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## **The World and the Self: Shoba, Mrs. Das and Mrs. Sen in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies***

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### **Abstract:**

Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*, the anthology of short stories, deals with some specific themes such as the identity and existential crisis of Indians living outside India, marital disharmony, displacement and dislocation, various mental conflicts experienced by men and women and the aloofness experienced by sensitive, frustrated individuals in strange lands. This paper intends to focus on the women protagonists of three stories in order to understand the way by which they engage in a conflict between the external and the internal world –the World (the external world of appearance) and the Self (the mind)- and how they are trapped in a cocoon of exile, alienation and loneliness. The paper attempts to see how the experiential realms of the married women differ, apart from the similarities, and how the escapist tendency they display show a difference depending upon the source of solace they lean on to.

**Keywords:** The World, the Self, trauma, psychological conflict, escapism

Diasporic literature with its spirit of innovation and diversity, both in form and theme, exhibited a massive growth in the late twentieth century round the globe. With the emergence of writers like Salman Rushdie, Rohinton Mistry, Jhumpa Lahiri, Kiran Desai, Agha Shahid Ali and many others, Indian Writing flourished in many a colour and taste, especially in the latter half of the twentieth century. Jhumpa Lahiri, with her fiction and short stories carrying the pulse of the Indian diaspora across many places, has gained a unique identity and position among the contemporary Indian writers. Her works portray the mental conflicts and traumas experienced by Indians outside India and help one understand the state of 'in-between-ness' that they are undergoing. Her novels and short stories equally carry the sense of displacement, isolation and alienation as experienced by the exiles or emigrants, that becomes a key source for the identity crisis or existential trauma faced by them. As any diasporic

writer would do, she comes up with characters frustrated by their lives in an outside country and expresses the struggle of their minds to cope with the new identity and existence. There is always an element of nostalgia that blooms, where the characters cherish their past lives back in India and poignantly recollect the gone days that not just throw light upon the lost glory of Indian traditions and customs, but also assists one in measuring the depth of the intense loss experienced by the people.

The short story collection *Interpreter of Maladies* is highly acclaimed for its depiction of a set of lives dispersed in the New World (the Bengali diaspora in Boston) and was the winner of the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 2000. The volume, that consists of nine stories, presents nine different worlds with characters confronting various psychological pulls and conflicts which become justifiable if one takes into account the circumstances they go through. As Michiko Kakutani, the Pulitzer Prize winner writes, “Ms. Lahiri chronicles her characters’ lives with both objectivity and compassion while charting the emotional temperature of their lives with tactile precision. She is a writer of uncommon elegance and poise, and with ‘Interpreter of Maladies’, she has made a precocious debut” (qtd. in Devadoss 7). The general tone and mood is one of despair, frustration, alienation and struggle to cope with the external world, and along with it, a feeling of rootlessness, of ‘something-lost/missing’ due to lack of communication, exists throughout the text. One aspect to be noted here is that almost all the protagonists are women, single or married, which gives it a cause to be a matter of grave concern as the issues they face are multiple and multi-faceted. It can be seen that the experiential spaces shared by the women, single or married, have similarities, but the fact that the marital status sometimes turns matters even more complicated and different, remains a truth. As can be seen in any writer of diaspora, Lahiri also delves deeply into the psyche of the individuals so as to reveal the complexities and clashes that characterise their minds that tend to affect the relationships they are in, majority of which are due to the strong reason that their lives are implanted in an entirely different region, which is far and far from their homes. As Rushdie states in his essay “Imaginary Homelands”, “...exiles or emigrants or expatriates, are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim...” (Rushdie 10) and that “...our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost...” (Rushdie 10).

The duality between the World and the Self is one feature that marks the stories that have been taken for analysis. By the term ‘World’, the external physical, material world is

meant, along with the aspect of the 'external appearance', and the 'Self' refers to one's own 'self', which is the mind or the psyche. It can be seen that the women in these stories suffer from various domestic and psychological issues and they are manifested in various ways according to their varying lifestyles. In each case, it can be seen that a tug-of-war happens between the external world of appearance and the internal world of reality or the real self. This happens because all of them are prisoners in their lives, and they try to break off the shackles that surround them, which make them have the image of escapists trying to escape from the intense trauma they are undergoing, leaning on to proper solace-givers.

The first story titled "A Temporary Matter" deals with the marital life of Shukumar and Shoba, an Indian couple in America, who experience disillusionment, boredom and monotony due to various reasons. It can be seen that the distance between Shoba and her husband grows wide after Shoba gives birth to a dead baby boy. What she expected from a marital life – to be a wife, a mother- gets only partially fulfilled and she gets disgusted with the entire idea of a 'married life' after the incident. In the beginning itself, the distance that is maintained between Shoba and Shukumar -physically and psychologically- becomes evident as they are pictured as leading their own private lives, secluded and uninterrupted, and there is a total lack of communication among them. As the writer puts it:

The more Shoba stayed out, the more she began putting in extra hours at work and taking on additional projects, 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 shop. (Lahiri 2)

In the case of Shoba, it becomes evident that the World and the Self remain at poles. When she goes out for job, she tries to spend more time outside, while Shukumar spends more time inside the house doing his work and some other odd jobs. When she comes back, there is hardly any conversation between them and they plunge into their own private worlds. They tend to part themselves deliberately and lead their lives in self-constructed cocoons. As is stated in the text, "...he thought of 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" (Lahiri 4). Shoba's trauma, that begins when the idea of being a mother (that was welcomed with great expectations and hopes and that was thought to give proper meaning to her parted existence from her mother country) gets shattered, makes her put a mask that starts hiding her actual self. Initially, in fact, she makes use of the external world so as to reveal less of her own self before her husband. She exhibits an attitude of indifference and seems to be having a mechanical existence. It is to be noted that it is the sense of insecurity and discomfort that

Shoba experiences as a foreigner or stranger in the place that adds to the agony of her realisation that she will not be a mother again.

There is a great disparity between the internal self and the external appearance of Shoba and Shukumar. This becomes evident when they start playing a 'game' in the dark (each day when the power goes at night) where they plan to share previously untold facts about themselves. The game is initiated by Shoba, who tries to come out of the cocoon of pretension and appearance, by making use of the darkness of the external world. It can be seen that the light and darkness contrast that is brought in stays close to one of the themes of the story too, which is of appearance and reality, that props out of marital dissatisfaction. Shukumar reveals a lot of things like how he cheated on his exams, how he pledged the sweater-vest that Shoba gave him as an anniversary gift to get drunk, how he kept a girl's photo from one of the magazines for a long time in his purse, etc. Each time the power goes and it gets dark, both of them find it comfortable to share such secretive things and they even pray to prolong the power-cut. The darkness symbolically stands for the lack of faith and loyalty that has been spread over their relationship and it is also the darkness that engulfs Shoba's psyche. When Shoba reveals the incident of her going with her friend Gillian to get drunk by lying to his mother, the truth dawns that, the cracks that have been forming in their relationship are not silly to let pass. The real matter that Shoba had been trying to put across, comes up, when she discloses, "I've been looking for an apartment and I've found one" (Lahiri 21), that shows her decision to completely part with Shukumar. This is revealed in the fifth night since they started playing the game and the facade is still intact. Shukumar, on the other hand, exposes yet another shocking fact to Shoba, which is about holding their dead baby in his hands before being cremated, while she had thought that he was too late to reach when it was all over. This matter concerning the baby truly shakes Shoba, like it shook him. Her motherliness which she deeply identified with her existence and life was shaken earlier, and now, the fact that her husband had held their baby without her knowledge, destroys her mind. The story, after an exchange of confessions through the disguise of a 'game', ends with the wife and the husband experiencing an inexplicable sense of loss and regret.

For Shoba, who had been leading a mechanical life, a separation from Shukumar was essential and it is through the 'blind-game' that she reveals her decision to part from him. With the reference to Gillian, Lahiri might be hinting at an extra-marital relationship that she has begun. The game in the dark explains the wide cracks that have been forming in their

relationship and shows the disparities that exist between her external and internal worlds. It should be noted that it is with an image of both of them weeping with an inexpressible grief that the story ends. It shows that the facade has ended and reality has dawned upon them that leave both, especially Shoba, at the peak of disillusionment. How the psychological conflicts that were hidden are gradually revealed and how the difference between the two worlds mark an unmendable fissure are quite clear in this way.

In the story “Interpreter of Maladies”, one comes across Mr. Das (Raj), Mrs. Das (who come from America to India as part of their tour) and Mr. Kapasi, the interpreter-guide who drives them to various places. Mrs. Das develops a curious relationship with Mr. Kapasi that becomes a crucial event as far as the former is concerned. The couple, who were born and brought up in America, pay their regular visit to India to see their parents and Mr. Kapasi is asked to assist them to visit various places. Like Shoba, Mrs. Das also keeps a secret, a shocking fact, that gradually gets revealed through the conversation between she and Mr. Kapasi. The interplay between appearance and reality thus forms part of this story too.

From the beginning, Mrs. Das invites our attention with her unique mannerisms and behaviour and by her way of dealing with people and her own family in a much neutral way. Though she looks absolutely perfect, leading a happy family life with her husband and three children in the initial stage, it is only after a while that we come to know about the mental stress that she suffers from. The lives of Mr. Kapasi and Mrs. Das intersect at a point when the latter gets interested in the real job Mr. Kapasi pursues. Mr. Kapasi, who serves as an interpreter to a doctor in his native place, attracts Mrs. Das, who, till that point of revelation had been keeping a detached, indifferent attitude to him. She calls the job “romantic”, becomes more and more inquisitive about it and becomes friendly to him. For Kapasi, this kick starts lot of fancies and imaginations where he dreams of developing the friendship with Mrs. Das even beyond the boundaries of India. They exchange addresses, contact details and friendly conversations during their journey.

Like Shoba, Mrs. Das too wages a war between the appearance that she puts up and her own self. Just as Shoba found the game as a gateway to expose her real self, here Mrs. Das finds Mr. Kapasi as her soul-mate, someone who is completely different from and outside of her family, to bring out the reality. She too emerges as a victim of circumstances and desperately urges to reveal the shocking truth that she had been withholding from her

husband. As Mr. Kapasi watches the children and tags one of them, Bobby, as a brave boy and as different from the other two, Mrs. Das reveals that he is not her husband's son: "He is not his" (Lahiri 62). She openly talks of her relationship with her husband and then about how she conceived Bobby from her husband's Punjabi friend, when once he paid a visit to their home. The words, "And no one knows, of course. No one at all. I've kept it a secret for eight whole years. But now I've told you" (Lahiri 62), help one understand the intense mental pain that she undergoes and the slight relief that she is supposed to have gained by way of disclosing it to a person, who is in no way related to her, but who serves as a solace-provider at least for that revelation. On the one hand, there is a tug-of-war between her appearance and the reality, on the other hand, she is taunting her own self, but finds a slight relief from the external world itself that seemed quite strange to her:

I feel terrible looking at my children, and at Raj, always terrible...Eight years, Mr. Kapasi, I've been in pain eight years. I was hoping you could help me feel better, say the right thing. (Lahiri 65)

Though Mr. Kapasi tries to carry forward the conversation asking about the real feeling that Mrs. Das has, whether it is guilt or pain, the latter ends her dialogue with him and joins the family.

It is on a note of happiness that the story ends, with Mr. Kapasi thinking of cherishing the Das family forever in his life. But the thought processes of the central character Mrs. Das remain a curious case throughout the story. The psychological trauma that she had been undergoing for such a long time is seen as lightened by the end, if one keeps aside the intensity of frustration and loneliness she had been holding till then. Just like Shoba did, Mrs. Das also tries to come out of the shell of appearance and pretension, and exposes her real self, for which she uses Mr. Kapasi of the external world. The ending can be read as giving a neutral tone, as it is not sure whether Mrs. Das will reveal about Bobby's birth to her husband or not. Still, as far as she is concerned, the mental conflict comes to a temporary stop, with the opening up of her mind to an entity of the world outside and thus showing her real self. As it was in the case of Shoba, one can never say that Mrs. Das is completely relieved of her mental struggle or that she has gained self-fulfilment to the fullest extent. Yet, Mrs. Das finds an apt place among the married women who try to fight their way out of loneliness and alienation.

“Mrs. Sen’s”, the next story down the list, portrays a beautiful relationship that grows between Mrs. Sen, an Indian lady, and Eliot, an eleven-year-old boy, for whom the former becomes the ‘baby-sitter.’ Here the contrast between Mrs. Sen’s external and internal worlds can be discerned from the unveiling of her true feelings and emotions to Eliot but not to her husband, Mrs. Sen appears as a soft-hearted and sensitive lady who takes care of Eliot once he is back from school, does the household jobs, and as one who often recollects the good old days she spent with her family and relatives in India. This story, especially, portrays the difference in the Indian and Western lifestyles and attitudes through Mrs. Sen and Eliot’s mother. Mrs. Sen comes up as the representative of all who have left their homes to permanently settle in a strange land, as the feeling of displacement and dislocation is quite obvious in her. She nostalgically recollects her past life in India and experiences boredom and frustration with her life in America, and at times feels loneliness and disgust due to her inability to cope with the outside world. Eliot, from a world outside her own (like Mr. Kapasi), comes for her relief. She starts sharing her stories and memories to the boy and develops a strong bond with him. The feeling of alienation is clear in Mrs. Sen’s words when she recollects her days in India, where everyone cooked and ate together and where it was always noisy nights, and pauses to say, “Here, in this place where Mr. Sen has brought me, I cannot some-times sleep in so much silence” (Lahiri 115). She talks of the way people screamed from one house to another in India, which was impossible there, the tradition of wearing the scarlet powder, the harmonious relationships and so on and Eliot starts liking her more, attracted by a lifestyle that is entirely different from his and his mother’s.

Throughout the story, the conversations between Mrs. Sen and Eliot are what dominate rather than those between her and Mr. Sen. It is Eliot who serves as an encouragement for Mrs. Sen to take the driving license, answers her anxious queries regarding driving, accompanies her to her favourite fish market, and she confides all her sad and ill-feelings about her inability to visit her relatives in India in him. For her husband, she remains a ‘satisfied’, ‘happy’ housewife, which is just an artificial shroud that she creates to cover her own self, while the psychological conflicts she experiences are being shared with an entity from the outside world, who becomes a source of solace for her. Mrs. Sen’s intense desire to ‘belong’ to her home, to be free from the fetters of alienation is obvious when she says to Eliot, “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 aunt will be a stranger” (Lahiri 122). She says, “When I was your age I was without knowing that one day I would be so far. You are wiser



than that, Eliot. You already taste the way things must be" (Lahiri 123). The war that her own self wages with the external world is clear from this statement when one gets to know of the difficulty she undergoes in unveiling her agonies to her husband. The facade, the pretension of being a happily wedded wife crumbles down before Eliot, an outsider, and she finds relief in disclosing the previously unshared things (with her husband) with him:

'Send pictures,' they write. 'Send pictures of your new life.' What picture can I send?... They think I live the life of a queen, Eliot...They think I live in a palace. (Lahiri 125)

The desperate image of Mrs. Sen who was implanted on a strange land against her wish is seen here. In her dialogues with Eliot's mother regarding the fresh fish she used to get from Indian markets and the quality of the Indian food, it is the same sense of despair and disillusionment that a native person experiences on another land that becomes evident.

It can be seen that driving is a major image that constantly comes up in the story. Learning to drive with Eliot shows the beginning of a new journey of friendship, but it does not last for long. Mrs. Sen faces lot of insults and difficulties due to her lack of driving skills, that symbolically stand for the struggle and frustration she faces on her path to assert freedom in an alien land. Mr. Sen's efforts to make his wife drive is of course his attempt to make her self-efficient, but her failure indicates not just her inability to do it, but her unwillingness and inability to cope with the new world she is in. She finds more happiness in talking with Eliot, rather than in driving a 'left-seater' car (as she herself says about the 'right-seated' driving in India) by Mr. Sen's compulsion. By the end, one can see the separation of Eliot and Mrs. Sen, that happens after Mrs. Sen's car meets with an accident (that ends the journey of friendship) with Eliot inside. As Eliot's mother decides to stop sending him to Mrs. Sen's, both Mrs. Sen, and Eliot find it difficult to break off their relationship. This separation indicates a break from the external world that was a source of comfort for Mrs. Sen and follows a possibility of her having a cocooned self, with even more psychic tensions that would remain undisclosed in her marital life. Like in the case of Shoba and Mrs. Das, this one also ends not in a sense of complete self-fulfilment, but with a temporary relief of having exposed the real self at least for a while, with the assistance of the external world.

To conclude, it can be seen that the three characters, Shoba, Mrs. Das and Mrs. Sen, engage in a conflict between the World and the Self. All of them exhibit a tendency to escape from their self-constructed fake images, to come out of their alienated, 'exiled', lonely selves

and they lean on to some source of comfort, so as to reveal their selves – Shoba in the ‘blind-game’, Mrs. Das in Mr. Kapasi and Mrs. Sen in Eliot – which may or may not create significant changes in their lives ahead. Though the issues the women are facing with have some similarities – they all have some repressed feelings inside, unrevealed- their approaches are different. But it can be seen that none of them finds an ultimate level of satisfaction, rather only temporary moments of relief. Thus it helps one underscore the inability of a person to reach the zenith of fulfilment or self-realisation when he or she has lost roots and identity, being caught up in an external, strange world. Lahiri’s characters that are full of life and vibrancy, in this way, remain as examples of genuine slices of reality, that will continue to influence and invigorate the generations ahead.

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