



e-ISSN: 2319-8753 | p-ISSN: 2320-6710

IJRSET

International Journal of Innovative Research in
SCIENCE | ENGINEERING | TECHNOLOGY

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF INNOVATIVE RESEARCH

IN SCIENCE | ENGINEERING | TECHNOLOGY

Volume 9, Issue 11, November 2020

ISSN INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

Impact Factor: 7.512

9940 572 462

6381 907 438

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www.ijirset.com

Representation of Social Compromises in Jhumpa Lahiri's Interpreter of Maladies

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ABSTRACT : Jhumpa Lahiri's Interpreter of Maladies, a collection of nine short stories, touches on some delicate chords of human relationships and cultural and cross-cultural values. In her stories, Jhumpa Lahiri shows initiation, assimilation, estrangement, and molding into a new whole, all of which are seen in play and interplay when one looks at the interaction between cultures and between individuals in these stories. There are compromises and fulfilments of different degrees relating to them. The lives shown in Interpreter of Maladies show various compromises which can be read into in terms of various relationships as also in terms of the interaction between cultures. While Lahiri's stories are set in India and America, most of her characters are Indian; in their lives, their relationships there is a subtle chemistry which is deeper than any superficial or photographic portrayal

KEYWORDS: Jhumpa Lahiri, Maladies, interpreter, social compromises, representation

I. INTRODUCTION

The stories set in America have characters who are Indian. Their sense of alienation, dislocation and marginality show how, in spite of the compromises they have made, the foreign culture they have imbibed and come to terms with a vibrant Indian blood-consciousness' makes this compromise incomplete too. Kenneth Champeon puts it very well: "Interpreter of Maladies is a fictional manifesto for everyone estranged, either physically or spiritually from their homelands. For everything that is joined in the new world, something is inevitably lost from the old."¹

Four stories in the collection show this compromise in particular "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine", "Interpreter of Maladies", "Mrs. Sen's" and "The Third and Final Continent". In When Mr Pirzada Came to Dine Mr. Pirzada is a Pakistani botanist on leave in New England when Civil War breaks in 1971. He is separated from his wife and daughters, whose fates are uncertain, and takes meals with an Indian family; the 10 year old daughter, Lilia, of the family, narrates the story. We see Mr. Pirzada as a guest and his deep concerns are not so overtly expressed before the narrator, except sometimes, for example, when he watches war footage from home on television: "As he watched he had a immovable expression on his face, composed but alert, as if someone were giving him directions to an unknown destination." More than that, there is a complete harmony and completeness in the host family's relationship with Mr. Pirzada in spite of the differences in nationality and religion. This bond has nothing loud about it but is taken for granted. This emotional acceptance and assimilation regarding religion runs through all of Lahiri's stories. We find in Lahiri's stories that the dross of religious differences and antagonism does not survive in an alien land, where the characters take off the labels of Hindu, Muslim, Christian, to a considerable extent.²

In This Blessed Home, there is a bit of religious inhibition in the husband, Sanjeev, which accounts for his sullenness and gruffness at his wife, Twinkle, she finding Christian objects in their home and displaying them and being happy with a childlike innocence and girlish delight. And it is this which thaws Sanjeev's reticence.³

Exile, estrangement, displacement and marginality are seen most poignantly in Mrs. Sen's. This poignancy and the sense of alienation just stops short of being gruesome at the climax of the story. For Mrs. Sen Everything is there (that is, in India). Babysitting a boy, Eliot, is her way out of loneliness in her New England life, her professor husband being too busy for her emotional needs and to fulfill her only excuse out of loneliness-fish. The adopted land, with its social dysfunction, can not check her brooding nostalgia for her native land, the warmth of its customs and people; her stray observations carry a deep insight. "Eliot, if I began to scream right now at the top of my lungs, would anyone come?" or "Everyone, this people, too much in their world".⁴

This compromise of her breaks down after she drives, a thing that mortifies her, to get fish. As Kenneth Champeon says of "Mrs. Sen's"...yet another fable representing the American dream as a nightmare.... The scenes in which the gentle and kind, but somewhat flighty Mrs. Sen inches her way into and out of murderous traffic, are among the most subtly powerful condemnations of America's pace of life in recent writing." Ultimately, Mrs. Sen is left with the same loneliness and an added hurt. That which was a sense of cultural estrangement and marginality in terms of absorption and communication till now, becomes more of emotional estrangement and marginality now she can not even babysit. This open ended story does go well with the sensitive portrayal and incomplete compromise that the story gives.⁵

In the story *The Interpreter of Maladies* the compromise is of a different kind. There is an understood platform on which Mr. Kapasi, with more of Indian tradition and culture in him and Mrs. Das, the second-generation American-Indian, carrying at ease the modern American culture in her, meet. The story has more of the interaction of human kind than of the cultural kind. The bond created between Mrs. Das and Mr. Kapasi is broken once. Mrs. Das realizes that the malady of her failing marriage and her unexplainable feelings about her sexual transgression do not come within the sphere of Mr. Kapasi's knowledge and he can not interpret them, let alone provide a remedy.⁶

It is in the story *The Third and Final Continent* that the assimilation between two cultures is seen at its most mature and fulfilling. The interaction between the young Indian narrator and his 103 year old, astonishing landlady is full of small tiffs but also with warmth and unspoken understanding. The narrator has assimilated into the western culture but he still values his culture and wants that to be imbibed and appreciated by his son. A beautiful relationship between a man from the east and a woman from the west results, the Indian values being retained and upheld at the same time-an ideal assimilation and compromise between the east and the west. Kim Roberts points out: "Lahiri's characters struggle to make sense of life in America with its cold formality and unnecessary efficiency."⁷

Through their eyes, we get a new glimpse of our own culture. Indian customs are juxtaposed with American tradition. An Indian hostess, throwing a housewarming party, invites guests to leave their three-inch heels at the door. A mousewife chops vegetables sitting on the living room floor. Newly wests, after having just met, discover feelings for each other. These contrasts offer proof of a common human existence while highlighting our differences. Lahiri seduces the reader into discovering a common denominator " In some other stories cultural interaction is mixed with other aspects of life. In "Sexy", Miranda wakes out of her cross-cultural adultery when that relationship, hanging on the word 'sexy' is seen in a different light when a child defines the word as "loving someone you don't know. "Miranda's compromise is an implied one with the option of a serious bond kept open; till then, the psychological and emotional bond is just in the seed form whereas the carnal bond has flourished. The possibility of the compromise reaching a mature stage crashes prematurely.⁸

Similarly, in *Temporary Matter*, it can be said that the environment plays a partial role in the estrangement between the husband and wife, as it also can be said that it holds them a crucial bit longer in an alien land. In his article "Subcontinental Drift" Celeb Cram rightly points out: "Lahiri revives these scenarios [cultural and emotional interactions] with unexpected twists, and to each she brings her distinctive insight into the ways that human affections both sustain and defy the cultural forms that try to enclose them." Certainly, a foreign land brings a sense of loss even to the most composed of Lahiri's characters. Ellen Emry Heltzel points it out saying "The loss of the familiar has become common not just to the immigrant experience, but to the experience of all of us, as our society rushes head over heels toward the future. In *Interpreter of Maladies*, Jhumpa Lahiri captures the poignancy of this loss with clarity and understated beauty⁹

II. DISCUSSION

It is an emotional compromise that we see more of in 4 *Temporary Matter* Moner Sukumar and Shoba's marriage is losing its love, having taken a turn for the worse when the couple had a stillborn child. The compromise they are living with changes into a rekindled relationship when the temporary matter of an electric failure for some days releases their pent up sadness and anger and shows them as two innocently mistaken and lost children.

In *The Treatment of Bibi Haldor*, Bibi, suffering from a mysterious ailment, is not totally reconciled to her fate. She struggles alone and ultimately, with the birth of a son, whose father's name she would not tell, she gets cured and has her business running well. Though the limitations and hindrances are many. Bibi does not succumb but retains her individuality which is evident in sexual as well as in professional desires. It is her grit that makes the compromise a happier one. Lahiri's magical realism turns optimistic in this story. showing that a determined person can turn compromises to his or her benefit.⁶

Boori Ma in *A Real Durwan* is not so fortunate as Bibi. Her compromise from affluence to rags and alms-is of a greater degree and unprotesting yet she is turned out from the building the people living in which she served. It was her helplessness and the resident's selfishness that kept the compromise working. When the stronger felt they were threatened they saw to it that they were not anymore. The conjugal relationship in *This Blessed House* is never really threatened, primarily because the disturbing factor, doting on Christian relics, causes irritation to one spouse only and is not of that high a degree so as to break the compromise and before the breaking point comes, Twinkle's tears, remove it and the relationship is reinforced with the husband's compromise. A reassuring sense of security and trust, rooted in innocence and reaching out, cement the bond.⁷

In *Mrs. Sen's* there are two emotional and psychological compromises: one, by the boy, Eliot, with the indifference of his parents and the other of Mrs. Sen with her loneliness and her husband's apathy to her emotional needs. Through each other's presence Eliot and Mrs. Sen get a purgatory release of emotions and it is this that sustains the compromises. Sadly, the compromises rest on a precipice and that they are dashed is not surprising. Both Eliot and Mrs. Sen are left with harsher circumstances to make compromises with.

In The Third and Final Continent there are incomplete signals and unexpressed feelings between the husband and wife. There are no misunderstandings, only reservations and inhibitions. But the facades are broken in the presence of a greater, decisive power, the warm radiance of Mrs. Croft's goodness which makes cultural differences between her and the spouses vanish and the ice is thawed out with her succinct statement for the wife, Mala: She is a perfect lady! This creates in the narrator an empathy for his bride. Bhaswati complete Compromises in Jhumpa Lahiri's Interpreter.⁸

Chakravorty is very correct when she says, "In Lahiri's narratives. The difference is stimulating. Its role is perhaps best symbolized in The Third and Final Continent, in which the presence of an astonishing old American woman lays the foundation for the lifelong friendship between a newly married, emotionally uncommitted Indian husband and wife." Certain facts come to light when we scrutinize these compromises and relationships in Interpreter of Maladies. Firstly, Lahiri does not show very extraordinary and offbeat aspects of life. Even in the stories of Bibi and Boori Ma the outward action and violent nature of things is restrained.⁹

This helps a lot in building and retaining relationships. Lahiri also does so while looking at things from the perspectives of a child, a Midwestern, or an Indian-American. As Bhaswati Chakravorty says, of Lahiri that she is able to "release the wellspring of the bewildering dynamics of distance and difference." Lahiri's characters too carry a certain poise, "hidden springs of cultural memory and history", an inherent or latent goodness, readiness and reason for coming to terms with others and with life. Mrs. Sen, Sukumar and Shoba, Miranda, Boori Ma, and others have psyches that approximate right, moral thinking and doing. Greg Changnon says, "Given the inherent conflict of immigration-the clash of customs, the shock of assimilation-and the seemingly unbridgeable gap between any two people, Lahiri's people seem to never give up." They are, except in the case of Boori Ma, never made complete pawns. Susan Ram says about Lahiri's characters, "Their take on life is that of the educated middle class professional for whom income is assured."

Often things are seen from the point of view of children like Eliot, Rohin and Lilia who accept life at its face value without questioning it. This creates a gentle, accepting tone in the stories. Also, there are some things or moments in Lahiri's stories that give a turn to the flow of the story and create a new order. Susan Ram comments on Lahiri, "In the best of the stories, she pursues an identifiable literary strategy: something offbeat or unexpected or quirky is introduced, and this becomes the means by which problems are brought out into open, confronted and resolved."⁴

In "Sexy" it is a little boy's remark, in Boori Ma it is a theft, and in The Third and Final Continent it is Mrs. Croft's remark that work as catalysts; in 4 Temporary Matter the power cut comes as a deus ex machina for restoring love in This Blessed Home it is Twinkles tears that bring a compromise, in When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine is saved candies that create an emotional bond and in Interpreter of Maladies it is the extraordinary idea of interpreting a patient's maladies from one language to another that creates a bond.

III. RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

We also see that time and absence and presence of individuals too create or destroy compromises. The best examples are 4 Temporary Matters where an opportunity for proximity results in communication and heals a wounded marriage; on the contrary, in Mrs Sen's, the husband's absence ultimately pushes Mrs Sen to a desperate act which proves destructive emotionally too. Another dominant image that runs through Lahiri's stories is that of food and eating. Food remains a stabilizing, conciliatory force.⁶

In A Temporary Matter, while the house is well-stocked with food and culinary forces are at work, the relationship is good but the house and food-stocks are disorderly when the relationship goes bad; in When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine food creates a great bond. Even in Mrs. Sen's only when food-fish-becomes a minor part of a frustration and becomes an intemperate desire that a disorder results. Charles Taylor observes, "Food in these stories is a talisman, a reassuring bit of homeland to cling to Dr. Asha Choubey has written an article Food Metaphor in Jhumpa Lahiri's, Interpreter of Maladies in which she elaborates on this aspect and tells how food serves as a part of identity, is helpful in the process of initiation and establishes a bond of affinity,"⁸

We find in Jhumpa Lahiri a writer of high caliber. In Interpreter of Maladies she has made use of settings, environment, points of view, plots and characterisation not only to interpret the maladies of cultural and human relationships but also to fill in the gaps in them.⁹

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**Impact Factor:
7.512**

ISSN INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
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