

A Study of Child Characters in the select short stories from Interpreter of Maladies by Jhumpa Lahari

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Abstract: Jhumpa Lahiri is one of this century's famous Diaspora fiction writers. She has received much appreciation for her work. Her first work, *Interpreter of Maladies*, a collection of nine short stories published in 1999, won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction and the PEN/Hemingway Award. Lahiri portrayed the life of Indian Immigrants living in America in her works. *Interpreter of Maladies* has nine short 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. The paper covers only three short stories When Mr Pirzada Came to Dine, Sexy and Mrs Sen's from *Interpreter of Maladies*. These three stories are narrated from the child's perspective. Generally, children are seen as innocent and immature because of a lack of knowledge about the world, but Lahiri's child characters shed light on the problems adults face and affect relationships. Children play a significant role in these stories. They try to accept their culture along with other cultures easily. They understand the elders' pain and try to show the solutions to the problems faced by the elders. Using innocent child characters in narration has added beauty to the stories. She proves her sensibility by exploring the world through the eyes of children.

Keywords: Diaspora, Immigrant, Perspective, Culture, Narration.

Introduction: Migration has become a natural process because of globalization. Technological and scientific advancement has paved the way for new opportunities in foreign lands. People migrate to other countries to acquire higher education, get better jobs and achieve financial independence. But the problem arises after reaching the foreign land as they find it difficult to forget their own culture and adapt to the new culture. Life changes once the new system is encountered. Some people quickly adjust to a new environment, but others find it difficult to accommodate themselves in a new world—especially women who experience nostalgia, homesickness and cultural conflict.

Diaspora literature is about the experiences of migrant communities living all across the world. Most diaspora writers wrote on nostalgia, loneliness, homesickness, rootlessness, identity crisis and conflict of cultures. Immigrant families experience these feelings because of staying far away from their native place or homeland. The writers have shown how immigrants feel alienated in the foreign land and experience homesickness as they feel nostalgic about their native land. This immigrant experience causes many problems like pain, identity crisis and difficulty following their own and foreign cultures.

Indian diaspora writers like V.S. Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, Bharati Mukherjee, Anita Desai, Jhumpa Lahiri and others wrote about the difficulties faced by the Indians in a foreign land. The trauma the characters face, their struggle to adjust to a new culture, their dilemma to follow two cultures and traditions, search for identity are explored in their works. Not only these themes but also marriage-related conflicts, struggle for freedom from the patriarchal system and broken relationships are portrayed in their works.

Interpreter of Maladies is a collection of nine short stories which depict the life of Indian Immigrants living in America and Indians living in India. Each short account is separately created about different families who migrated to America from Asia and living in India. Her fiction shows how these characters face diaspora consciousness.

Interpreter of Maladies, her debut literary work, was released in 1999, for which she received Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 2000. Lahiri has acquired a worldwide appreciation for her first work and many awards for this short story collection. She has won The Transatlantic Review Award from the Henfield Foundation, The Louisiana Review Award for short fiction, The O. Henry Award for Best American Short Stories, The PEN Hemingway Award, The American Academy of Arts and Letters Award and The New Yorker Debut of the Year Award. This literary work was nominated for the LA Times Book Prize.

Jhumpa Lahiri is undoubtedly a prominent and acclaimed literary figure in the world of literature. Her personal experiences as an immigrant who moved from India and America make it easy to write about the difficulties faced by immigrants. Mostly themes like nostalgia, alienation, identity crisis, cultural conflict, love and marriage are seen in her works. These are all the diaspora experiences faced by many immigrants worldwide. Through such real-life experiences, Lahiri makes her readers feel it is their own life. It connects her to the readers very quickly. Interpreter of Maladies is a collection of nine short stories about Indian immigrants. The group has short stories titled 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.

Some of these stories tell the lives of Indian immigrants, but some point to the stories of families in America. The different cultural values are seen in each of these short stories. Children play an essential role in the piece of literary work. "Children's curiosity, imagination, and perceptivity shape readers' perception of youth and age through subtle metaphor, striking discomfort, and insightful observation" (Park 5).

When Mr Pirzada Came to Dine: This is a beautiful story narrated by a child named Lilia, an Indian American girl born and raised in the United States. Lahiri gives an account of people of different cultures who are primarily alike in many ways but also very different in their way. This short story, "When Mr Pirzada Came to Dine," is narrated from a child's view with an adult's perception.

It is about a man Mr Pirzada from Dhaka, who gets a grant from Pakistan Government to study foliage in New England. He left his country during the civil war between India and Pakistan; and when Dhaka was under Pakistan's control. When he was in Boston, due to his financial conditions, he used to dine at his American Indian friend's house. Mr Pirzada liked their daughter Lilia, and he used to buy special candy for her every time he went to their house and made her feel special. Lilia also liked him, waited for his visits and used to listen to his problems. She understood that Mr Pirzada missed his family and worried about them a lot as no news from them came anytime. Lila prays every day for his well-being.

Lilia is one of the smartest and most developed characters of *Interpreter of Maladies*. She learns fast by observing and gaining information from the maps and creates her judgements. Lilia tries to understand his plight and the cultural difference between her parents and Mr Pirzada. She noticed many small details in her parents and Mr Pirzada. She depicts him as Indian, not understanding the India-Pakistan struggle of 1971, around which the story rotates.

In a mature mindset, she says the idea of Indo Pakistan boundary differences makes no sense to her. When her father tells her to understand the difference between these two places, she is confused because she observes her parents and Mr Pirzada speaking the same language and enjoying the jokes. "Nevertheless, my father insisted that I understood the difference" (Lahiri 25). Unique among the narratives of *Interpreter of Maladies*, a grownup Lilia recounts the account of herself as a youngster yet has the additional focal points of adulthood and many years. In the words of Cox "Lilia not only observes for difference but, as the adult narrator, is also able to comment on what she saw as a child and to articulate the conclusions that she reached" – conclusions which have allowed her to mature and come into her own as an Indian-American adult (Cox 126).

She understands the difference between the two countries when her father shows Pakistan on the map, and from then, she takes more interest in Mr Pirzada by saying, "Now that I had learned Mr

Pirzada was not an Indian, I began to study him with extra care and to try to figure out what made him different "(Lahiri 30). She understands that the time zone is also different from his place. Her understanding of things increases: "Now and then I studied the map above my father's desk and pictured Mr Pirzada on that small patch of yellow, perspiring heavily, I imagined, in one of his suits, searching for his family "(Lahiri 41). She perceives "separate and mutually invisible worlds bump" – an unexpected course of events that seems impossible from an adult perspective (Caesar 87). This understanding happened from listening to conversations between her parents and their guest Mr. Pirzada every night when dining in their house. Lilia's impressive maturity is seen when she shows concern for Mr Pirzada's daughters who live in Dhaka.

Caesar notes that "she has a kind of compassion rare even in adults: the ability to feel concerned and sympathy for someone who is facing problems she has never faced herself," a disquiet deep enough that she constructs her spirituality in an attempt to ease the troubles of Mr Pirzada" s family (Caesar 87). Every night when Mr Pirzada gives her sweet candy as a gift, she keeps them safely in a box in her room as she feels eating them is inappropriate. Her grandma in India gave the package as a gift. She considers it a sacred one. And keeping those candies in that box is like offering prayers for the safety of Mr Pirzada's family. This is the concern Lilia has for them. She has gained the knowledge of the physical world and also the spiritual world. She shows care and respect for others in need at that tender age instead of asking for a gift to play. She comes to know about the feeling of missing home personally when Mr Pirzada comes home: "What it means to miss someone who was so many miles and hours away, just as he had missed his wife and daughters for so many months" and she treasures this as a kind of moral lesson. Karim describes Lilia as a "perceptive child-narrator" and notes that the story suggests – and Lilia learns through her parents, her candies, and she answered prayers – "people" s need to connect during moments of crisis in their lives" (Karim 206). In this short narrative, Mr. Pirzada's departure for Bangladesh to visit his family makes Lilia very happy and relieved.

Sexy: Lahiri's short story titled "Sexy" is ironic in tone. In this short, Rohin succeeds in doing what Dev cannot do. He makes Miranda realize the difference between love and lust. Miranda feels like Dev's mistress. She accepts this earnestly and buys a mistress to wear to impress him.

What is fascinating here is that she has never felt true love until now, so she mistakenly thinks Dev's attachment to her is true love. He tries to make her believe by portraying them as he truly loves and can do anything for her. But once Dev's wife returns home, his behaviour towards Miranda changes, and it appears she is being treated as any other woman. He tries his tantrums to control and calms her, and she ultimately believes him without knowing his real intentions.

It is about the relationship between Miranda and Devajit Mitra, Rohin's father, an immigrant from Bengal. Dev's relationship with Miranda is physical, whereas Miranda's is real love. Once on their visit to Mapparium, Dev says, "You're sexy", but it is only his erotic feelings which lack love which Miranda expects from him. But the exact words "you're sexy" uttered by an innocent seven-year-old Rohin, son of Dev, changes the lives of many in the story. He observes the distress his mother experiences when her husband starts dating someone else. Rohin's words make Miranda realize her adulterous relationship with a married person. She understands that infatuation with Dev is only to enjoy her physically as a sex object, and then she withdraws from that relationship, which turns her into a mistress position or a sexual thing being marginalized. She could protect her feminine identity in the end.

Rohin displays astonishing intelligence and can recite geography with ease. He speaks four languages like Punjabi, Bengali, French and English. His mother is a Punjabi, and his father is a Bengali person at school. He learns English and French. Laxmi says that even if he misses a few days of school, it will not affect Rohin as he is a genius. When Rohin goes to Miranda's house, he starts asking her about the capitals of countries thereby he can get practice as he is going to compete with one of his classmates at school. He forces her to ask the questions, which appear very easy for Rohin. He quickly exhibits his knowledge about various countries as he memorizes them. But Jhumpa Lahiri shows his tender age by saying, "When they reached the last of the countries in Africa, Rohin said he wanted to watch cartoons" (Lahiri 103). When compared to Lilia of 'When Mr. Pirzada came to Dine', Rohin is younger but behave more adult like. Lilia goes to bed early to bed and likes to dress up in a Halloween witch costume, Rohin is forced to behave more adult in normal daily situations.

When Rohin comes to her place, Miranda notices first "his eyes, which had dark circles under them....and made him look haggard, as if he smoked a great deal and slept very little, in spite of the fact that he was only seven years old" (Lahiri 100). Even if he comes in a school uniforms which looks more like a business attire, this small boy Rohin shows a grown up's features on his young form. The walking style of Rohin appears to Miranda more like a toy soldier with his arms swinging. Miranda's ignorance of things beyond her front door is countered by Rohin's knowledge about the world. Rohin outplays her in intelligence. All will talk and treat her as a child in the story except Rohin, who shares his innocent wisdom. Here "beyond the adolescent sensibility to show the character's development of meaningful adult values" - (Ceasar 90) appreciates Lahiri for her style of narration. Rohin tries to connect things what sees around and makes his own understandings. When he looks at Miranda's cosmetic items and enquires about the use of those, he gets an answer from her 'puffiness', immediately he connects the word to his mother's appearance and says "My mother has

puffiness. She says it's a cold, but really, she cries, sometimes for hours. Sometimes straight through dinner. Sometimes she cries so hard her eyes puff up like bullfrogs" (Lahiri 104). Rohin understands that adults use cosmetics to cover up as well they hide other things from children. His mother knows that adult talks should be too much for a seven year old child but he says my mother "always takes her clothes off in front of me... She doesn't even pick them up afterward. She leaves them all on the floor by the bed, all tangled" (Lahiri 106). She tries to hide the fact why his father Dev has not returned. She feels it is ok to undress before him. As in their life, no elders are there; Rohin finds it difficult to console his mother and gets confused what to hide and what not to hide. He tries to check Miranda's closet and asks her to wear the mistress cocktail dress, which she bought to wear before Dev. When she wears that dress, Rohin tells Miranda "You're sexy". She gets surprised how can a seven years old boy can say such words and asks what the words mean. Initially he hesitates and says it is a secret. But later on he says "it means loving someone you don't know" (Lahiri 107). Then Miranda understands that Rohin might have overheard a talk between his parents, and he defined the words in terms of what happens in his small world. This makes Miranda to realize what mistake she has committed by loving a married man and causing pain his family and also understands that in reality Dev is not in truly love with her but it is only infatuation. Rohin with "amazingly mature insights" – though unlike Lilia, he vocalizes his stunningly simple connections, and they are recognized by an adult (Caesar 87).

Mrs. Sen: It is a story of Mrs. Sen, an Indian immigrant who faces the difficulty in adjusting herself in a foreign culture. Mrs. Sen, aged thirty years takes up the job babysitting a seven-year-old Eliot. She takes care of Eliot when his mother goes to work. The story is told from the third person omniscient narrator. The narration comes through the eyes of Eliot. She finds it difficult to adjust to the new culture and place. She shares her feelings with Eliot, who pays an ear to her words. When she describes the word 'home', Eliot gets confused at first, but slowly he understands the meaning of 'home'. Home is not her house in America but her nation, India. This depiction of home encourages Eliot to see the difference between Indian and American culture.

When she asks whether the neighbours would come to help, if she screams shows the attitude of people in Indian society and the aloofness maintained by people in America. Eliot, a small boy feels for Mrs. Sen who is experiencing isolation from native culture because of the geographical distances. Eliot's experiences and understanding are highlighted by the "full of fear, astonishment, fascination and awe – towards an Indian living abroad". Eliot won't absorb Indian culture and traditions staying with Mrs. Sen but his views about the things innocent and are not like the grownups.

"Eliot is eleven," she tells Mrs. Sen over the phone, 'he can feed and entertain himself; I just want an adult in the house in case of an emergency" (Lahiri 111). Eliot's mother doesn't understand that he

just needs someone who can guide, not just babysitter. But Eliot starts liking Mrs. Sen not because of the warm house but he finds affection and love, which this small boy needs. She understands Eliot more than his mother and tells him "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). She knows the foods which Eliot likes and dislikes. Eliot starts to identify the differences between Mrs. Sen and his mother. Mrs. Sen offers Eliot's varieties of Indian snacks after he comes back from the school where as his mother would just order pizza and "at the table as he ate, drinking more wine and asking how his day was, but eventually she went to the deck to smoke a cigarette, leaving Eliot to wrap up the leftovers" (Lahiri 118).

When Mrs. Sen asks Eliot, whether the neighbours would come to help, if she has a problem, Eliot looks at her with sympathy as she feels isolated from her culture because the social proximity in her native land is different from the social remoteness in America. Eliot won't adopt Indian culture and tradition, but his clear idea about all these is entirely dissimilar from the adults.

According to Michael W. Cox, as the narrator gives voice to Eliot's observations of the two women in the room, his "mother's style of dress and hair... in juxtaposition with Mrs Sen's, suddenly [strike him] as strange". A similarity between Eliot and Rohin can be noticed, when the boys notice their moms and another woman who exhibit a foreign way of life attempting to link two cultures into an existing reality.

Another writer Ashutosh Dubey says, "Mrs. Sen's loneliness emanates from being so far from home and Eliot's loneliness comes from living in suburbia.....he does not know his father and hardly knows his mother". The fear about their children faced by most adults is not only about the immaturity of age but also about the culture and experiences the young are facing : "It was the last afternoon Eliot spent with Mrs. Sen or with any babysitter. From then on his mother gave him a key, which he wore on a string around his neck. He was to call the neighbours in case of an emergency and to let himself into the beach house after school" (Lahiri 135). Eliot's mother takes him away from the cultural differences, in fact from any culture.

Conclusion:

Lilia, Rohin and Eliot are seen making cultural connections to reach outside self to teach the elders around them. This creates a broader scope for the children to mature with grace. They overcome the confusion in their innocent minds and appear to be succeeding in defining the words and teaching rudiments of life to the elders in their lives.

Jhumpa Lahiri includes children as characters in her stories along with the main characters. These child characters play an important role in these stories. The behaviour exhibited by them , their thinking and observing skills of child characters as well as the lessons taught by them to their elders

become an important factor in understanding the people in general and developing a new Indian American culture in specific. The main characters in these stories discover their inner power and try to solve their own problems because of the presence of these child characters. It can clearly understand how Jhumpa Lahiri, a writer who known for using plain simple language to showcase her stories also succeeds in using child characters to give a strength to her narration of the plot. She makes her child characters with childlike innocence memorable in the readers.

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