



Re-reading Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* in the Light of Exile, Alienation and Isolation

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Abstract

In postcolonial discourse the images that the term 'exile' invoke do not simply limit themselves to "the condition of someone being sent or kept away from their own country, village etc., especially for political reasons", or to a detachment from metropolitan or local spaces. 'Exile' has been deployed as a concept beyond simply a forced removal from a given physical location. Yet, the importance of the removal from spaces in 'exile' cannot be overlooked as physical location plays a decisive role in cultural productions.

However, it is not imperative to be physically removed from one's 'homeland' to be in 'exile'. Exile can take place in different cultural spaces, especially through processes like colonization and modernization. One can feel exiled even in one's 'homeland'. Edward Said states that exile can be both 'actual' and metaphoric, 'voluntary' or 'involuntary'. Threat and violence are not the only forces to cause exile, subtler forms of compulsion can do the same as well. This can be seen in the case of intellectuals living overseas for the purpose of education or research. An attempt is made to re-read Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* here.

Keywords: Interpreter, Maladies, Exile, Isolation, Alienation, Diaspora, etc.

A close reading of Jhumpa Lahiri's works, especially, her first significant book, the short story collection *Interpreter of Maladies*, makes fascinating study of exploration of the theme of exile with its multidimensional ramifications. The expressions in Jhumpa's works are replete with the images of loss and longing. The narratives are necessarily the narratives of pain. She alludes to her constant listening to the tales of inconveniences her parents encountered in their lives. She feels her sense of pain, alienation and marginalization, to be a kind of inheritance from her parents.

The title piece of the short story collection *Interpreter of Maladies* relates encounter of an Indian interpreter guide with an American Indian diaspora family on the latter's trip to India and unfolds in the process several stories hidden beneath the surface of apparent cozy family life. In the course of a close reading of the text the story

reveals the maladies of the exile and invokes images that may add newer dimensions to the very concept of the term.

The story grabs the reader completely as one casts a casual look at the very first sentence of the piece, because Lahiri, a wonderful storyteller begins in the middle of events without bothering much for a detailed introduction. The introduction to the context, the characters and their physical and cultural spaces are made evident in a few deft touches. Mr. Das's family has landed in Orissa in one of their visits to India. The five-member family includes Mr. and Mrs. Das, two sons and one daughter. Here they come across Mr. Kapasi, the tourist guide and a part-time interpreter of maladies of patients to a doctor. Dispassionate disinterestedness in the husband and wife, particularly in the latter and the lack of sense of belonging in them is marked by Mr. Kapasi and is

subtly suggested with deft touches as we read, "Mr. and Mrs. Das bickered about who should take Tina to the toilet. Eventually Mrs. Das relented when Mr. Das pointed out that he had given the girl her bath the night before" (43). Still Mrs. Das "did not hold the little girl's hand as they walked to the rest room". The description does not reflect a cohesive family unit. It rather portrays a few disjointed and isolated individuals floating on a space called family, who have almost no common space to share.

That the Das family is in the diaspora is made evident in just one sentence: "The family looked Indian but dressed as foreigners did..." (43-44). Such is the economy and lucidity of expression Jhumpa Lahiri has in command. Soon Mr. Kapasi realizes that this family is as foreign as his other clients. "Mr. Das squeezed hands like an American so that Mr. Kapasi felt it in his elbow. Mrs. Das, for her part, had flexed one side of her mouth, smiling dutifully at Mr. Kapasi, without displaying any interest in him" (44).

Mr. Das takes pride in the fact that he and his wife were born and raised in America and not in India. Yet they are drawn to India, and make trips to the country at regular intervals. He announces that his parents after retirement have settled back at Assansol in India and they visit the couple every couple of years. Second generation Indian diaspora in America, they do not have a "home" anywhere in the world. They neither belong to America—their birth place, where they still feel outsiders, nor do they belong to their "homeland" India. They conform to the state of *Trishanku* of the Indian mythology, a metaphor for the modern expatriate immigrant inhabiting the contested global-local place.

However, as the story unfolds, glimpses of uneasy detachment and disinterestedness displayed by both husband and wife, especially the latter, suggest that probably there are more stories than expected beneath the apparent cozy family picture that meets the eye. They do not seem like usual parents with visible concern for their children. "Mr. and Mrs. Das behave like an older brother and sister, not parents. It seems that they were in-charge of the children only for the day. It was hard to believe that they were regularly responsible for anything other than themselves" (49). They appear more like

distinctly familiar co-passengers on a tour. Occasionally, it seems that both the husband and the wife though are bound to share a common physical space, do not really share minimum mental space. Both of them are exiles as they are diasporas in America. They are more so at their own home, which they do not seem to have built and do not seem to belong to it.

Every adult in the story has a malady of his own, which begins to unveil as Mr. Kapasi mentions his part-time job of an interpreter to a doctor. Like many in the area, the doctor too does not know Gujarati. Mr. Kapasi happens to meet the doctor in connection with his son's treatment. At that time Mr. Kapasi had been teaching English in a Grammar School and he bartered his skills as an interpreter to pay the increasingly exorbitant medical bills. Unfortunately the boy dies of typhoid. However, Mr. Kapasi could not discontinue the job of the interpreter as his financial liabilities went on increasing with the addition of the new members to his family and in his incessant attempts to cater to the ever-increasing demands of his wife.

Mrs. Kapasi's malady was that she could not allow herself to have any regard for her husband's part-time job. It reminded her of the child she lost, and she resented her husband's interpreter profession as she believed it helped other people's lives. Mr. Kapasi's account of his life, his wife and the gradually increasing desert spaces between the two allow us to interpret and investigate the maladies that are ailing the family. Her disregard for her husband's profession of an interpreter to the same doctor under whose treatment her ailing son died; her using the phrase doctor's assistant "as if the process of interpretation were equal to taking someone's temperature or changing a bedpan" (53); her frequent crying in her sleep; her keeping "the string of her petticoat knotted around her waist" and never becoming "fully naked before her husband even in their private moments"—all these provide testimony to the desert spaces between the husband and the wife and their transformation as some kind of exile in their own family.

"In his attempt to keep his wife in good mood, Mr. Kapasi constantly tries to gratify her whims and her

countless wishes. In doing so he is awakened to the fact that the only 'signs' he could recognize from his silences" (53).

Mr. Kapasi was so involved in fantasizing Mrs. Das that he began to dread the thought of their departure and wondered how he might make the tour last a little longer. So when Das family acceded to his suggestions of visiting Udayagiri and Khandagiri, Mr. Kapasi felt 'almost delirious with relief' (60). It intrigued him when Mr. Das refused to climb the stairs, and instead asked Mr. Kapasi stay back. Greater shock awaited him as Mrs. Das revealed that their younger son Bobby was not the son of Mr. Das. Mr. Kapasi was taken aback to such an extent that he could not immediately respond to her account of the whole story. He could not even manage an answer when she confessed, "I told you because of your talents" (65). It is the guilt for not being able to confess the secret to her husband, 'who thinks' "I'm still in love with him", is what has made life terrible for Mrs. Das. "I'm tired of feeling so terrible all the time. Eight years, Mr. Kapasi, I've been in pain eight years. I was hoping you could help me feel better, say the right thing. Suggest some kind of remedy". Mr. Kapasi pondered a while and asked, "Is it really pain you feel, Mrs. Das, or is it guilt?" (66). Mrs. Das opened her mouth to say something, but stopped. She opened the door of the car and began to stride up the stairs, causing wayside monkeys to follow her. Mrs. Das worried, Bobby was not found in the company of Mr. Das and other children.

The boy was found surrounded by a group of monkeys, pulling at his T-shirt and even striking him with a stick. Bobby screamed as tears ran down his startled face swiftly. Mr. Das was so nervous that he was at a loss to decide what to do. Mrs. Das shrieked and urged Mr. Kapasi to do something. The gravity of the situation prompted Mr. Kapasi to act instantly. Soon he succeeded in saving the hapless little boy from the shrieking monkeys and delivered him to the parents. For the first time since he met the family, Mr. Kapasi witnessed the 'father' and the mother behaving like 'real' parents sharing eagerly the baby's care with concern and affection never displayed earlier. No one except Mr. Kapasi noticed as the small piece of paper containing his address

slipped from Mrs. Das's straw bag and fluttered away in the wind. Mr. Kapasi now did not bother at all as he was engrossed for the moment in watching a scene where indifferent and seemingly 'exile' on a family space at last revealed a sense of belonging as they have awakened to the fact that they do have a responsibility to share as they belong to a 'home' of their own.

The idea associated with the terms 'home' and 'homeland' acquire new meaning in *Interpreter of Maladies*. The Das family all born and brought up in America fetishize and fantasize about India even though they never consider this their home and are always outsiders in their occasional visits to the country.

Some of the recurrent themes in Jhumpa Lahiri are the search for identity as defined by the self, by others, by location, and by circumstances. The title piece of the short story collection *Interpreter of Maladies* is no exception in this regard. Homeland, role within the family, interpersonal relationship between husband and wife who live like exiles in their respective family space, act as determining and qualifying identity in the case of the members of two families—Das and Kapasi.

The title of the present story acquires multiple meaning as the interpreter of maladies is approached by one, who is an 'exile' in her 'home' and 'homeland' for the interpretation of an acute malady so that she could expiate her guilt, pain and suffering. In the process the 'interpreter' too is awakened to the maladies afflicting his family and personal life and to the fact that he himself has turned into an 'exile' in his 'home'.

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