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Issues In Human Life: An Examination Of Selected Stories From Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter Of Maladies*

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Abstract:

The majority of the characters have an identity crisis as a result of their inability to reconcile their American and Indian identities. This causes cultural isolation, which in turn causes personal isolation. The tales eloquently demonstrate the components of diasporic preoccupation, namely the desire for a place where diasporans may live comfortably.

Keywords: Immigrants, identity crisis, self-exile, cultural isolation.

The lives of Indian immigrants are the subject of Jhumpa Lahiri's stories. *Interpreter of Maladies* is a collection of nine stories that address the difficulties faced by immigrants living in foreign countries. The first story, "A Temporary Matter," among the nine collections of stories, depicts the marriage dilemma of a young couple named Shoba and Shukumar. Readers are made ready for the challenges of self-exile by the deterioration of their bond while living apart in Boston.

Despite being born to Indian parents, Shoba and Shukumar made America their home. The protagonist Shukumar gives birth to a stillborn child when he is in Baltimore for a conference and finishing up his dissertation. Following that, they both turn away from one another, failing to communicate their sadness or share ideas. They experience an internal crisis as a result of the death of their premature kid because Shoba finds it unable to get past her husband's absence when her stillborn child is delivered. She saw the birth of the kid as the fulfillment of her love for Shukumar, but its passing symbolizes the end of her love and her sensitivity to life in general. Shukumar broods on 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. (IOM 4) He thought of 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. (IOM 4)

The emotional agony of losing a child has a different, but no less severe, effect on Shukumar and Shoba. Rather than going outside to retrieve the mail or purchase fruit or wine from the shops near the trolley stop, Shukumar would remain in the house and find solace in his lethargy. Even the child's designated room serves as a haven for him, in part because it calms him and in part. After all, Shoba avoided it. Shoba, on the other hand, forces herself to be isolated. Her deliberate absence, taking on new projects, and avoiding any emotional contact are all part of a protection system she has created around herself to allow herself to bury the loss beneath the cemetery of her aloof quiet.

Marriage is not simply a sexual connection in the Indian psyche; it is an undertaking to collaborate in the conception and nurturing of offspring. A kid strengthens the tie of marriage; marriage is regarded as banal and inadequate without a child. Shoba is transformed into a mechanized automaton as a result of the child's death. The methodical care and compassion with which she had constructed a home for them, preparing chutneys on Sundays, "stirring the boiling pot of tomatoes and prunes" (IOM 7).

Writing meticulous instructions and dates on her cookbooks has now dried within her. Engrossed in her misery, she ignores the fact that Shukumar, too, is going through his private hell; despite this, he tries to create a sense of home for Shoba by cooking food almost every evening. Cooking is the only activity that connects him to everyday normalcy and Shoba, giving him the satisfaction of doing something productive, because he knew that if it weren't for him, Shoba would eat a bowl of cereal for dinner. The announcement of an hour-long power outage in the evenings comes to their rescue, and they begin to sit together again and communicate with each other. Shoba frequently compares the power outage to the one in India. Their intimate conversation contains memories of India:

“It's like India ... sometimes the current disappears for an hour at a stretch I once had to attend an entire rice ceremony in the dark. The baby just cried and cried.

It must have been so hot” (IOM 11)

She also says:

I remember during power failures at my grandmother's house, we all had to say something (IOM 12)

Shukumar is taken aback by Shoba's plan to leave the house and live separately, and he reveals the secret that she has given birth.

The following story, "Mrs. Sen," is about the wife of a Mathematics Professor at an American university who is experiencing cultural alienation. Mr. Sen is a docile housewife who is bored out of her mind while her husband is at work. She pines for her family in Calcutta, her old neighborhood, and, most importantly, the sense of community that is lacking in American culture. Mrs. Sen, an Indian by birth, still dresses in saris and applies Vermilion to her brow in an attempt to protect herself.

Mrs. Sen represents those Indian immigrants who are stranded in a country and culture that demands conformity from them as the caretaker of an American boy Eliot. Mrs. Sen, feeling lonely in America, reads letters from India and listens to Ravikumar's cassettes. Her obsessive yearning makes her uneasy. Her obstinate refusal to learn to drive is also viewed as a physical means of resisting conformity to the new world. Mrs. Sen's English is hampered by her fear as she observes the traffic, and she tells Eliot, "Everyone, this people, too much in their world." Mrs. Sen, on the other hand, seems to overcome her homesickness by listening to the voices of her relatives on tape.

Mrs. Sen misses the fish she ate in India because she is a typical Bengali woman and fish is a staple food for Bengalis. She is obsessed with fish, and the arrival of fish at the local store is welcomed as a piece of home news; she is always too eager to hold it, cook it, and serve it to Mr. Sen. Mrs. Sen tells Eliot's mother that "everything is there" in India (Calcutta) and that she can get good fresh fish nearby, implying her nostalgic feelings. Mrs. Sen captures the helplessness and homesickness that many new immigrants experience in a foreign land. The story demonstrates the power that physical objects have over the human experience.

Mrs. Sen is preoccupied throughout the story with the presence or absence of material objects that she once had whether it is fish from her native Calcutta or her special Vegetable cutting blade--she clings to the material possessions that she is accustomed to, while firmly rejecting new experiences such as canned fish and even something as mundane as driving a car. While her homesickness is understandable, it has resulted in a lack of meaningful social connections for her. Her item-centric nostalgia emphasizes the fact that the people she meets in America are not a barrier to her adjustment.

The fish market employee takes the time to call Mrs. Sen and reserve her special fish. The officer who questions Mrs. Sen after her car accident does not charge her. For the most part, the characters in the story make it easy for Mrs. Sen to adjust to life in America. Despite this, Mrs. Sen refuses to assimilate in any way, wearing saris, serving Indian canapés to Eliot's mother, and avoiding the prospect of driving. Mrs. Sen resists assimilation through the power of material objects and the meaning they hold for her by living her life vicariously through remembered stories imprinted on her blade, saris, and grainy aerograms.

In this story, Eliot, an eleven-year-old boy, begins living with Mrs. Sen, the wife of a university professor. Mrs. Sen, Eliot's caregiver, chops and prepares food. She tells Eliot stories from her past, such as those from Calcutta, to help shape her identity. The story "Mrs. Sen" is filled with produce lists, ingredient catalogs, and recipe descriptions. The emphasis is on the ingredients and the act of preparation. Other items are highlighted, such as Mrs. Sen's meticulous collection of saris from her native India. Mrs. Sen's custom of buying fish from a local seafood market is central to the plot. Mrs. Sen associates the fish with her childhood home and

holds great significance for her. However, getting to the seafood market requires driving, which Mrs. Sen has not learned and refuses to learn. Mrs. Sen attempts to drive to the market without her husband and is involved in an automobile accident at the end of the story. After that, Eliot no longer stays with Mrs. Sen. In "Mrs. Sen's" story, Eliot develops a healthy companionship, and Mrs. Sen expresses her joy and loneliness, as well as enthusiastically sharing her Indian memories with him. She informs him about Bengali traditions and explains that by "home," she means Calcutta, not the room in which they are staying.

Eliot's exoticist gaze allows for cross-cultural interaction. Even though he recognizes that Mrs. Sen's customs are rooted in India, Eliot's reaction to his mother's daily arrival to pick him up expresses the level of comfort he feels within Mrs. Sen's apartment. Finally, after Mrs. Sen's car is involved in an accident, that communion is broken because his mother takes him away. However, the reader is left with the impression that meaningful communication is only possible if there is genuine understanding, love, and sympathy.

Interpreter of Maladies is a rich mosaic of women immigrants at various stages of their adaptation to American life, with all of its triumphs and failures. The exotic trappings of these stories sketched on a canvas that sketches backwards in time and space, give them the universal appeal of a traveller's tale. Food, clothing, and festivals are described in detail. Lahiri believes that food is an important part of people's lives and has incredible meaning beyond the obvious nutritional aspects. Mrs. Sen depicts an immigrant woman's nostalgia for India in this story with great subtlety and sympathy. It also depicts the difficulties that Indian wives face in a foreign culture. People who are culturally and geographically cut off from their homeland experience feelings of alienation. This story is infused with a sense of loss.

Jhumpa Lahiri frequently plays with the reversal of gender roles, particularly as they pertain to husband and wife roles within marriages. Lahiri's married characters frequently deal with the confusion of marriage roles regarding cooking, working outside the home, and bearing children. According to Lahiri's generalizations of Indian marital culture, women are solely responsible for cooking and doing household chores, as well as becoming completely domesticated with the arrival of children. According to such guidelines, men are responsible for working and providing financial support to their families.

Jhumpa Lahiri's characters are predominantly from the diaspora. They must adjust to new, and sometimes shockingly different, gender stereotypes and roles in their new home. Generation gaps, culture shock after leaving their "homeland," and sexuality questions all play a role in Lahiri's interpretations of gender and what it means to Indians in the diaspora.

Thus, in her collection of short stories, Lahiri depicts cultural crossover accurately. Most of the characters' inability to strike a balance between their American and Indian identities leads to an identity crisis in their lives. This leads to cultural isolation, which leads to personal isolation. The stories convincingly establish the elements of diasporic obsession with the longing for a home where diasporans can feel at ease.