

## **CULTURAL ALIENATION IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S SHORT STORY THE INTERPRETER OF MALADIES**

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### **Abstract**

*Cultural Alienation has been one of the worst nightmares for those who are caught between two different extremes. Often people are stagnant between the process of adapting and adjusting themselves to fit in to a form, at the cost of losing their identity. This identity crisis is more prominent in Lahiri's works. Some of the characters in this short story has been through an ordeal in life as far as their identities are concerned.*

**Keywords:** Alienation, Double identity, caught up between tradition and modernity.

Jhumpa Lahiri's short story *Interpreter of Maladies* aims at displaying the identity crisis by which the central characters are affected with. The combination of both the western and Indian cultural influences is seen in the characters Mrs and Mr. Das. It is evident that they coerce themselves to be physically Americans but in reality they are mentally Indians in the subconscious level. They undergo some kind of loneliness and they are trapped under cultural conflicts and displacements. Ironically, the couple is dominated by the influence of western culture in terms of their dress-sense and the way they speak with the American accent. It is clear that the Das family wanders with "double identity" and it is hard to establish themselves either as Americans or as Indians. The way they appear in India is more of an American and the way they appear in America is more of an Indian. They are dilapidated in America as well as in India.

Mr. Kapasi a traditional Indian tourist guide who takes them to the Konark temple sees them in a very different manner. Being a tourist guide he is able to identify tourists who belong to different cultures and traditions. In the beginning, Mr. Kapasi finds the Das family a bit strange but the "Indianness" of the family which plays peek-a-boo now and then entertains him. Although the couple is born and raised in America they are not recognized completely as Americans. The American born couple Mrs and Mr. Das had been constantly trying to cultivate the western culture in order to accomplish themselves as Native Americans. As a result of it Mr. Das calls his wife by her first name which is a typical American thing. Mrs. Das for her part has cropped her hair short and had dressed exactly like an American woman.

There is a huge difference between people who visit India as people who belong to the other part and people who visit India as the place where they belong to. People who pay a visit as a foreigner have some specific purpose for their visit but in the case of Mrs and Mr. Das, they visit India neither as tourists nor as natives but as 'distant Indians' who live abroad. Some of the instances Lahiri point out displays this feeling vividly. When Mr. Kapasi takes the Das family to the Konark temple, the children shout out "Monkeys" with excitement but Mr. Kapasi corrects them by saying Hanuman. He says "*we call them Hanuman*" [Mr. Kapasi, *Interpreter of Maladies*]. Through this particular incident one could understand that the Das family is considered as distant Indians.

The quality of being Indian or the Indianness in them is not totally dead at the same time Mrs and Mr. Das are super conscious in hiding their Indian trait but the more they try to hide the more visible it gets. While the Das family is prone to cultural alienation both in India and America the kids undergo a relatively less trauma because of the exclusive fact that their parents are born Americans whereas in the case of Raj and Mina (Mrs and Mr. Das) their parents are born Indians but later settled in America. Cultural Dislocation is seen too, when Bobby, the youngest of the two boys asks his father, seeing Mr. Kapasi steering on the right side of the car, "Daddy, Why is the driver sitting on the wrong side of this car too"? [Bobby, *Interpreter of Maladies*]. So whenever the kids question about their duality in terms of culture both Raj and Mina prefer not to answer them, not because they feel irritated but they are ignorant of it.

Mr. Kapasi relates his life with that of Mrs and Mr. Das who also seem to have an unhappy marriage. He feels his isolation is equal to that of the isolation that Mrs. Das shared with him. It is evident and clear that Mr. Kapasi has had a very unromantic life with her wife. When Mrs. Das has seen something romantic in Mr. Kapasi being an interpreter of people's diseases his perspective about the way he sees himself changes. This compliment particularly from Mrs. Das enthralls him. This is seen when Mrs. Das says about his job which had appealed to her in an unusual and a romantic manner. "*But so romantic*" [Mrs. Das says dreamily]. The idea of 'interpreting' rings a bell for Mrs. Das who had always wanted someone to whom she can open her heart.

Mr. Kapasi started to enjoy closeness with Mrs. Das, despite her being a married woman. At the same time he notices that Mrs and Mr. Das act more like that of an elder brother and sister to their kids than that of parents. Throughout their journey Mrs .Das was self conscious of her looks and she didn't care to bother about her husband and children. The word romantic stated by Mrs. Das, repeats in Kapasi's mind and he was "*feeling grateful that he had chosen the gray suit that morning and not the brown one*" [Mr. Kapasi]. Although Mr. Kapasi knows that no Indian woman behaves as Mrs. Das does with him, he is convinced of the fact that she is American too.

The concept of marriage in India is separate from that of the American concept; unlike Indian marriages the couple could express their contempt for their marriage and are free to part their ways. It is a matter of just two people there, whereas in India it is the matter of two families and sometimes a matter of society. Though Mrs and Mr. Das live an unhappy married life, they didn't think about parting their ways from one another since they were raised in the Indian culture. But Mrs. Das couldn't help herself of her loneliness and has an illicit affair with a Punjabi man out of which she gave birth to her very own son Bobby, who is ultimately not the son of Mr. Das. This she confesses to Mr. Kapasi when they have a private talk.

After her confession about her dark side of life, Mr. Kapasi feels disappointed. He not only feels disappointed but loses interest over Mrs. Das. The intimate feeling which Mr. Kapasi enjoyed from Mrs. Das, in no time disappeared. This sudden feeling of disgust could be seen, when he asks Mrs. Das, '*but why have you told me this information?*' [Mr. Kapasi].

Lahiri attempts to show the cultural alienation is not only seen outside but inside the family also, more particularly within self and this could be seen through the character Mina who feels irritated to be called as Mrs. Das. When Mrs. Das confessed about her extra marital relationship Kapasi sees her as a woman who is guilty rather than a woman who was desperate and longing for love. "*Is it really pain you feel, Mrs. Das, or is it guilt?*" [Mr. Kapasi]. This could be because Kapasi was born in such a place where a woman has to suffer even if she couldn't suffer anymore.

The Das family as whole suffers from a great malady called "cultural alienation", but Mrs. Das suffers double the sufferings of the family, because of the fact that she could not say out loud that Bobby

is the son only born to her, but not to Mr. Das. Bobby on the other hand disrespects Mr. Das and does not obey to his commands. The father-son bonding is not of a very good rapport which was like any other son who is not in any way connected to his father emotionally. One of the reasons for the gap between the parents and the children in this short story is because of lack of communication. This 'communication breakdown' is the outcome of their loneliness'.

Apart from cultural displacement the theme of unhappy marriage is also a striking factor that results from lack of understanding and intimacy between the couples. In the case of Mr. Kapasi it is the death of his son that brings out an irreparably awkward gap between his wife and himself; whereas in the case of Raj and Mina their relationship deteriorated in the progression of time. Pathetically, it is the life of Mrs and Mr. Das that is pitiful because they were in love when they got married. Mrs. Das feels that the spark between them was gone once she gave birth to her first child. The irony is that Mr. Das does not even care to find the difference between Mina before the birth of their first born child and after the birth of their second born child.

Throughout the short story Lahiri makes us see how the characters suffer from some of the postcolonial syndromes such as identity crisis, cultural dilemma, isolation from the society and infidelity. Although the characters are deserted by both the cultures, the characters are unable to withdraw themselves completely from neither of the cultures and traditions. The narrator thinks that though the couple Mrs and Mr. Das are Americans in terms of citizenship, their real root lies somewhere in south Asia.

## References

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2. Lahiri, Jhumpa, "Interpreter of Maladies" in *Interpreter of Maladies*, Reprinted by Houghton Mifflin Company 1999.