

ENGLISH: *INTERPRETER OF MALADIES*

'Interpreter of Maladies shows that all relationships are fraught with difficulties.' Do you agree?

While Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* certainly argues for the complicated nature of relationships, she never claims that such connections are universal. Certainly, Lahiri showcases a variety of fraying or severed ties, which have been caused by miscommunication, illegitimacy and indifference; however she also ensures there are healthy, functional rapports amongst her series of short stories. Through use of setting and symbolism, Lahiri explores the difficulties individuals can experience within their relationships. She offers a cure for many of these challenges in the form of communication and compromise – though in some circumstances, problems cannot be resolved.

Lahiri examines grief as one of the many conditions that can plague relationships. 'Interpreter of Maladies' is a perfect example of the effect sorrow can have on couples. Mr. Kapasi, the tourist guide, suffers through many 'protracted silences' with his wife after the death of their son. Unable to comfort his mourning spouse, he begins to feel that they have 'little in common' with each other, which causes him to feel further isolated. He also recognises that his wife has 'little regard' for his career. Neither character is able to provide the other with what they need. Mr. Kapasi cannot offer his wife solace and she cannot make him feel appreciated or special. So when he encounters Mrs. Das, an American tourist, for the first time, he begins to fantasise about how their friendship could 'grow, and flourish'. Mrs. Das describes his job in 'complimentary terms' and makes him feel valuable, an aspect missing in his own marriage. The tourist guide's crumbling marriage is particularly obvious when the tourist guide 'admire[s]' Mrs. Das' legs. Certainly, there is a physical element to this admiration. More so, however, he longs for human connection, something he hasn't experienced since the loss of his son. The Sun temple Mr. Kapasi shows the American family reflects his emotional state. Though the exterior shows no apparent signs of collapse, the inside is 'filled with rubble'. In 'Interpreter of Maladies', Lahiri submits death as one cause of suffering.

Bereavement plays a similar role in 'A Temporary Matter'. After Shoba and Shukumar's baby was 'born dead', they begin to lose their sense of self and become outsiders in their marriage. The very nature of their grief is echoed by the blunt way readers are informed about the baby's passing and reverberates in the actions of Shoba. Typically one to 'think ahead' Shoba begins to treat her home 'as if it were a hotel', abandoning her shoes near the refrigerator and aborting all attempts at maintaining appearances (she looked 'like the type of woman she once claimed she would never resemble'). Shoba's previous passion for life is shown in the way she once stocked 'endless sealed pyramids' of food. After tragedy strikes, all the dishes are devoured. The consumption of supplies intended for the future indicates that when the baby died, so did Shoba's hope for the future. The food is a device that Lahiri utilizes to exhibit the intricacy of relationships. The pain caused by loss is further conveyed in Shukumar's behaviour. He has to 'pull himself out of bed', often around lunchtime. Like the depletion of food reserves, this reluctance to face the day showcases the extent to which the baby's death has hurt Shukumar and supports Lahiri's message that many relationships are metaphorical minefields. Shukumar also spends a great deal of time in the study because he knows it is 'a place Shoba avoid[s]'. Just as Shoba is 'always gone' from the house, this signifies that neither individual can handle each other's company, perhaps because it is a reminder of their dreams which have been destroyed. Additionally, neither character has the energy to reach out because they are so consumed by their own sadness. This emotional isolation is symbolized by a plant in their house, which is merely 'inches from the tap' and yet 'so dry'. Lahiri communicates the impact of death so as to emphasise the assorted issues that can blight a relationship.

Another difficulty that Lahiri proposes as detrimental to lasting, healthy connection is a lack of communication.

The central character in 'A Real Durwan' is misunderstood by the other residents of her apartment. In order to cope with sleeping on a 'bed of newspapers', beneath 'the letter boxes', Boori Ma

weaves elaborate stories of her past ('My feet touched nothing but marble'). The neighbours tolerate these fibs because Boori Ma resembles 'a real durwan', in the way she guards the entrance to the apartment block and keeps the stairwell clean. Though tolerant of Boori Ma, the neighbours do not comprehend her character. This is a flaw in their relationship and means that later, when items are 'stolen' from the apartment, they believe she 'informed the robbers'. Through an omniscient narrator, readers are informed that Boori Ma has, in fact, been at the market the days preceding the theft, and so could not have colluded with anyone. Furthermore the audience knows that Boori Ma is an honest individual who genuinely cares for the building's members, which is evidenced when she is the 'only one' to farewell the Dalals. The residents have never properly connected with Boori Ma, however, and are convinced that she is capable of such treachery. At the beginning of the story when neighbours would accuse Boori Ma of having a mouth 'full of ashes' she was very nonchalant about their disbelief, crying, 'Believe me, don't believe me, such comforts you cannot even dream them.' In the end, though, her desperation is expressed when she says 'Believe me, believe me.' Boori Ma's original indifference to her neighbours' doubt and the latter's failure to familiarise themselves with her causes major problems. The 'sweeper of the stairwell' is 'tossed out' on to the street, signifying the virtual severing of their earlier bonds. Boori Ma's story suggests misunderstanding is one of the key causes of hardships within a relationship.

Misinterpretations are also shown to be problematic in the aforementioned 'Interpreter of Maladies'. Mr. Kapasi incorrectly assumes that Mrs. Das cares about him, simply because she expresses 'an interest'. In reality, she views him as a 'parent' and only speaks to him to help herself. Mrs. Das, too, misconstrues her tour guide's actions, believing that he can offer a 'remedy' to her disconnection. In fact, the revelation about the paternity of Mrs. Das' son, Ronny, actually irritates Mr. Kapasi, and he views her lack of 'close friends' and general 'overwhelm' as 'trivial'. Their relationship fails to thrive because both characters make false assumptions and never attempt to really get to know the other. This is just one difficulty which Lahiri presents as perilous for a good rapport.

Lahiri also examines the way an individual's personal issues can negatively affect a relationship. In 'Mrs. Sen's', the eponymous protagonist suffers from severe homesickness. This prevents her from embracing any aspects of her new home, including her husband. This malady can also be seen when Mala in 'The Third and Final Continent' cries during her first few nights away from home. Mrs. Sen and Mala are in similar situations because both women have left their country 'for no reason other than to be [someone's] wife.' Though Mrs. Sen's marriage isn't necessarily arranged, the characters are similar in that neither has ventured abroad for their own purposes but rather to be with their husbands. Unlike Mrs. Sen, however Mala is open to her husband's attempts to help her assimilate. Though 'strangers', at first, soon Mala and he 'discover pleasure and solace in each other's arms'. In divergence, Mrs. Sen is not receptive to her husband's suggestions. He continuously attempts to teach his wife how to drive but she is resistant to learning. Her stubbornness prevents a meaningful relationship from forming, which is reported when Eliot observes that Mr. Sen would pat his head but 'not kiss Mrs. Sen'. Their lack of bond is also displayed in the way 'they [don't] hold hands', unlike the 'boyfriend, girlfriend' on the bus whose 'fingers [are] linked'. Lahiri uses the two different stories to illustrate the way personal unhappiness can taint the success of a couple.

The series of short stories attests to the way a lack of social acceptance can ail a relationship. In 'Sexy' Miranda's affair with Dev is problematic because of its illegitimacy in American culture. She can 'never go to restaurants' with her paramour or discuss dates with her co-worker, Laxmi. Lahiri represents Miranda's internal distress with a dress, which is in 'a heap on the floor' every morning. In essence, Miranda's relationship causes her misery because it is not one that is validated by her colleagues and family. Conventionality also affects the way Sanjeev reacts to his wife, Twinkle, in 'This blessed house.' When Twinkle begins decorating their home with 'Christian paraphernalia' he tells her, 'I can't have the people I work with see this'. Sanjeev cares a great deal about society's views on his 'watercolor poster of Christ'. This affects his interactions with Twinkle with minor annoyances becoming great frustrations. When Twinkle desires to place a 'plaster Virgin Mary' on the lawn, Sanjeev exclaims, '[the neighbours] will think we're insane.' The influence of popular

opinion on relationships is further displayed when Twinkle informs Sanjeev that his 'friends adore the poster'. After hearing his peers' positive reviews, his attitude towards Twinkle alters and he feels the same 'pangs' he experienced when he first fell in love with her. Sanjeev 'dread[s] the raised eyebrows of his guests' for the same reason that Miranda cries- pressure from society is capable of causing tribulations. In the former's situation, however, a 'compromise' leads Sanjeev to 'follow' Twinkle. Whereas in 'Sexy', Lahiri suggests that some couples cannot overcome hurdles. This suggestion about the nature of connection is emphasised by Lahiri's utilization of pathetic fallacy, which appears at the story's conclusion. The 'clear blue sky' signifies Miranda's cleared conscience and reiterates the power of convention over the wellbeing of a relationship.

While many of Lahiri's stories contain struggling relationships, she also incorporates functional connections to provide a balanced view of the world. In 'When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine', Lahiri demonstrates the way communication and consideration can result in friendship and love. Lilia's parents invite Mr. Pirzada into their home to 'share a meal' for no reason other than to develop a bond with someone who can share in their culture. Their connection is so strong, it is capable of making Lilia feel 'like a stranger in [her] own home'. Despite this, Lilia grows to truly care for Mr. Pirzada, which is visible when she 'prays' for his family in Dacca. This type of bond ensures that Mr. Pirzada never feels lonely, even when 'many miles and hours away' from his family. Easy relationships are also apparent in 'A Temporary Matter', with the Bradfords shown to be in a loving marriage when Mrs. Bradford 'slip[s] her arm through the crook of her husband's elbow'. Lahiri incorporates simple, unproblematic relationships into her stories- often as minor characters- to illustrate that not every relationship is burdened by issues.

Lahiri's employment of contrast, symbolism and other literary devices highlights the way rapports can often be challenging. She uses a wide range of short stories to demonstrate the various types of maladies that can trouble a relationship. By including a range of characters and circumstances, Lahiri underlines her message that difficulties can affect many – but not all- types of connection.