

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

**INTERPRETER OF MALADIES: STORIES OF BENGAL, BOSTON AND BEYOND****ANGALAKUDURU ARAVIND**

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**ABSTRACT**

Jhumpa Lahiri frequently writes fiction about the Indian immigrant experiences in United States of America. She came on the horizon of literary world in 1999 with the publication of her debut collection of short stories, *Interpreter of Maladies: Stories of Bengal, Boston and Beyond*. The collection was praised by American critics, but received mixed reviews in India, where reviewers were alternately enthusiastic and upset as Lahiri had "not painted Indians in a more positive light".

The collection consists of nine dazzling stories: "A Temporary Matter", "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine", "Interpreter of Maladies", "A Real Durwan", "Sexy", "Mrs. Sen's", "This Blessed House", "The Treatment of Bibi Haldar", and "The Third and Final Continent." Out of the nine elegant stories, six are set in the United States and three in India. Although not all of the stories in *Interpreter of Maladies* are set in America, all of them deal with characters in immigration of sort or another.

The stories in *Interpreter of Maladies* narrate the lives of Indians or Indian immigrants to America, of people "navigating between the strict traditions they've inherited and the baffling New World they must encounter every day" (cited from inner flap of *Interpreter of Maladies*). The stories focus on characters, many of Indian heritage, who struggle with issues of identity, personal relationships, the feeling of alienation, isolation, loneliness, longing, loss and hope which so often mark the immigrant experiences. They suffer from psychic trauma and haunting presence of their lost homeland the land of their birth and also suffer from the anguish of reinventing home in the land of their choice. They often get sandwiched between two cultures. These stories introduce us to people who left behind family, friends and the familiar heat and bustle of India to build a new life in America a cold, bleak land of strangers and new customs. It also describes the sense of loss, longing, exile, alienation, loneliness, displacements and dislocation experienced by all immigrants, giving voice to their anguish and probing into their complex psychoses.

**Key Words:** Bengal, Boston and Beyond, Immigrant

As the child of immigrants, Jhumpa Lahiri herself experienced the trauma and angst of immigration. She admits:

I have somehow inherited a sense of exile from my parents, even though in many ways I am so much more American than they are... I think that for immigrants, the challenges of exile, the loneliness, the constant sense of alienation, the knowledge of and longing for a lost world are more explicit and distressing than for their children.. .But it bothered me growing up, the feeling that there was no single place to which I fully belonged (qtd. in Nagapal 44 - 45).

Through these nine stories, Jhumpa Lahiri probes into the immigrant experiences. As an omniscient observer, she gives a minute description of immigrant life, their various maladies, angst, trauma and dreams. Having won critical acclaim for "its grace, acuity and compassion in detailed lives, transported from India to America" (Das S.), the collection remains a subtle evocation of the warm and complex portrayal of family life and Indian immigrants trying to saddle two cultures their Indian heritage and the American.

"A Temporary Matter" is the first story of the collection which revolves around the life of a young married couple, Shukumar and Shoba, in Boston. They are American citizens of Indian origin. Shukumar is thirty five years old and his wife, now of thirty years. Shukumar is still busy in his doctoral dissertation "on agrarian revolts in India." (2) He has no employment on hand, leaving the burden of house-running to his wife. She works as a proof-reader of textbooks in the office of downtown. The tragedy of their life is that they have lost their first and only child at delivery itself. The event alters their subsequent life drastically. The story captures a pivotal moment in a couple's relatively short but eventful marriage. It is a heartbreaking story of an Indian couple with their estrangement and marital discord in an alien land. It also gives voice to their maladies, angst, alienation, drifted personal relationships, breakdown of communication in familial life and loss in their immigrant lives.

Marriage is the union of two hearts. It is the most sacred and pious aspect in human life. It is a human experience in which one shares emotions, feelings, joy, sorrow etc. A blissful marriage is both stable and

peaceful whereas disagreement and discord are also the harsh realities of the same relationship. Marriage as an institution blooms with love and understanding, and fades with suspicion and non-communication. It is a bliss if there 'is trust an understanding in the relationship otherwise it is not less than a curse. For an Americanised couple in the story, marriage seems to be a curse. Actually, they had enough in each other to be happily married; they had their own dreams about a family of their own:

He imagined a day when he and Shoba might need to buy a station wagon of their own, to cart their children back and forth from music lessons and dentist appointments. He imagined himself gripping the wheel, as Shoba turned around to hand the children juice boxes. (3)

When Shoba's child was born dead, her husband was away for a paper presentation and it become a traumatic moment for Shoba. When she was taken home after the delivery, she started avoiding her husband. There is lack of understanding between them which creates crisis in their marital life. Though they lived in a three bed-room house, there was no warmth in their relationship. However, "There was nothing to indicate that she would not be able to have children in the future." (4)

The relationship has deteriorated to the point that everything in Shukumar's life seems to have lost color, vibrancy. The love he once felt for Shoba has lost its ardour, for he sees her beauty fading, "the cosmetics that had seemed superfluous were necessary now, not to improve her but to define her somehow." (14) At the same time, Shoba is always indifferent towards Shukumar. Once she was "too eager to collapse into his arms." (2) She never thinks about her appearance. It becomes too rumpled which reminds her look, "like the type of woman she'd once claimed she would never resemble." (1) The inability to communicate; express feeling of love, concern and care widens the gap between them. It creates the marital discord in the relationship of the Indian immigrant couple who have long been Americanized.

Under such state of affairs, crisis in their married life creates the lack of communication between them. Both of them deliberately avoid each other. Actually, they lived very happily before the tragedy happened

in their life. Shukumar thought that this crisis in their relationship would pass soon. She was just thirty-three and was strong and on her feet again. The doctor also tried to console them by saying, "that these things happen." (4) But no one out of them was ready to bridge the barrier created between them after the death of their baby. Moreover, as Shukumar thought,

...how he and Shoba had become experts at avoiding each other in their three- bedroom house, spending as much time on separate floors as possible. He thought of how he no longer looked forward to weekends... and how long, it had been since she looked into his eyes and smiled, or whispered his name on those rare occasions they still reached for each other's bodies before sleeping. (4-5)

Their malady is failure in communication in emotional stress.

Due to lack of communication, both are living isolated and alienated life in an alien land — under the same roof. Within the span of only a few months, they have constructed for themselves a routine life forever. In an effort to delay her coming and an inevitable confrontation with her husband, Shoba spends long hours at her office, "where she searched for typographical errors in textbooks and marked them, in a code • • . with an assortment of colored pencils." (4) She is always in search of an opportunity to stay out of her home, "the more Shoba stayed out, the more she begun Putting in extra hours at work and taking on additional projects." (2) When she comes at home, "she sat for hours on the sofa with her colored pencils and her files." (5) On the other hand, Shukumar remains ensconced on the third floor, "He hadn't left the house at all that day, or the day before... the more he wanted to stay in, not even leaving to get the mail, or to buy fruit or wine at the stores by the trolley stop." (2) He sleeps until it is almost lunch time, drinking coffee Shoba had brewed earlier that morning. He also forgets to brush his teeth regularly. He cannot find the motivation he needs to finish his dissertation. He seeks to escape his wife's attention by moving his office to the nursery, a place Shoba avoids. "It was the one time in the day she sought him out, and yet he'd come to dread it. He knew it was something she forced herself to do." (8)

Both of them also avoided the contact of companions and relatives. They lived isolated from the society. Years ago, when there was a birthday party arranged by Shoba, there were some one hundred and twenty people. In the party Shoba kept Shukumar's long fingers linked with hers as they walked among the guests at the party; that was a thing of the past. The only guest, they had in intervening period was Shoba's mother; she came from Arizona. Shukumar never talked to his mother-in-law. B.S. Nimavat aptly points out, "At times absurdly funny, at others heartbreakingly sad, Lahiri's tale examines how a tragic loss can lead to indifference and a breakdown between in communication between two people who once loved each other" (199).

The temporary matter plays an inevitable role to unite them. The temporary matter is that, "...for five days their electricity would be cut off for one hour, beginning at eight P.M." (1) It symbolically stands for the conjugal harmony in the lives of Shoba and Shukumar. The power cut coincided with their lunch time, from eight to nine in the evening; it meant that they had to eat in the dark. The story is confined to those five days when there will be no electricity for an hour. During those five days, Shukumar and Shoba come closer after the day's busy schedules. In the darkness of the power cut, the silences between them is to melt away. They could speak out their minds to each other. "Something happened when the house was dark. They were able to talk to each other again." (19) They play games, "Say something to each other in the dark." (13) Shoba remembered that whenever there was a power-cut in India, they would say something, invariable; it would be a story, a poem, a joke or anything. But Shukumar was not good at telling stories. She then suggested, "How about telling each other something we've never told before." (13) Both of them welcomed this power cut for an hour as darkness could bring them closer despite difference submerged in their relationship. As they sit together each evening from 8 P.M. to 9 p.M., they begin to share — about the time they met "four years earlier at a lecture hall in Cambridge... They'd ended up side by side, on folding wooden chairs." (13), about the first she visited him, "The first time I was alone in your

apartment, I looked in your address book to see if you'd written me in." (13), about his forgetting to tip the waiter, "I forgot to tip the waiter. I went back the next morning, found out his name, left money with the manager." (14), about cheating at an exam, at selling the sweater she knit for him, about the poem she did not like, about the photo of a woman he had ripped out of a magazine etc. These small exchanges now seem to bring them together. About it, Mukherjee comments, "The past, however bitter it may be, looks romantic and beautiful, when viewed through the window of the present" (109).

But in the morning of fifth night, the electric company announced that there would be no power cut on that evening as the line had been repaired ahead of its scheduled time. It disappointed and shocked them. Living together act was over for them. Darkness helped them confess as there was no restriction of guilty consciousness, no eye contact and no inhibition. Pashupati Jha rightly comments:

This is a highly psychological story in which light stands for the conscious reality that may be troublesome. This conscious reality is also the contrasting mindset of the couple asserting itself when there is light all around. Darkness, nonetheless, signifies the strong undercurrent of subconscious desire for love unconditioned by ego or will (71).

As an American woman, Shoba wants freedom, wants sometime to be alone which is not even thought of in India. Shoba wants liberty, both economic and personal; she Plans accordingly by saving her bonus and searching for an apartment. This kind of lonely existence is a common feature in the U.S. She also made it a habit to drink Plenty of wine. "Bottles of vinho verde had nested in a bed of ice in the bathtub. Shoba was in her fifth month, drinking ginger ale from a martini glass." (9) In India, in the middle class, it is rare to see . women drinking. One definitely remembers Ibsen's Nora in Doll's House and Kate Chopin's Edna Pontellier in The Awakening (Sondkar 112). After the death of her child, she was "preparing a life without him." (21) She might have felt like the typical Americans that she could not continue without some decent space around her. In India, unlike the west, those who break free from their wedlock are not comfortable socially, emotionally and physically. Nila Das

observes, "It is believed that individual as well as familial and social relationships are lived to the full when men and women inter-relationships relate to one another in a shared socio-cultural space" (54).

The crisis in marital life had changed into an exchange of confessions due to the small temporary matter. They made love to, which they didn't for many years. The process of confession which started in the dark continued even in the light, for they developed the courage to face each other, and they no more required the veil of darkness. As a result, Shoba reveals the truth that she needed some time alone and informs, "I've been looking for an apartment and I've found one." (21) Shukumar is shocked and reveals a harsh reality to her. He then takes his turn and discloses the secret he had

f kept from her. He tells the secret, "Our baby was a boy... His skin was more red than brown. He had black hair on his head. He weighed almost five pound. His fingers were curled shut, just like yours in the night." (22) The confession from both sides once again unites them and the story ends with the words, "they wept together, for the things they now knew." (22) Though the story ends on an optimistic, open end it is doubtful whether they will remain together forever, share and communicate accompany each other forever. But the confession unites them and restores their faith in marriage bond. Madhoo Kamara aptly points out, "It (A Temporary Matter) records the process of restoration of faith after a long dividing doldrum - a threat to the otherwise gloomy conjugality of unwanted inter dependency between Shukumar and Shoba" (124).

"When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine" is the second story of Jhumpa Lahiri's elegant collection, Interpreter of Maladies. The story is about an Indian scholar who is on a visit to America and has been awarded a grant from the government of Pakistan to study the foliage of New England. The story of Mr. Pirzada, a University Professor unfolds before the reader through the mouthpiece character, Lilia. Through her eyes we see the life that an immigrant lives — separated by distance but united by sentiment. As a child, she watches in surprise and awe the unfolding drama of Mr. Pirzada's life. The story seems to be autobiographical. It reminds us of Lahiri's own experiences of growing up as an

immigrants' child through the narrator of the story. It captures the distinct feeling of alienation, the universal way that family and danger bring us all together. About this story, Jhumpa Lahiri, in interview with Elizabeth Fransworth, said:

This story is based on a gentleman from Bangladesh who used to come to my parents' house in 1971... I heard from my parents what his predicament was. And I learned about his situation, which was that he was in the United States during the Pakistani Civil War and his family was back in Dacca... I was so overwhelmed by this information that I wrote this story (Interview with Elizabeth Fransworth).

"When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine" explores the loneliness and isolation of Bangladeshi immigrant scholar who leaves home and family to study the foliage of New England. It also captures the anxiety of the immigrant when the clouds of war start looming over East Pakistan. In Dacca, he has a three-storey home and a lectureship in Botany at the Dacca University. He has left behind a wife of twenty years and seven daughters between the ages of six and sixteen whose names begin with the letter A. In spite of his happy family life; he immigrates to America on a grant from the government of Pakistan to study the foliage of New England. As his grant is frugal, he has to live in a room in a graduate dormitory and does not have "a proper stove or a television set of his own." (24) So, he comes to the narrator's house to gather news about the life or death of his family. Being a Bengali Muslim, Mr. Pirzada is always in anxiety about the safety of his wife and daughters during the Indo-Pak- War. That was the time of Civil War in Pakistan in 1971 when Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was leading Bangladesh for freedom from the clutches of Pakistan. He is worried about his family in Dacca. "...bearing confection in his pocket' and hopes of ascertaining the life or death of his family." (23) He always sets his watch to Dacca time. In anxiety of his family, "Each week Mr. Pirzada wrote letters to his wife.. .but the postal system, along with most everything else in Dacca, had collapsed, and he had not heard word of them in over six months." (24)

To confront the sense of nostalgia for the home and homeland, loneliness, absence of belonging and communication, Lahiri uses food in her dazzling stories. She deftly interweaves several recurring

themes in the collection, including the value of individual and families sharing a meal as an act of unity or community. Similarly, the characters use food to reconnect with their motherland. Food certainly serves as an important part of immigrants' identity. It provides a link and induces a 'sense of belonging in an alien world. In "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine", food serves as a strong bond between characters. Asha Chobey rightly points out: Food comes as a fistful soil from the motherland. Not only does food serve as a slice of native life for Mr. Pirzada but also it serves as a strong bond between the protagonist, Mr. Pirzada and Lilia's family ([www.postcolonialweb.org](http://www.postcolonialweb.org)).

Lilia's family looks up Indian names in the local phone book, and subsequently invites one Mr. Pirzada over for "long cherished meals." (34) Actually, Mr. Pirzada comes from Dacca (Bangladesh) whereas Lilia's parents are from India. But the food that they relish, as well their collective meals, establishes a bond of affinity:

They ate pickled mangoes with their meals, ate rice every night for supper with their hands. Like my parents, Mr. Pirzada took off his shoes before entering a room, chewed fennel seeds after meals as a digestive, drank noalcohol, for dessert dipped austere biscuits into successive cups of tea. (25)

Lahiri dwells on the importance of the collective meals between Mr. Pirzada and Lilia's family; simple but evocative meals like "mincemeat Kebabs with coriander chutney" (28), "ground areca nuts" (29), "lentils with fried onions, green beans with coconut, fish cooked with raisins in a yogurt sauce." (30) These food items which are typically Indian as well as Pakistani not only set the rhythm of harmony among all the Indo-Pakistani community but also they serve as a refuge for Mr. Pirzada in his homesickness. Reviewer Charles Taylor writes that "food in these ° stories is a talisman, a reassuring bit of the homeland to cling to" ([www.salon.com](http://www.salon.com)).

The story throws light that Indians and Pakistanis outside their respective geographical locations are no enemies, but friends. It brings before us the Indian American life of a Bengali family and their scholar friend from East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). The story is narrated through the mouthpiece character, a ten-year-old girl Lilia. Mr. Pirzada comes to the narrator's house regularly for his meal as a

paying guest. He belongs to Pakistan and is a Muslim and the narrator's family is from India and they are Hindu. But their culture connection binds them. The narrator's family gets along with Mr. Pirzada quite comfortably, sometimes, he even sleeps there, as if he were a close relative of them. Mr. Pirzada's muslimness has not even once clashed with the hinduness of the narrator's family. In spite of it, their cultural affinity is obviously stronger than the differences of religion and country, and responsible for their closeness: "Like my parents, Mr. Pirzada took off his shoes before entering a room, chewed fennel seeds after meals as a digestive, drank no alcohol, for dessert dipped austere biscuits into successive cups of tea." (25) Their closeness becomes more emphasized now the three of them (Mr. Pirzada, Lilia's father and mother) operate "as if they were a single person, sharing a single meal, a single body, a single silence and a single fear." (41) The ten-year-old Lilia observes a strong bond between her Bengali parents and Mr. Pirzada, a Pakistani from Dacca. They "spoke the same language, laughed at the same jokes, looked more or less the same." (25) In a foreign land the fact of belonging to a different country becomes meaningless. Though their countries are different, their cultures are the same.

The visits of Mr. Pirzada come to an end when he completes his project and flies home quite anxiously. The story however ends on a positive note with the card from Mr. Pirzada: "He was reunited, he wrote, with his wife and children. All were well, having survived the events of the past year." (41-42) After hearing from Mr. Pirzada about the safety of his family, Lilia and her parents become very happy and celebrate their happiness with a special dinner. Located in the respective geographical space India and Pakistan may consider each other as an enemy, but thrown together in a third space there is absolutely no enmity, only love, concern and prayer for the other. Pashupati Jha and T. Ravichandran observe that this story is "unique in the sense that emphasis is here on fostering a cultural bond despite apparent differences of birth and breeding" (73).

"When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine" is a powerful story, set in New England in 1971, exploring the subject of partition — the division of India and

Pakistan by the British in 1947 and afterwards the partition of Pakistan and Bangladesh in 1971. The story not only depicts the oneness of people belonging to geographically two different countries but also comments on the subtle, though ultimately noticeable effects of western colonialism on Indians and Indian immigrants in a foreign land. Due to British colonialism, India is divided into two distinct parts: India and Pakistan in 1947. After the partition, there is a riot in India. "Hindus here, Muslims there. Dacca no longer belongs to us. He told me that during partition Hindus and Muslims had set fire to each other's homes. For many, the idea of eating in the other's company was still unthinkable." (25) The narrator's father in the story gives voice to his anxiety. "Mr Pirzada is no longer considered Indian. Not since partition. Our country was divided. 1947." (25) Afterwards, the Civil War broke out in East Pakistan in 1971.

That year Pakistan was engaged in civil war. The eastern frontier, where Dacca was located, was fighting for autonomy from the ruling regime in the west. In March, Dacca had been invaded, torched and shelled by the Pakistani army. Teachers were dragged onto streets and shot, women dragged into barracks and raped. By the end of the summer, three hundred thousand people were said to have died. (23)

The Indians suffered a lot in their motherland during the colonial period. After gaining independence, the immigrants like Mr. Pirzada got worried and restless in a foreign land. When the six-thirty news was aired on the television, the narrator said, "I saw tanks rolling through dusty streets, and fallen buildings, and forests of unfamiliar trees into which East Pakistani refugees had fled, seeking safety over the Indian border." (31) Such incidents increase the anxiety of Indian immigrants in the adopted land. Lilia becomes terribly restless when the Indian government goes to war with Pakistan obviously to contain the inflow of the refugees. Fortunately the war ends in twelve days. She is obsessed with the history of India, Pakistan and partition.

A ten-year-old girl named Lilia is the narrator of the story which builds around her hopes and fears over grave situations such as the Pakistani Civil War and invasion of Dacca by Pakistani army. Lilia, although born and brought up in Boston, is unable to get rid

of the sentiments, which Forster would call, absolutely Indian. She is the representative of the immigrants who are sandwiched between two cultures — the motherland and adopted land. She leads a much westernised life. She goes to an American school, associates with American children, celebrates their festivals like the Halloween; her father works with the Americans, her neighbours are American; she speaks English; she watches American television and she is fully exposed to the American way of life.

On the other hand, she is exposed to a very Indian way of life, albeit only in the confines of her own home where her mother cooks Indian food, her parents speak Bengali; and they are forever concerned about India and what is happening there. For them India is an actual and concrete place that will be 'home' in their hearts forever. They are tied to the memories of India they carry with them and are constantly struggling to adjust to a new country and a new way of life. But the second generation immigrant, Lilia is not tied to a specific place. She is between two worlds — neither India nor America.

Lilia's innocent mind cannot understand the issues like Partition, the Civil War in East Pakistan, the fleeing refugees and the frequent communal clashes. She waits longingly for the candy Mr. Pirzada brings everyday for her. As she says: "I coveted each evening's treasure as I would a jewel, or a coin from a buried kingdom, and I would place it in a small keepsake box made of carved sandalwood beside my bed." (29) She could not understand how Mr. Pirzada could be different from her parents. She shares her perplex with the readers:

It made no sense to me. Mr. Pirzada and my parents spoke the same language, laughed at the same jokes, looked more or less the same. They ate pickled mangoes with their meals, ate rice every night for supper with their hands. Like my parents, Mr. Pirzada took off his shoes before entering a room, chewed fennel seeds after meals as a digestive, drank no alcohol, for dessert dipped austere biscuits into successive cups of tea. Nevertheless my father insisted that I understand the difference. (25)

As she hears the discussion between her father and Mr. Pirzada, her curiosity is raised to know about Pakistan, the Partition and the Civil War in East

Pakistan. She tries to read about India in her school library.

Eventually I found a book titled *Pakistan: A Land and Its People*. I sat on a footstool and opened the book. The laminated jacket crackled in my grip. I began turning the pages, filled with photos of rivers and rice fields and men in military uniforms. There was a chapter about Dacca, and I began to read about its rainfall, and its jute production. I was studying a population chart. (33)

But her teacher Mrs. Kenyon discourages her saying there was no reason to consult books on India as it was not a part of the field of study. Lilia also notes that

We learned American history, of course, and American geography. That year, and every year, it seemed, we began by studying the Revolutionary War. We were taken in school buses on field trips to visit Plymouth Rock, and to walk the Freedom Trail, and to climb to the top of the Bunker Hill Monument. We made dioramas out of colored construction paper depicting George Washington crossing the choppy waters of the Delaware River, and we made puppets of King George wearing white tights and a black bow in his hair. During tests we were given blank maps of the thirteen colonies, and asked to fill in names, dates, capitals. (27) Such a paradox makes it more difficult for the young girl to decipher which place she belongs to.

Unlike her parents, Lilia is caught in insider outsider syndrome. Her attitude towards Mr. Pirzada is symbolic of her relation to the filial country. She feels a sense of distance from her parent's history but at the same time is inquisitive of another country. She is a representative of second generation Indian Americans who are positioned in the third space of 'in betweenness' — a cross cultural space which offers, as Homi Bhabha puts it, "the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood — singular or communal — that initiate new signs of identity" (380).

As in "Once in a Lifetime", "Hell-Heaven", Lahiri also employs the second generation Indian-American child as a narrator of the story titled as "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine". Lilia, narrator of the story, is 'an innocent ten-year-old girl who unfolds the life drama of Mr. Pirzada, a university professor on a research programme in the U.S. currently. He comes

to Lilia's house for his meals regularly. As a child, she hears the discussion between her father and Mr. Pirzada. She comes to know about his wife and his seven girls living in Dacca.

...he explained one day, producing from his wallet a black-and-white picture of seven girls at a picnic, their braids tied with ribbons, sitting cross-legged in a row, eating chicken curry off the banana leaves. "How am I to distinguish? Ayesha, Amira, Amina, Aziza, you see the difficulty. (23-24)

Lilia is like one of Mr. Pirzada's daughter left in Bangladesh. One is reminded of Ratan and Mini in Rabindranath Tagore's "The Postmaster" and "The Cabuliwallah" (Mukherjee 110).

Being an innocent child, she does not find any difference between her parents and Mr. Pirzada. She thinks that Mr. Pirzada is an Indian like her parents; it is only her father who corrects her saying that Mr. Pirzada is not an Indian, but a Pakistani. He gives her a lesson on Partition and adds how Hindus and Muslims longed for each other's throat in the 1940's. However, Lilia notices that there is a sudden change when the Civil War breaks out in East Pakistan in 1971. During this turmoil, she observes Mr. Pirzada's anxiety. She too cannot help feeling an emotional bond with Mr. Pirzada and prays for the safety and security of Pirzada's family living in their homeland. She tells us,

I prayed that Mr. Pirzada's family was safe and sound. I had never prayed for anything before, had never been taught or told to, but I decided, given the circumstances, that it was something I should do. That night when I went to the bathroom I only pretended to brush my teeth, for I feared that I would somehow rinse the prayer out as well. I wet the brush and rearranged the tube of paste to prevent my parents from asking any questions, and fell asleep with sugar on my tongue. (32)

This sympathy is the normal sympathy of a little, sensitive girl for the suffering men and women. Like Mr. Pirzada, her mind is also worried due to fear and anxiety. She shares her perplex with the readers: "I worried whether his wife and seven daughters were now members of the drifting, clamoring crowd that had flashed at intervals on the screen." (32) To console Mr. Pirzada, she thinks, "I wondered, too, what would happen if suddenly his seven daughters were to appear on television, smiling and waving

and blowing kisses to Mr. Pirzada from a balcony. I imagined how relieved he would be. But this never happened." (31) The story ends with Mr. Pirzada's returning to Dacca, living in a free country with his wife and seven daughters. But Lilia missed him a lot. "Though I had not seen him for months, it was only then that I felt Mr. Pirzada's absence. It was only then, raising my water glass in his name, that I knew what it meant to miss someone who was so many miles and hours away, just as he had missed his wife and daughters for so many months." (42) This is universal feeling of childhood towards parents and elders.

"Interpreter of Maladies" is the title story of Jhumpa Lahiri's dazzling collection. It is about the first generation Indian-American couple — Mr. Das and Mrs. Das on a tour of India with their children — Tina (daughter), Ronny and Bobby (sons). The Das family is guided by Mr. Kapsi, a driver cum tourist guide who also works as an interpreter for a doctor. The phrase "Interpreter of Maladies" has its origin way back in 1999. Lahiri got the phrase in a conversation with a person in Boston. Jhumpa Lahiri says, Usually titles don't emerge until I'm well underway with a story, and sometimes I finish something and still have to search for a title. "Interpreter of Maladies" was the exception. This title was born before I even knew what the story would be about. At first it was simply a phrase that came to me during my graduate school years in Boston. One day I crossed paths with an acquaintance of American descent who has kindly helped me move, sometime before, into one of my Boston apartments. We stopped to chat, and he told me he was working in a doctor's office, translating on behalf of the doctor's many Russian patients. As I walked back home the phrase "Interpreter of Maladies" popped into my head as a way of describing what this person was doing. It lingered long enough for me to jot the phrase down on a piece of paper. Even so often I would come across it, thinking it might make a good title, but the story didn't materialize for another five years or so ([www.chipublib.org](http://www.chipublib.org)).

The story is a perfect amalgamation of Indian and Foreign culture. Lahiri never forgets India and Indian attitude towards life. She portrays the cultural diversities through the Indian-American family who visit their parents every year. She minutely observes

their greeting style, dress, language, mode of behaviour etc. The story is set in India. Actually, some of Lahiri's characters are living in India and some are Indian immigrants living in the United States. Most, however, are like Lahiri herself, foreign - born children of Indian immigrants torn between being Indian and being American, and it is this conflict which shapes most of the stories. The title story introduces us an American-born Indian family on tour to India, strangers to their own culture and heritage.

In this story, we find the cultural diversity - the cultures of East and West. The family looks like Indian but dresses as Americans did. Lahiri presents Mr. Das as a representative of the American life.

A clean-shaved man, he looked exactly a magnified version of Ronny. He had

a sapphire blue visor, and was dressed in shorts, sneakers, and a T-shirt. The

camera slung around his neck, with an impressive telephoto lens and

numerous buttons and markings, was the only complicated thing he wore. (44)

His wife, Mina Das represents the American woman who "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. The blouse was decorated at chest-level with a calico applique in the shape of a strawberry." (46) At the time of greeting, Mr. Kapsi pressed Mr. Das's palms together. But the Americanised Mr. Das like a typical American squeezed his hands and Mr. Das had flexed one side of his mouth, smiling dutifully at Mr. Kapsi, without displaying any interest in him. Mr. Raj and his wife Mrs. Mina Das are born in America. Their parents live in Assansol in India and the young couple visited them once in two years. Like the Americans, Mr. Das refers to his wife by her first name when speaking to the little girl. Mrs. Mina Das, like American women, quarrelled with her husband for trivial things like who would take Tina, to the toilet. "AT TEA STALL Mr. and Mrs. Das bickered about who should take Tina to the toilet." (43) But the Indian women very obediently look after the family and children. Mrs. Mina Das, like the American women, adopts the American way of life.

...her frosty pink fingernails painted to match her lips, and was slightly plump in her figure. Her hair, shorn only a little longer than her husband's, was parted far to one side. She was wearing large dark brown sunglasses with a pinkish tint to them, and carried a big straw bag, almost as big as her torso, shaped like a bowl, with a water bottle poking out of it. (46)

Lahiri also points out the Americanisation of Das family's children. About their dress style, the narrator says, "the children in stiff, brightly colored clothing and caps with translucent visors." (44) On the way to Konarak, when the children saw some monkeys, they shouted 'monkeys', but Mr. Kapsi said immediately, "We call them hanuman." (47) Yet another cultural change is that "Mr. and Mrs. Das behaved like an older brother and sister, not parents. It seemed that they were in charge of the children only for the day; it was hard to believe they were regularly responsible for anything other than themselves." (49) These are some of the instances of the cultural diversities between the visiting Indian Americans and the native Indian.

The story beautifully expresses the dilemma, the difficulty and often the impossibility of communicating emotional pain and affliction to others as well as to one's own self. Mr. Kapsi, the interpreter of maladies, has lost his ability to communicate with his wife, forcing him to drink his tea in silence at night and leading to a loveless marriage. "The signs he recognized from his own marriage were there — the bickering, the indifference, the protracted silences." (53) He has also lost his ability to communicate in some of the languages he learned as a young man. In his youth, he had been a devoted scholar of foreign languages, the owner of an impressive collection of dictionaries. He had dreamed of being an interpreter for diplomats and dignitaries. But he was unable to achieve his target due to his marriage. Due to his failure in his job, he also fears to communicate with his children because "Sometimes he feared that his children knew better English than he did, just from watching television. Still, it came in handy for the tours." (52)

Mrs. Das does not communicate with her husband and children not because of a language barrier but because of her deep rooted guilt. Mr. Kapsi

observes, "Mr. And Mrs. Das were a bad match, just as he and his wife were. Perhaps they, too, had little in common apart from three children and a decade of their lives." (53) On the way of Konarak, Mrs. Das is not interested in anything. "She was lost behind her sunglasses, ignoring her husband's requests that she pose for another picture, walking past her children as if they were strangers." (58) The children of Das family do not listen to their parents, nor do they listen to Mrs. Kapsi about the monkeys. It is a sign of failure of communication.

All these frustrated attempts at communicating with one another lead to hurt feelings. Mrs. Kapsi is trapped in a failing marriage. Mr. and Mrs. Das are openly hostile to each other. The children of Das family run rampant over their parents and everyone else. Mr. Kapsi and Mrs. Das are unable to reach a level of friendship that they both may have sought, if only they could speak with one another openly. When Mrs. Das loses Mrs. Kapsi's address at the end of the story, it marks the termination of the possibility that they could reach out to each other and the definite end to all communication between them.

Marriage is the union of two people, two families. Communication and confession are two pillars of marital bliss. Sense of guilt, non-communication and infidelity are elements that crush marriage. In "Interpreter of Maladies", Jhumpa Lahiri portrays the husband-wife relation which is full of deceit, deception, dark deeds, non-communication, lack of trust and understanding. Fear, guilt captures the mind and soul of Mrs. Das. She is unable to share the secret, confess her adultery like Hester Prynne in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (Sondkar 113). Mrs Das is tempted and in a spur of a moment loses her chastity. She involves in extra-marital affair with her husband's Punjabi friend and gives birth to a son from the 'same relationship which is not acceptable nor is permissible in the Indian society. Lahiri discloses her infidelity:

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 Raj always insisted on afterward. (64)

She doesn't confess for the sake of self-security, for the family and her own self respect. Extra-marital affair, non-communication, lack of understanding in relationship causes multitude of problems in one's marital life. Through the illicit sexual relationship of Mrs. Das, Lahiri tries to remind us that infidelity is not the exclusive experience of the Americans but immigrant Indians are also susceptible to it and more over it is not limited to one country or one culture but is a universal phenomenon.

"Interpreter of Maladies" also relates the loss of love between husband and wife who earlier thought of being in love and continued to stay with each other. The pain that emerges at a later stage and engulfs the entire relationship becomes the cause of a major breach. Mrs. Das reveals to Mr. Kapsi her one-time affair (extra-marital affair) and later the process of her and Mr. Das's loss of interest in one another and their subsequent failure to feel the same bond of attachment that had once existed. There is a persistent pain that she has felt all the time in carrying on with a relationship that had failed in various ways. "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. He thinks I'm still in love with him." (66)

This story is a brilliant analysis of the institution of marriage and the various maladies of the family of the first generation Indian immigrants. Loss of love, non-communication, lack of understanding and emotional pain are the various maladies. Mr. and Mrs. Das visit India with their three children, Tina, Ronny and Bobby. They are guided by a driver-cum-tourist guide, Mr. Kapsi on their way to the Sun Temple at Konarak. On the way, Mr. Kapsi tells them that he guides tours only on Fridays and Saturdays, and on other days, he works as an interpreter for a doctor. Coming to know of his regular profession as an interpreter of maladies of patients to a doctor, Mrs. Das finds him romantic and intoxicating. She reacts, "Interesting, I've never heard of anything like that." (50) She also takes his address, takes a close snap with him, calls him to have lunch with them and thus becomes quite friendly. Mr. Kapsi also begins to entertain romantic thoughts of intimacy with her. He suggests them to visit the hills of Udaygiri and Khandagiri. On reaching there, Mrs. Das refuses to accompany her husband and stays

back in the car. She requests Mr. Kapsi to stay back. When he praises Bobby as "a brave little boy," Mrs. Das comments, "It's not so surprising. He is not his." (62) She discloses the secret about Bobby that he is the fruit of her husband's Punjabi friend. From that one time extra-marital affair, her sense of guilt is deep rooted in her mind. She alienates from her husband and her children. She loses the love of marital life. Her guilty consciousness has made her sick. Lahiri points out her state of mind:

She did not behave in a romantic way toward her husband, and yet she had used the word to describe him. He wondered if Mr. and Mrs. Das were a bad match, just as he and his wife were. Perhaps they, too, had little in common apart from three children and a decade of their lives. (53)

She is busy polishing her nails and eating puffed rice. She does not love her children or husband and is caught in the boredom of her life. Her depression and apathy distance her from her family, but she harbours a secret that could tear the entire family apart. She carelessly scatters the puffed rice along the trail at the monastic dwellings, never thinking about the danger her actions pose to others. Even where she realises the danger to Bobby, as monkeys surround and terrify him, Mrs. Das does not take any responsibility for the situation, just as she refuses to acknowledge any guilt about an affair with Mr. Das's friend. Before this illicit relationship, she is very happy with Mr. Das from their college life. She is unable to live without him for a minute. She says,

We married when we were still in college. We were in high school when he proposed. We went to the same college, of course. Back then we couldn't stand the thought of being separated, not for a day, not for a minute. Our parents were best friends who lived in the same town. My entire life I saw him every weekend, either at our house or theirs. (63)

Mrs. Das reveals to Mr. Kapsi her one time affair in an illicit relationship with her husband's friend, a Punjabi gentleman who had come to stay with them for a week and Bobby is the fruit of that extra-marital affair. This guilty consciousness has made her suffer for the last eight years and has made her sick. She says, "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. He thinks I'm still

in love with him." (65) She tells Mr. Kapsi all this because she believes in his talents. She feels he might be having children of her age and would be able to bring a remedy for this terrible silent suffering by interpreting her malady. She says, "I was hoping you could help me feel better, say the right thing. Suggest some kind of remedy." (Ibid) Mr. Kapsi is greatly disturbed to learn that Mrs. Das thought of him as a parent. He does not have any remedy with him for her. But Mrs. Das expects the opinion from him. Hear the emotionally-tensed conversation:

Mrs. Mina Das: Well, don't you have anything to say?"

Mr. Kapsi: "About what?"

Mrs. Mina Das: "About what I've just told you. About my secret, and about how terrible it makes me feel. I feel terrible looking at my children, and at Raj, always terrible. I have terrible urges, Mr. Kapasi, to throw things away. One V. 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?" (Ibid) (Dramatic version mine)

The repetition of the word 'terrible' shows how much pain she had undergone because of her guilt and humiliation.

The only remedy that came to his mind is that she should be honest and tell the secret to Mr. Das. This also he does not suggest. He only asks her, "Is it really pain you feel, Mrs. Das, or is it guilt?" (65) At this time, Mrs. Das turns to him and glares. She does not say anything but opens the car door and begins to walk up the path where her family is. She wants a cure for her malady. But the malady is deep rooted and Mr. Kapsi, the interpreter, is no doctor to cure her of the malady. "Honesty is the best policy" for Mrs. Das, the solution to the crisis is successfully conveyed through the "Interpreter of Maladies" to the readers. Lahiri seems to suggest that the emigrant Indians are unable to get rid of their Indian consciousness -- that they should be honest and true in their conjugal life. The concept of chastity haunts them like a ghost at noon. At the same time, they cannot be westernized in their thoughts and feelings. This dichotomy is the predicament of the Indians settled abroad.

Lahiri is undoubtedly the first emigrant writer who is concerned with the lives of immigrants, their

maladies and tries to be interpreter. She probes deep into the maladies but prescribes no cure. She is an artist and the artist's another name is an interpreter. She only interprets the 'maladies' faced by immigrants but does not suggest any solutions to their traumatic maladies. She emerges as the 'interpreter of maladies' and not the physician of maladies in the Indian diasporic literature.

"Interpreter of Maladies" also explores the result of frankness and romanticising of the American way of life. The characters misunderstand the frankness of the other person, the results are in some way harmful. Mr. Kapsi is a typical Indian male who misunderstands Mrs. Das's frankness as love. As a car driver cum tourist guide, Mr. Kapsi takes the American born couple to the Sun Temple at Konarak. On his way to the temple, he tells them about his other job, the job of an interpreter for doctor. Mrs. Das remarks that it is romantic one, a big responsibility, as the patients are totally dependent on him. Mr. Kapsi has never received so much attention from any woman including his wife who had little regard for his career as an interpreter. Mr. Kapsi is happy as Mrs. Das feels that his job is full of challenges. He fantasies about their relationship and wants to establish romantic relation with her in his loneliness. He compares her with his wife: "From time to time he glanced through the mirror at Mrs. Das. In addition to glancing at her face he glanced at the strawberry between her breasts, and the golden brown hollow in her throat." (53-54) He is anxious to be alone with Mrs. Das to indulge in some private conversation. At Konarak, he remains with Mrs. Das and observes erotic sculptures. His sensuous infatuation for Mrs. Das intoxicates him with the sight of her bare legs and short skirts: "Though Mr. Kapsi had been to the temple countless times, it occurred to him, as he, too, gazed at the topless women, that he had never seen his own wife fully naked... 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." (58)

On the other hand, Mrs. Das is interested in Mr. Kapsi as an interpreter of maladies. She wants Mr. Kapsi to become a confidante to her and solve her marital difficulties. She considers him as a father figure and helper and ignores indications that he

may not fit those roles. She doesn't notice that he is uncomfortable with her personal revelations and presses him for help even when he explicitly tells her that he cannot give it to her. Mr. Das, no doubt, is liberal enough to tell his wife to move closer to Kapsi for a snap but the closeness that she had with his Punjabi friend would destroy the relation which took years to build. He also photographs the Indian peasant whose suffering he finds appropriate for a tourist shot. He sees only what he wants to see - an interesting picture from a foreign perspective not the actual who is starving by the roadside.

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