

Alienation, Loneliness and the Immigrant Experience

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Lahiri's most famous works *The Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) deal with the emotional and psychological challenges faced by individuals and families faced with the contrasting pressures of the new world and the one left behind, themes. The contrasting worlds that Lahiri's characters encounter result very often in a sense of alienation. Sidney Finkelstein's definition of alienation is "a psychological phenomenon, an internal conflict, a hostility felt towards something seemingly outside oneself, a barrier erected which is actually no defense but an impoverishment of oneself". (75)

Often people are stagnant between the process of adapting and fitting themselves to a form, and find that they have or are in danger of losing their identity. This identity crisis is prominent in Lahiri's works. The migrant experience creating a feeling of isolation that is felt in all of Lahiri's characters. Characters attempt to survive culturally in the new spaces is considered through the framework of the personal space. The first short story in *The Interpreter of Maladies*, 'A Temporary Matter' is an apt example of Lahiri's skillful dealing of the deeper existential concerns through the lens of marriage.

As time passes, loneliness grows especially in Shoba's world, which turns her into a woman she never wanted to become. Her outfit and sloppy make-up make her "look, at thirty-three, like the type of woman she'd once claimed she would never resemble" (*Interpreter* 1). Looking at how "she pried the sneakers from her feet without untying them" (*Interpreter* 5), Shukumar thinks she wasn't this way before. She used to put her coat on a hanger, her sneakers in the closet, and she paid bills as soon as they came. But now she treated the house as if it were a hotel. (*Interpreter* 6).

A home had turned into a place of temporary stay. Nothing bothered her about the house, and projects she had once planned for the house but not completed, now no longer

bothered her. Shoba's changing attitude towards both herself and her husband is the consequence of her accusing Shukumar of being absent when she lost the baby. Although it was she who had insisted on his going for the academic conference in Baltimore, and although it was three weeks before her due date when the event happened, Shoba is unable to forgive him for the loneliness she felt at the hospital. This feeling of loneliness expands between them each and something that interested her, something that made her look up from her plate" and to question "what was there left to say to her?" (*Interpreter* 13). In the story of Shoba and Shukumar, "alienation is inextricably tied to loneliness" (Jebastine & Subarna), just as in other Lahiri characters, like Ashima in *Interpreter of Maladies*.

The electricity shut down gives the couple a chance to see what is left to say each other, to perhaps identify a point to resume communications, to re-establish a link with each other. What began as a consequence of the natural response to an electricity shutdown – to light a few candles while waiting for the power to return – becomes, after months of living in silence and forced conversation, a moment to speak, to reminisce. Shoba recalls a memory of the power failures during her childhood in India. She recalls a past time, a different circumstance, largely unpleasant: "Sometimes the current disappears for hours at a stretch" (*Interpreter* 11), but somehow favourably recalled.

The darkness lit by a small candle seems to bring them together so much they even start washing the dishes together and "drying their hands on either end of a towel" (*Interpreter* 15) after finishing the dishes. During this temporary thawing of the state of their marriage, Shukumar is surprised to discover how little he knew about Shoba although he knows how "she curled her fingers tightly when she slept, that her body twitched during bad dreams" and "it was honeydew she

favoured over cantaloupe” (*Interpreter* 16). Despite being able to talk to each other again with the help of this temporary problem with electricity, Shukumar senses that something changed between them when they had to spend time “in a wing of the hospital they hadn’t been to on the tour for expectant parents” (*Interpreter* 3).

When the electric company solves the problem the shutdown ends. So do the couple’s hour of sharing and communication. Perhaps it is not the end of communication, rather it is the loudest and clearest point of communication that they have had in the days and months following the birth of their still born child. Shoba reveals the whole point of their game with her final confession: she has found an apartment closer to work, an apartment that did not include him. Sickened by what he hears, Shukumar suddenly decides to share what he had promised himself to keep as a secret from Shoba: the sex of the dead baby. Shoba had not wanted to know the sex of the baby during the ultrasound; she wanted it to be a surprise. She also had not wanted to know how her husband had dealt with the death of the child. She now knows the sex of the baby – “She had wanted it to be a surprise” (*Interpreter* 21) – and the fact that her husband had come back from his conference, seen and held the dead baby in his arms before it was cremated.

Shoba could not deal with her trauma and Shukumar could not support her. They are both separated by their grief and inability to share it with each other. Within six months, they go from being excited expectant parents to strangers living in the same apartment. Interestingly, Shukumar comments that Shoba “was the type to prepare for surprises, good and bad” (*Interpreter* 6). Yet, the baby’s death catches her unprepared and she is drawn into an isolated and lonely world to which she surrenders eventually.

This grieving couple is not only without the support of one another, but also lacks the support of a larger family. Shoba had made plans for the rice ceremony for her baby, made the guest list, and decided which of her three bothers would feed the child. But now, in the absence of a baby, there appear no other guests in their apartment except Shoba

herself, and there are no extended family members to help them. Shoba’s mother who had come for two months only seemed to add to the growing coolness of their relationship. Shoba preserved herself by setting up her “arsenal of coloured pencils” (*Interpreter* 8), and Shukumar stayed at home pretending to work on his thesis, while struggling to admit to his dwindling interest in his thesis writing.

The Interpreter of Maladies continues its study of the theme of alienation within the space of marriage in the titular story. The interpreter is Mr. Kapasi, who is employed as a translator to a Gujarati doctor working in that part of Orissa and doubles as a local tourist guide. In the course of his job as a tourist guide, he encounters the Indian American family of Mr. and Mrs. Das. The couple along with their children come to India to visit and engage the services of Mr. Kapasi. It is interesting to note that for the Indian-American family, India is as much a foreign land as it is to someone without an Indian heritage. Mr. Kapasi must interpret the land of Das’ parents to Das and his children as well.

In this story, Lahiri shifts the physical stage of the action to India. But even here, the characters are as out of place as Shoba and Shukumar were in a foreign land regardless of the number of years they had spent there. Perhaps here, in the land of their ancestors, their foreignness is even more starkly visible. The children need to be told why the driver of their car isn’t actually on the “wrong side” (*Interpreter* 48) or that monkeys aren’t just monkeys but are revered for the sake of Hanuman: “we call them hanuman” (*Interpreter* 47) and Mr. Das needed a “paper back tour book, which said INDIA in yellow letters and looked as if it had been published abroad” (*Interpreter* 44) to help him understand the same place where his parents lived.

Eventually, however, Lahiri’s skillful presentation of the characters allows us to see that these aren’t the only maladies afflicting the family. In fact, from the beginning of the story, we see a family where the adults behave with a severe lack of maturity. They “bickered about who should take Tina to the toilet” (*Interpreter* 43), do not “hold the little girl’s hand as they walked to the rest room”, referred

to each other by their first names even when speaking to their children, exhibit a kind of vagueness when it comes to looking after their children and in Mrs. Das's case, remain removed from each other, while "not offering her puffed rice to anyone". (*Interpreter* 47), As Mr. Kapasi sums up his observation of the family, "they were all like siblings" (*Interpreter* 49).

The malady affecting the family, as Mr. Kapasi soon realizes goes deeper than immature parenting and juvenile behaviour of parents. Mrs. Das begins to converse with him and she begins to interest him. "Mr. Kapasi was anxious to be alone with her, to continue their private conversation. . ." (*Interpreter* 58). But in the private conversation that they manage to have, Mrs. Das confides in him a secret that she had been carrying with her for eight years – her youngest son Bobby was not the son of her husband. For Mr. Kapasi, this piece of information is the last thing he expected to hear from the lady. When he asks her why she told him this very intimate detail of her life, it emerges that is because of his job as an interpreter. Mrs. Das has been carrying this secret with her for eight long years and, as Mr. Kapasi diagnoses the situation, had become a woman who was "not yet thirty, who loved neither her husband nor her children, who had already fallen out of love with life." (*Interpreter* 66) She expected Mr. Kapasi to interpret her pain. But he confronts her and asks, "Is it really pain you feel, Mrs. Das, or is it guilt?" (*Interpreter* 66). The confrontation by the interpreter of maladies does not always indicate healing – the patient must acknowledge the malady. Mrs. Das is not interested in that confrontation. She marches away from it, to her family.

The story "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine" makes the all-important observation about the nature of the disconnect that exists between immigrants, particularly second-generation immigrants and the world that their parents came from. Laila lives in American with her parents and Mr. Pirzada from East Pakistan visits them. To Laila's parents and to Mr. Pirzada, there is no question about their identity, their cultural past or what their ethnicity is. They are clear that Mr. Pirzada is Bengali but he is "no longer considered Indian. . . Not since Partition." (*Interpreter* 25) Laila

is confused, for he is "the Indian man" to her. Her father explains that in 1947, not only did India gain its independence from Britain, it was also divided into Pakistan and India. Dacca and what would later become Bangladesh was part of Pakistan, as East Pakistan. Mr. Pirzada was therefore, Pakistani. Laila, exposed to discussions of the Pakistan civil war while watching American commercials on TV, and made to learn American history in school, is ignorant of her own history. She is caught and reprimanded for reading Asian history in school, when she had been expected to be working on American history. For Laila, her American life is challenged with the coming of Mr. Pirzada for dinner.

Eventually Mr. Pirzada goes back home and sends a card with a letter telling Laila's family that he had been reunited with his family and that the war was over. His life as an immigrant, a refugee had ended. It has only been a temporary condition. But for Laila, her condition as immigrant, as un-rooted and culturally ambivalent will continue for the rest of her life. Mr. Pirzada had never had any doubts about his identity or his attachment to Bangladesh, even when he was in America, but Laila is in America, and will continue to remain in doubt about her identity, and her history, of which she remains ignorant, and which will be written over with the history of a foreign land.

The narrator's life in Boston is shaped by 103-year-old Mrs. Croft and his new wife, Mala. The story also refers to his mother who had died in Calcutta several years ago, but whose life as well as death had left a huge impact on his life. In the three women, the narrator is exposed to three different worlds, and three different cultures. His mother "refused to adjust to life" (*Interpreter* 187) without her husband, after he died of encephalitis. The narrator had to watch his mother sink into insanity and even light the funeral pyre for her when she died. On the other hand, Mrs. Croft, despite being a widow, had managed to live through so many changes, including the planting of the American flag on the moon. She had seen the changes in American society from the time she was born in 1866, had lived through her husband's death, and now, in her very old age, still rented

out rooms to young students from “Harvard or Tech” (*Interpreter* 177). The contrast in the way two widows dealt with their lives stood out to the narrator so much that he regarded Mrs. Croft very highly and felt miserable when he read her obituary in the newspaper. His wife, Mala, who had come to America, because he was there, had to get used to him and he to her. But they do, and they manage to have a meaningful marriage.

Unlike the other stories of immigrants, this final story in the collection ends on an affirmative and positive note. The narrator is able to tell his son whenever he is discouraged, that his own accomplishment of living in a new world for thirty years was not an insignificant one. While the men who walked on the moon would remain heroes for all their lives, they spent only a few hours in that new world. He, on the other hand, had lived in a new world for most of his life. Mrs. Croft too had seen the emergence of a new world and had managed to not let it daunt her, unlike his own mother, who simply collapsed when she had to deal with life after her husband’s death. His wife, Mala, confronted with a strange place, as well as a stranger for a husband, who was the only one she had to cling to in the new place, had also emerged to be “happy and strong”. (*Interpreter* 197)

For immigrants, life is not easy. They must move physically, emotionally, as well as culturally. The narrator of this story has not forgotten the path he had taken to reach where he was, nor has he forgotten where he came from. But he is also aware that his son, born in America, must come home to “eat rice with... his hands, and speak in Bengali” (*Interpreter* 197), practices which he isn’t sure his son will continue after his and his wife’s death. Like all first-generation immigrants, he and his wife have adjusted to life in the new world, demonstrating that while they were not the first to make their fortune in a different place, they were certainly not cowed down by the new world they encountered. At the same time, they kept alive their connection to the world they had come from. Like Mrs. Croft who never got over her wonderment of seeing man on the moon – “splendid” (*Interpreter* 179) – the narrator never got over his own awareness of this new world that he had adjusted very well to. But just like Mrs. Croft

who never forgot the manners of the world she had been born in, he never forgot the manners, traditions, practices of the world he had come from.

“This Blessed House”, depicts the relationship of a young married couple. Sanjeev and Twinkle, married for just two months but they differ from each other in many ways. Both husband and wife are the second generation of immigrant families, but both respond to their immigrant status differently. Twinkle is a new generation woman completing her Master’s degree thesis, with many habits and lifestyle patterns that are more American than Indian – she smokes, she has had more than one romantic relationship before meeting and marrying her husband, is more liberal in her approach to cooking, – likes to cook dishes which are not quite Indian, avoids spices and curries and complains that cooking Indian food was a bother; she detested chopping garlic, and peeling ginger (*Interpreter* 144) – and has a more open-minded approach to different circumstances.

The couple moves into a new house and in the course of setting up home, they discover many Christian paraphernalia like post cards, crosses, posters, statues of Christ and so on, left behind by the previous owners of the house. The reaction to these by the husband and wife couldn’t be more different, for while Twinkle finds the objects spectacular and takes them to be welcoming signs, and believes that “This house is blessed.” (*Interpreter* 144), Sanjeev does not like these items to remain in the house, does not consider them blessed, and keeps telling his wife that “we are not Christian”. (*Interpreter* 137) Sanjeev is frustrated with his wife because she insists on not just keeping these items but also on displaying them in prominent places around the house. To him, his wife’s actions is childish and a betrayal of their identity.

Twinkle’s excitement of discovering the Christian bric-a-brac is offset by Sanjeev’s quiet seething frustration with his wife and his circumstance, particularly, his inability to feel at home in his own house. Just like the immigrants in strange land, Sanjeev is out of his depth in this home that he had bought, and with his wife whom he had married. He was not able to understand or effectively

communicate with his wife, whom he had known for only four months and with whom he now shared his life. He thought “with flicker of regret of the snapshots his mother used to send him from Calcutta, a prospective of brides who could sing and sew and season lentils without consulting a cookbook.” (*Interpreter* 146). While we are not told outright that Sanjeev regrets getting married to Twinkle, his discomfort with his wife, his mental listing of all that he perceives as her failures leave the reader with no doubt that Sanjeev is at the very least, second guessing his decision to marry Twinkle. Sanjeev is thus a representative of immigrants who despite their living in a new country, carry with them and constantly return to their native land through memories, traditional practices, thought processes, rituals, and even food.

Despite having moved to America, Mrs. Sen does not appear interested in understanding or assimilating with the American culture. For instance, she refuses to learn driving, which is something everyone is expected to know in America. Mrs. Sen did begin driving lessons, but gave them up after a minor accident. She is dependent on her husband for almost everything but that is not a deterrent to her sense of independence or liberty, in contrast to Eliot's mother, who is employed, drives her own car and is making her own way in life. Mrs. Sen feels that India was better than America because there, they had a driver for their car, and she did not have to know to drive at all. Besides, for her “Everything is there” (*Interpreter* 113), that is, in India, and there is thus, no reason for her to learn driving because there is nothing motivating her to drive any place. By then eleven-year-old Eliot has also understood that when Mrs. Sen said ‘home’, she referred to India, not her apartment in America, “where she sat chopping vegetables.” (*Interpreter* 116)

Eliot notices that Mrs. Sen would always keep an eye on the mailbox, for she was always looking forward to receiving letters from her family back in India. This is a very clear revelation of how immigrants like Mrs. Sen keep their links with their homeland very strong through letters, telegrams and phone calls. This is not merely a sentimental connection, but a determined cultural nostalgia that is rooted in the culture that the individual

identifies with. In fact, Eliot is able to notice that Mrs. Sen became happier upon receiving her letters and reading the Bengali script. She is so happy that for Eliot, it felt as though Mrs. Sen “was no longer present in the room”. (*Interpreter* 122)

Some immigrants assimilate very well, like Twinkle from “This Blessed House”, but others like Mrs. Sen continue to long for their homeland, a longing represented in their longing for food that they had had in their homeland. For her, the fish in America “tasted nothing like the fish in India” (*Interpreter* 123). A lot of her recollections of her life in India revolved around food, especially fish, the variety she had enjoyed, the frequency with which she could cook and consume fish. Mrs. Sen, like Sanjeev, are unintentional victims of the cultural alienation that immigrants face, when they are compelled to uproot themselves from one culture and set roots in another, which is foreign and strange.

It is interesting to see here that Dev is not affected by his actions at all. He is adept at lying to his wife to accommodate his trysts with Miranda. Laxmi's cousin's husband refuses to come home to his wife even after she says she could take him back. Perhaps Lahiri is, in her own indirect manner of approaching the point she wishes to drive home, trying to show the kind of life that some Indian-Americans lead. They do not suffer the angst that is the consequence of a cultural alienation. Instead, they have adjusted to the very liberal, self-centred lifestyle of the West, where the only thing that matters is one's own happiness. It is Miranda who recognizes the tragedy of the entire situation when she babysits Rohin, the little boy of Laxmi's cousin. Rohin tells her that the word sexy means “loving someone you don't know.” (*Interpreter* 107). Of course, the boy has arrived at the definition through a series of understandings of his parents' conversations, but for Miranda, it is a moment of truth. She is able to see the fallacy of the situation. Dev is unable to see it. So is Laxmi's cousin's husband.

Boori Ma is unable to let go of her past. As she sweeps the stairwell of the building, she loudly narrates the story of her former life and the changes she has had to undergo. With her

voice which was “brittle with sorrows, as tart as curds, and shrill enough to grate meat from a coconut”(Interpreter 70) she would enumerate

twice a day . . . the details of her plight and losses suffered since her deportation to Calcutta after Partition. At that time, she maintained, the turmoil had separated her from a husband, four daughters, a two-story brick house, a rosewood almari, and a number of coffer boxes whose skeleton keys she still wore, along with her life savings, tied to the free end of her sari. (Interpreter 70-71)

She also enumerated the “easier times” (Interpreter 71) such as the grand celebration organized for her third daughter’s wedding to a school principal. At the celebration, “rice was cooked in rosewater. The mayor was invited. Everyone washed their fingers in pewter bowls. . . Mustard prawns were steamed in banana leaves. Not a delicacy was spared.” She also clarified that such elaborate preparations were not an extravagance for her family: “At our house we ate goat twice a week. We had a pond on our property, full of fish.” (Interpreter 71)

For Boori Ma, narrating these details did not depend on whether she had an active audience or not. It was a daily affair; as she swept the stairwell, she would loudly tell her story. Interestingly, her stories did not remain the same. “Whether there was any truth to Boori Ma’s litanies no one could be sure. For one thing, every day, the perimeters of her former estate seemed to double, as did the contents of her almari and coffer boxes.” (Interpreter 72) That she was a refugee, no one doubted, but when asked for specifics about her journey during the migration, she would shake the free end of her sari, rattling the keys attached to it and say, “Why demand specifics? Why scrape lime from a betel leaf? Believe me, don’t believe me. My life is composed of such griefs you cannot even dream them.” (Interpreter 72)

When a series of robberies hit the area, the people suspect Boori Ma of helping the robbers and dismiss her from her job, and begin to search for a “real durwan”, as opposed to someone who had taken the job

upon herself. As the story draws to a close, Boori Ma’s keys and life savings are stolen from the end of her sari, leaving her bereft in more ways than one. She not only loses her money, but also the keys that represented a link to her former life, a link that sustained her as she lived in the reduced circumstances in her life as a refugee. While keys themselves could help her achieve nothing, the keys were a reminder of her past. When the keys are stolen, despite shaking the free end of her sari, “nothing rattled” (Interpreter 82) Boori Ma is now rendered voiceless.

Jhumpa Lahiri’s second collection of short stories *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008) carry on her work from Interpreter of Maladies, her Pulitzer Prize collection of short stories and her first novel, The Namesake. In this collection, the stories are longer than those in the earlier volume, and reveal a craftsman equipped with the ability to probe deeper into the realities of immigrant lives.

In fact, this epigraph underlines the loneliness and struggle to flourish instead of only surviving in strange lands, that immigrants and their descendant face – a theme that is repeatedly returned to by Lahiri in *The Interpreter of Maladies*

In Lahiri’s works, we find her characters caught in an unaccustomed world, one to which they don’t really get accustomed to, even down the generations. For the first generation of migrants, the new country is a new place, with a new culture, a new language, a new way of life. Getting used to and adapting to this new place is extremely difficult, almost traumatic even, and a cultural alienation seeps in, as can be seen in Mrs. Sen (Interpreter of Maladies)

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