words. Mr. Kapasi observes that Bobby and Mr. Das resemble each other, unlike Ronny, who has little in common with his father. His Indian idea of *family* deforms the reality of the situation, hence, disappointed, all he can ask, *judgmentally*, is: "Is it really *pain* you feel, Mrs. Das, or is it *guilt*"[2]

This chronic *malady* of the spirit is expressed through this "impossibility of communicating and interpreting emotional pain and affliction to others as well as expressing it to ourselves"[3], as Lahiri confesses in an interview. Mrs. Das, Indian American woman, and Mr. Kapasi, Indian man, feel the same *cultural disjunction* as J. Lahiri feels in her position as a writer, as well. J. Lahiri, unlike B. Mukherjee, also an Indian American female immigrant writer, never considered herself truly American. She was always conscious of the place left behind; her fiction made visible this postcolonial lament for lost origins. Her parents and the numerous visits to her native India kept her in close contact all the time with Indian "culture, tradition, customs, norms, rituals of Hindu religion and living."[4]

Lahiri'sIndian characters, such as Mr. Kapasi, affirm their cultural identity and impose their Bengali culture on the American scene. They claim space through ethnic or cultural identity. The *hyphen* used in her Indian-American reality and cross-cultural, *'hybrid' encounter* shows – unlike B. Mukherjee's non-hyphenated Indian American reality – the need for *cultural dichotomy*, which implies the cultural promotion of the native Indian culture as well as the need to adapt to the standardized American culture. The former

[2]Lahiri, Jhumpa, "Interpreter of Maladies", p 28, italics mine.
[3]http://www.houghtonmifflinbooks.com/readers_guides/interpreter_maladies.shtml#conversation
[4]Shukla, Sheobhushan&AnuShukla, *Aspects of Contemporary Post/Colonial Literature,* p 111.

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colonized people, like the Indians, migrated to the West after *decolonization* and now the Indian diaspora of the USA is the second largest Indian Community after Britain.

Lahiri's characters fight estrangement and peripherality in a new land, while, due to interaction, they transform their own habits and standards of living: "What Lahiri highlights most is the strand of *human bondage* which is not at all easy for immigrants to shun or erase out of their memory."[5]

Shukla, the editor of *Aspects of Contemporary Post/Colonial Literature*, mentions Calcutta as a "sweet home" for Lahiri, where "the sense of *family* was so important in connecting across generations", while "in the States, to be connected to anything, we had to reach out."[6]

This strong sense of *family* and *community* in India and the ultimate nostalgic lament for her origins is the red thread in all the nine stories from the volume. In her short story "Mrs. Sen's", for instance, Mrs. Sen is homesick. "At home that is all you have to do. Not everybody has a telephone. But just raise your voice a bit, or express grief or joy of any kind, and one whole neighborhood and half of another has come to share the news to help with the arrangements."[7]Chatterjee also mentions Ashima's fear of giving birth to a child in a foreign land: "But nothing feels normal to Ashima. For the past eighteen months, ever since she's arrived in Cambridge, nothing had felt normal at all. It's not so much the pain, which she knows, somehow, she will survive. It's the consequence: *motherhood in foreign land*."[8]

Postcolonial themes like loneliness and alienation, love and self-love, fidelity, family, care and neglect, romanticism, frustration, and debasement of human values are frequent in Lahiri's (short) fiction to emphasize *the psychological dislocation* and the *trauma of self- transformation* through immigration.

Mr. and Mrs. Das in "Interpreter of Maladies" are presented as bad parents and behaving like siblings (like an older brother and sister, as Mr. Kapasi notes), not like spouses and parents, although they married for love, unlike Mr. Kapasi's arranged marriage. "It seemed that they were in charge of the children only for the day; it was hard to believe they were responsible for anything other than themselves"[9]. Self-love and neglect replace, in Mr. Kapasi's view, love and care for spouse and children: She walked "past her children as if they were strangers". [10]

The physical appearance, the way they dressed and spoke, highlight the *hybrid condition* of the second generation Indians: "The family looked Indian, but dressed as foreigners did, the children in stiff, brightly colored clothing and caps with translucent visors". [11]

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[5]Shukla, Sheobhushan & Anu Shukla, *Aspects of Contemporary Post/Colonial Literature,* p113, italics mine.
[6] Idem, p.113, italics mine.
[7]Chatterjee, Arundhati, "The Migrant Voice of Jhumpa Lahiri", Ch. 7, p.116.
[8]Lahiri, Jhumpa, *The Namesake*, p5-6, qtd. In Chatterjee, p112, italics mine.
[9]Lahiri, Jhumpa, "Interpreter of Maladies", p16.
[10]Ibidem, p.22.
[11]Ibidem, p.13.

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Lahiri draws on habits, costumes, rituals, ceremonies, language, names, clothing, etc. to promote Indian cultural heritage and carve her cultural space inside multi-cultural America. She does that by showing the two perspectives of America and India. Mrs. Das sits in a bulky white Ambassador, she has shaved largely bare legs and a tanned face. Mr. Das squeezes hands like an American, is dressed in shorts, sneakers and a T-shirt. He watches the American serial *Dallas* and has his eyes always behind a camera. The children were chewing gum. Mr. Das called his wife by her first name, which is forbidden by Indian laws. Mrs. Das wore "a red-and-white checkered skirt that stopped above her knees, slip-on shoes with a square wooden heel, and a close-fitting blouse styled like a man's undershirt". [12]

Mr. Kapasi, on the other hand, pressed his arms together in greeting, had an arranged marriage, who, gazing at the topless women carved on the temple, muses on his own wife fully naked: "Even when they had made love she kept the panels of her blouse hooked together, the string of her petticoat around her waist". [13]He feels thus enchanted by Mrs. Das's legs and his mind races to a feeling "he used to experience long ago" [14], the same self-confidence he felt when he first translated a passage from a French novel without a dictionary. But willing to escape his Indian norms proves mistaken. Mrs. Das approaches him and confesses her secret: Bobby is not Raj's son.

Disconcerted, he "reached into his shirt pocket for the small tin of lotus-oil balm he carried with him all times, and applied it to three spots on his forehead". [15] A symbol and ritual in Indian culture, the *lotus-oil* is a balm that makes your body and mind to be more active, diminishes stress and stimulates sexual conception. In short time, Mr. Kapasi passed from bewilderment and sexual arousal to confusion and betrayal.

Mrs. Das seeks atonement and explanation from a stranger: "I'm tired of feeling so terrible all the time. Eight years, Mr. Kapasi, I've been in pain eight years. I was hoping you could help me feel better; say the right thing. Suggest some kind of *remedy*". [16]

Nevertheless, there is no cultural bridge between the two, although they speak the same language. Coming from different cultural backgrounds, they could not serve as mutual cultural mediators or catalysts, despite Mr. Kapasi's initial fancy dreams: "He hoped that Mrs. Das had understood Surya's beauty, his power. Perhaps they would discuss it further in their letters. *He would explain things to her, things about India, and she would explain things to him about America.* In its own way this correspondence would fulfill his dream, of serving as an *interpreter between nations*".[17] But he fails. He cannot help her feel better, he cannot say the right thing, he cannot suggest any kind of remedy. On the contrary, he feels insulted that "Mrs. Das should ask him to interpret her common, trivial

[12]Ibidem, p. 14.
[13]Ibidem, p. 22.
[14]Ibidem, p. 21.
[15]Lahiri, Jumpa, "Interpreter of Maladies", p. 25.
[16]Ibidem, p. 27, italics mine.
[17]Ibidem, p. 23, italics mine.

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little secret". [18] He starts judging and thinking of truth and honesty as the best policy. He even thinks of offering himself as a *mediator* in the confession scene.

Mrs. Das does not give him an answer about what she feels: pain or guilt. She realizes the lack of 'human bondage', the cultural disjunction. She flees to her family to find comfort, if not understanding: "Wait for me … I'm coming". [19] She even begs her husband to do something for Bobby who was surrounded by a group of monkeys. While in the beginning she refused bluntly Tina's request to polish her nails as well, "Leave me alone… You're making me mess up"[20], the ending of the story shows us a more human, motherly Mina: "Poor Bobby… Come here a second. Let Mommy fix your hair". [21]

In his youth, Mr. Kapasi "dreamed of being an interpreter for diplomats and dignitaries, *resolving conflicts* between people and nations, settling disputes of which he alone could *understand both sides*. A fluent speaker in English he could also speak French, Russian, Portuguese, Italian, Hindi, Bengali, Orissi, and Guyarati. Now only a handful of European phrases remained in his memory, scattered words for things like saucers and chairs".[22]

His patients were more dependent on him than on the doctor, if he were to tell the doctor the *wrong thing*, according to Mrs. Das's interpretation. For Mr. Kapasi, "the job was a sign of his failings". [23] Mrs. Das, when he first meets her, seems to intoxicate him with feelings long forgotten: "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". [24]

But the promise is fake again. It is also a way Lahiri uses to show the characters' *deformation of reality*. Mr. Kapasi observes that his idea of family deforms the reality of the situation and still cannot fill out the cross-cultural gap. Lahiri's message seems to be that romanticism, as part of the American Dream, is dangerous. The Das family has a distorted and deformed vision, the way their children's vision will be as well.

This *break down of communication,* often with hurtful consequences, is the most common outcome of broken identities, due to class, familial or immigrant issues. The Dases do not communicate between themselves or with the children, Mrs. Das loses Mr. Kapasi's address at the end of the story, a clear sign of an impossible communication in the future. *Unspoken truths* hinder this communication and hence interpretation and understanding of feelings. This inability to see the world clearly is illustrated by Lahiri through different symbols.[25] Mr. Das sees the reality only through the camera lens. Mrs.

[18]Ibidem, p. 27.
[19]Ibidem, p. 28.
[20]Ibidem, p. 16.
[21]Ibidem p. 29.
[22]Ibidem, p. 18.
[23]Ibidem, p. 18, italics mine.
[24]Ibidem, p. 21, italics mine.
[25] Cf. SparkNotesEditors. "SparkNote on Interpreter of Maladies "Sparknotes.com.SparkNotes.LLC.2007.Web.5Feb2015.

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Das wears sunglasses and, when in the car, she cannot roll down the window; Mr. Kapasi views reality through the rearview mirror, while the children wear a visor.[26]

Conclusion

JhumpaLahiri experienced loneliness as a child. As a writer, she attempted to articulate, further on, the dilemma and impossibility of communicating and expressing feelings and emotions. She always saw herself in between zones. Conscious of the place left behind, she wanted to deploy items of the Bengali culture and impose them as a reality in multi-cultural America. She advocated for a *hybrid culture* in a *liminal space*where, through cross-cultural encounters, there is place for both cultural promotion and adaptation. The hybrid condition of a second generation immigrant's attitude should be, in Lahiri's view, an attitude of *cultural translation* and *interpretation* of the adopted culture and the culture of the motherland. The title of the short story "Interpreter of Maladies" reflects this theme of the need of *cultural interpretation*. However, the process of interpretation, being associated with a *malady*, it leads us to the conclusion that this cultural translation or interpretation fails her characters. This hybrid condition of communicating across gender, linguistic and cross-cultural borders is a chronic, deep-rooted, problematic, social and spiritual malady, which requires a *remedy*.

Throughout her writings Lahirisearched for this remedy of the spirit, by *translatingand interpreting* transcontinental nations, languages, cultures and stories. However, she has no *remedy* or solution yet. Culture still impacts and defines us to a high extent through the way we interpret others. Mr. Kapasi has no cure for Mrs. Das or himself. Lahiri's postcolonial message in the short story "Interpreter of Maladies"is that you can be a foreigner in a new land or even within one's family.

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[26] Cf. Ibidem, SparkNotes Editors, 2007.

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