

**Review**

## **Analyzing Theme of “Language” in Jhumpa Lahiri’s Selected Short Stories**

**Bushra**

M.Phil Scholar, Fatima Jinnah Women University, Rawalpindi, Pakistan

Accepted 20 January 2019

Jhumpa Lahiri’s “Interpreter of Maladies” depicts the displaced immigrant protagonists and second-generation Indian-Americans searching for their identity in the culture of the other. Each story in the collection depicts the lives of Indians dealing with different roles and circumstances. Some are living in India and some are Indian immigrants surviving in the United States. The hyphenated Indian identity has stuck them between two different approaches i-e: Indian American and Indian. We find a strong connection between identities throughout the nine stories. These stories may seem as individual nine stories, but the underlying themes of all the stories are same. Language, Nostalgia and fear of separation are visible throughout the pages. It’s a literary piece in which characters are grappling to know how to become visible and fit themselves in a different social setting. This research paper will be discussing connection of language with the lives of the people. From Lahiri’s collection, I have selected four short stories namely “A Temporary Matter”, “When Mr. Pirzada came to Dine”, “Interpreter of Maladies” and “Mrs. Sen”. Cultural diaspora and nostalgia have led characters to negotiate the gulf between Indian and white cultures. In its discussion of four stories of the collection, in which language has a central role, the paper draws on ideas and opinions about the given topic. Through a keen observation and attention to the characters and their environment and relationships, theme of language will be analyzed. This paper will be spotlighting the trauma, consciousness and possible success, failure or resistance of characters in which they acquire new identities of other culture through language and identity-quest.

**KEYWORDS:** Identity, Language, Nostalgia, Hybridity, Diaspora, Immigrants.

**Cite This Article As:** Bushra, B (2019). Analyzing Theme of “Language” in Jhumpa Lahiri’s Selected Short Stories. *Inter. J. Eng. Lit. Cult.* 7(1): 4-9

### **INTRODUCTION**

“Interpreter of Maladies” (1999) is Lahiri’s Pulitzer-prize winning volume. This book deals with the experience of cultural diaspora and makes the reader acknowledged the complexities and hurdles involved in such an experience. The world which Lahiri has painted in almost all her fiction is set in motion against cultural tension, lack of communication and the resulting

dialogues and behaviors when two opposite cultures of the two ends of the first-world and third-in general and Indians and Americans in particular intersect due to immigration, an after effect of colonialism. Lahiri openly admits that “Interpreter of Maladies” is a reflection of her own experiences as well as those of her parents and their Indian immigrant friends (Farnsworth, 2000). Lahiri has

used her collection in order to discuss cross-cultural themes and create an opportunity to compare both cultures.

The title "Interpreter of Maladies" in itself epitomizes what we are going to find in the book. It deals with the lives of different characters and their struggles, problems, longings and sacrifices. Lahiri's characters have a strong bonding with their cultural roots but, they cannot help themselves forgetting those roots. The characters have language, and yet they are not able to share their feelings and emotions directly through oral communication. They are in a constant struggle to speak about their feelings and longings but they can't.

### **When Mr. Pirzada came to Dine**

When we talk about one of the stories in the book "When Mr. Pirzada came to Dine", we notice longing, nostalgia and depression due to huge cultural differences. Mr. Pirzada is an immigrant from Dacca who is in United States for some academic research. He has a happy family along with a wife and six daughters. "Lilia" is the narrator of this story who has seen Mr. Pirzada visiting her parents. Lahiri has painted this imagery so beautifully when Mr. Pirzada is missing his family, but he cannot express it. He has no words to say what he feels. Lilia's parents always welcome him and present him with different Indian dishes which relieves his depression for a while.

The war of 1971 has also played a role in language where two different countries (Pakistan and India) are at war, whereas different people, Mr. Pirzada and Lilia's family (Muslim and Hindu), are bridging this gap. It's a communication and cultural juxtaposition. Mr. Pirzada can't express his nostalgia. It's a longing for return with no hope of return. He experiences certain anxiety when he switches on the T.V and listens to the news of war. He is worried for his family. Little Lilia has noted down Mr. Pirzada's nostalgia from his expression and body language. So here we find that bodily expressions are also playing a sort of language role where message (of longing) is conveyed.. The bond between Lilia's parents and Mr. Pirzada keeps on increasing through their routine together and the food they share.

Asha Chobey rightly points out: "Food comes as a fistful of soil from the motherland. Not only does food serve as a slice of native life for Mr. Pirzada but also it serves as a strong bond between the protagonists, Mr. Pirzada and Lilia's family. Food is a memory which joins the souls. The taste which Mr. Pirzada tasted in Dacca has always been relished when he takes dinner at Lilia's home. Their collective meals develop a bond of affection among them. Food serves more as a symbol and acquires a metaphoric stature than the mother tongue for

the simple reason that even in India most of these characters speak English. English food, though enjoyed occasionally, is still not an intrinsic part of the Indian cuisine or diasporic identity. Hence, Indian food connected them.

Lahiri expresses the feelings of Mr. Pirzada through food as "they ate pickled mangoes with their meals, ate rice every night for supper with their hands. Like my parents, Mr. Pirzada took off his shoes before entering a room, chewed fennel seeds meals as a digestive, and drank no alcohol, for dessert dipped austere biscuits into successive cups of tea". (pg. 25). This creates a sense of familiarity between different people of diasporas. It's as if food is the feeling of home. The nostalgia of Mr. Pirzada is somehow settled by the food prepared by Lilia's mother. Reviewer Charles Taylor writes that "Food in these stories is a talisman, a reassuring bit of the Homeland to cling to" ([www.salon.com](http://www.salon.com)). Particularly, nostalgia comes from Greek "nostos" meaning "a return" so, it is food both as a longing and as return in Mr. Pirzada's case.

"When Mr. Pirzada came to Dine" also throws light on the fact that Indians and Pakistanis outside their respective cultures and geographical locations are not enemies, but friends. This story has language of friendship and culture, language of food and language of expression. One of the most highlighted things in this story is that Mr. Pirzada's sense of Muslim identity has never collapsed with the Hindu identity of Lilia's family. Hence, Lahiri has used good behaviors as the mode of communication for her characters in this story.

The character of Lilia is also notable because she herself lives in America, studies in American school, speaks English, and watches American T.V but, still she loves to know history of India and Pakistan. She acts as a bridge between two cultures. She embodies the language of friendship. Being an innocent child, she finds no difference between her parents and Mr. Pirzada. Language of friendship and care is vividly shown when Lilia says:

*I prayed that Mr. Pirzada's family was safe and sound. I had never prayed for anything before, had never been taught or told to, but I decided, given the circumstance that it was something I should do. That night when I went to bathroom, I only pretended to brush my teeth, for I feared that I would somehow rinse the prayer out as well. I wet the brush and rearranged the tube of paste to prevent my parents from asking any questions, and fell asleep with sugar on my tongue. (32).*

This is a universal feeling of children towards parents and elders which Lilia has shown for Mr. Pirzada. On one

hand, we observe how longing can't be spoken but it can be shown through certain expressions and movements as Mr. Pirzada did when he listened to news of the war. On the other hand, two different families with different religions felt no difference among themselves which highlights the language of respect. At the end of the story, Mr. Pirzada's longing got a language and he met his family safely.

### **A Temporary Matter**

In the second story, "A Temporary Matter", we find this lack of communication to an extreme. It's a story of a couple, Shoba and Shukumar, who have lost their child during Shoba's operation in a hospital. Shukumar was not in the hospital with Shoba because of his research work that was equally important. This became the bone of contention in their relationship. Shoba retreated to her room and profession. They both were busy in their works without any communication. They were husband-wife only on paper. The misunderstanding between the couple kept on increasing day by day. There was no warmth in their relationship. However, "There was nothing to indicate that she would not be able to have a child in the future" (4). Shoba took the loss of her baby so seriously that she kept herself silent through days and nights. The inability to express themselves widens the gap to express love, care and affection between the couple. They had lived a happy life before this incident, and Shukumar also thought that all these misunderstandings will end soon and they will be back to a normal routine, but Shoba couldn't. Yet it is also Shoba's preparedness that Shukumar takes for granted. Whereas Shoba's emotional state is reflected in the abundance of her pantry, or the increasing emptiness of her shelves, Shukumar can be characterized by his consumption. (Williams, 2007) Even as a student, he has a "facility for absorbing details without curiosity" (4). The spaces between the couple keep on growing and it started to seem like they were never a couple. Shoba stopped complaining, sharing or talking about anything which was engulfing her inner self. She stopped sharing. Hence the couple had no communication at all which B.S. Nimavat aptly points out, "At times absurdly funny, at others heartbreakingly sad, Lahiri's tale examines how a tragic loss can lead to indifference and a breakdown between in communication between two people who once loved each other" (199).

The noticeable scene in the story occurs when the electricity cuts off and it becomes dark. They had lunch time from eight to nine, which means they had to eat in the dark. This darkness was always silent without any communication. In the dark, they came closer and started talking about their routines. Marriage, for Indians, is a complicated affair, one that has grown more satisfying in

certain ways while less so in others. Indians plan and discuss marriage to no end, but seldom broach the darker, more ambiguous realm of emotions. (Mehta, 1999). When Shoba and Shukumar started sharing their secrets which were confined to them only then they started to enjoy and cherish the relationship they both had left somewhere in the past. Mukherjee comments, "The past, however bitter it may be, looks romantic and beautiful, when viewed through the window of the present". Shukumar finally admitted in front of Shoba that he was there at the time of delivery and he had also held their child. Finally this agency allows her to move past their tragedy to a new life that does not contain Shukumar's nutritionally and psychically consumptive and exhaustive presence and practices. (Williams, 2007). By the end of the story, the mist of misunderstanding is washed away by tears. Darkness played an important role as a language as it gave space to both of them to express their feelings without looking at each other's faces. All the food made by Shukumar also became a language of love and care between the couple which was lost before.

Pashupati Jha rightly comments about this story that "this is a highly psychological story in which light stands for the conscious reality that may be troublesome. This conscious reality is also the contrasting mindset of the couple asserting itself when there is light all around. Darkness, nonetheless, signifies the strong undercurrent of subconscious desire for love unconditioned by ego or will (2002). Darkness gave them the medium to speak up which they couldn't do before. Lack of communication bounded them to specific routines, but Lahiri has adapted beautiful technique to demonstrate how couple met at the end and all the disputes resolved when they cleared the misapprehensions.

### **Mrs. Sen**

Another story "Mrs. Sen" is story of nostalgia and longing. Mrs. Sen is an Indian-American facing nostalgia for her family and Indian environment and food, of course. Mrs. Sen is also caretaker of an eleven year old child "Eliot". She used to share her past experiences, food, and family history with Eliot. By way of introduction, she tells Eliot's mother, "Mr. Sen teaches mathematics at the university" (112). This is the only suitable introduction she always finds for her husband. As we keep moving through the story, we find how she is involved in the kitchen most of her time preparing delicious Indian meals. In this story, food somehow relieves nostalgia of Mrs. Sen and that is the reason she wants her food to be perfect and delicious the way she tasted it in her own country.

Lahiri communicates her nostalgia as “she took whole vegetables between her hands and hacked them apart: cauliflower, cabbage, butternut squash. She split things in half, then quarters, speedily producing florets, cubes, slices, and shreds. She could peel a potato in seconds. At times she sat cross-legged, at times with legs splayed, surrounded by an array of colanders and shallow bowls of water in which she immersed her chopped ingredients”. (114) Vegetables give us an Indian food touch. Mrs. Sen is very dedicated towards her cooking as it gives her satisfaction. The story's listing of cauliflower, cabbage, butternut squash, potatoes, spinach, cucumber, eggplant, onions, chicken pieces, mackerel, butterfish, sea bass, and so on, draws attention to the parade of components but never the final dish. (Williams, 2007) Of course, dishes are mentioned: "It was merely dinner for herself and Mr. Sen, as indicated by the two plates and two glasses she set" (117). We can notice one thing here, as in “A Temporary Matter”, Shoba and Shukumar were having a formal kind of relationship as is the case with Mr. and Mrs. Sen. They are also busy in their own different worlds under same roof. Mr. Sen is a professor who is busy with his own academic routine while Mrs. Sen takes pleasure in reading letters and messages from family members and cooking. Mrs. Sen found a good company in Eliot who could listen to her. We can also find a contrast between the preparation of the meal and the actual meal. She wants to add all the Indian flavors to her dishes as she longs for Indian food. She has a blade as well which she brought from India. She has a deep affection for this blade as it gives her homely feeling. She explains her mutual family gatherings with the words:

*She had brought the blade from India, where apparently there was at least one in every household." Whenever there is a wedding in the family "she told Eliot one day, "or a large celebration of any kind, my mother sends out word in the evening for all the neighborhood women to bring blades just like this one, and then they sit in an enormous circle on the roof of our building, laughing and gossiping and slicing fifty kilos of vegetables through the night." Her profile hovered protectively over her work, confetti of cucumber, eggplant, and onion skins heaped around her. (115)*

She got married in the United States, a culture that was totally unfamiliar for her, and she was longing for her family and memories of home. Mrs. Sen also bridges western and eastern cultures when she cooks dishes for Eliot who is an American. Hence, we find a language of care here. Even though, Mrs. Sen doesn't like American culture but she cared for Eliot a lot. Receiving a fresh fish is the only happiness in her life, as it reminds her of India.

The relationship between Mr. and Mrs. Sen is shown when they asked Eliot to take their picture and they were behaving in a much formal way which was very noticeable. Lack of communication created this gap between this couple. Mr. Sen could not give her wife enough time to listen to her stories of India. She also could not express her feelings for her homeland and memories of her family. She had a nostalgia which could not be cured because of her marriage. Indian marriages are totally different than the western concept of marriages. Couples usually compromise as in the case of Mrs. Sen. She was arrested by deep memories of her home which she soothes by cooking different meals. Language between the couple was there and it needed to be understood, not always orally. As Anita Mannur points out, "Mrs. Sen returns to a world where she negotiates the pangs of loneliness and alienation that she feels as a woman located far away from her family with no real community to speak of besides her husband in the United States" (65). Mrs. Sen tries her best to fit herself in the other culture and find her own identity so she could be independent and acceptable being an Indian. Her world has shrunk. Linguistically, it revolves around the small space of the kitchen and its memories of home. No doubt, linguistic spaces are really important in Lahiri.

### Interpreter of Maladies

The title story of the book “Interpreter of Maladies” is the story of an Indian family living in the United States. Mr. and Mrs. Das came India for tourism along with their three children. Mr. Kapasi is an Indian tour guide who also works as an interpreter for a doctor. Jhumpa Lahiri says,

*Usually titles don't emerge until I'm well underway with a story, and sometimes I finish something and still have to search for a title. "Interpreter of Maladies" was the exception. This title was born before I even knew what the story would be about. At first it was simply a phrase that came to me during my graduate school years in Boston. One day I crossed paths with an acquaintance of American descent that has kindly helped me move, sometime before, into one of my Boston apartments. We stopped to chat, and he told me he was working in a doctor's office, translating on behalf of the doctor's many Russian patients. As I walked back home the phrase "Interpreter of Maladies" popped into my head as a way of describing what this person was doing. It lingered long enough for me to jot the phrase down on a piece of paper. Even so often I would come across it,*

*thinking it might make a good title, but the story didn't materialize for another five years or so ([www.chipublib.org](http://www.chipublib.org)).*

Mr. Kapasi was also an interpreter for Gujarati patients. Being an Indian, it was really odd/ unsuitable for him to see Das family because he expected them to behave the same as Indians. The clothes of Mrs. Das, the careless nature of couple, ignored children and Mrs. Das's behavior with Mr. Kapasi, all were conveying something. Lahiri points out the Americanization of Das family's children. About their dress style, the narrator says, "the children in stiff, brightly colored clothing and caps with translucent visors." (44)

On the way to Konarak, when the children saw some monkeys, they shouted 'monkeys', but Mr. Kapasi said immediately, "We call them hanuman." (47) Yet another cultural change is that "Mr. and Mrs. Das behaved like an older brother and sister, not parents. It seemed that they were in charge of the children only for the day; it was hard to believe they were regularly responsible for anything other than themselves"(49). Lack of interest between couple showed lack of communication between them until Mr. Kapasi found the reason behind it. The couple wanted to talk but they had no topic to converse. This lack of language created gap between the couple. They only talked when they needed to. Mr. Das is busy with his camera all the time which shows his insouciance in the family and family matters. Mrs. Das is with her puffed rice and does not bother to share it with anyone. They are each engaged with themselves. Children are busy in their own business too.

When Mrs. Das came to know about the occupation of Mr. Kapasi (as an interpreter), she changes her attitude. She thinks that Mr. Kapasi can finally give language to her disease and interpret it. The sympathy of Mrs. Das was interpreted as a clear signal of affection by Mr. Kapasi. He started to maintain himself by applying some oil on head. On the other hand, we have also seen lack of communication between Mr. and Mrs. Kapasi too as Mr. Kapasi started to get involved in Mr. Das without caring for his wife at home. The way Mr. Kapasi looked at Mrs. Das from rear view mirror communicates certain expression from Mr. Kapasi's side who is over sensitive. He gives meaning to the expressions of Mrs. Das where as Mrs. Das just wanted to lighten her burden of guilt. When she shares her secret with Mr. Kapasi, he was shocked and forgot how to react. He couldn't understand what she was trying to hide. He assumed her to be falling for him and his expectations shattered at once. He couldn't convey his feelings to Mina (Mrs. Das) orally and expected a lot from her. In the end, when whole of the Das family was happy together, Mr. Kapasi finds himself as an unnecessary part of the picture. The paper on which he wrote his address flew away by the wind which

gave him a clear message to stay away. He finds his role as an extra in the happy picture of Das family. When Mrs. Das spoke of her guilt, her burden was relieved.

"Interpreter of Maladies" also explores the result of frankness and romanticizing of the American way of life. The characters misunderstand the frankness of the other person and, the results are in some way harmful. Mr. Kapasi is a typical Indian male who misunderstands Mrs. Das's frankness as love. The difference between both the cultures gave way to this misunderstanding. As in every other story of this collection, Food plays a central role in conveying some message. In previous stories, food rather related nostalgia or care but here, food is a different language. The puffed rice which Mrs. Das was chewing and when her eyes met Mr. Kapasi's, created hope for him. It can be regarded as a negative connotation for an Indian male due to their reserved cultural norms and societal barriers for females. The man on the tea stall stared at Mrs. Das in a specific way. He stared at her clothes and her strawberry top. Here, it also conveys a negative connotation. Both the couples prioritized their own tasks other than their children or their relationship. It's also conveying the apathy of couple towards each other. We find language in different forms throughout the story. We have heard that "Action speak louder than words". Same is the case here where different expressions and movements gave words to different connotations. Lahiri has given us this idea where two different cultures collapsed and are lost in misunderstanding.

## CONCLUSION

Theme of Language is pervasive throughout the nine stories. Different characters facing cultural diaspora find it difficult to convey their message by words. Sometimes food, expressions, body language, binary culture and behavior also become modes of expression. As Jennifer Ho comments, "Food is a critical medium for compliance with and resistance to Americanization, a means for enacting the ambiguities of an Asian-ethnic identity that is already in a constant state of flux" (2015). Lack of communication among the couples also gave way to the problem of language. The stories are about the Indian immigrants who are caught between the culture they have inherited and the one they have to adapt to. All the stories almost retain the same theme, but differ in their perspectives. (Sarabhai, 2015). Hence, Lahiri gave way to common yet ignored notion of the society where two different cultures are struggling hard an unfamiliar environment. The characters are constantly struggling to normalize in a different society. Words needed to be spoken because the depression of nostalgia needed to be cured and yet, their inheritance is a country where

everything is spoken. The value of these stories – although some of them are loosely constructed lies in the fact they transcend the confined borders of immigrant experience to embrace larger human issues, age-old issues that are, in the words of Ralph Waldo Emerson, "cast into the mold of these new times" redefining America. So it is not surprising that the title story of Jhumpa Lahiri's laudable collection has been selected for both The Best American Short Stories and the year 1999's O. Henry Award. (Noor, 2000)

## REFERENCES

1. Lahiri, J. *Interpreter of Maladies*. Flamingo, HarperCollins. 2000.
2. 10. Farnsworth: Elizabeth Pulitzer Prize Winner – Fiction Interview. Online News Hour. July 16, 2000.
3. Ho, Jennifer. *Racial Ambiguity in Asian American Culture*. WUNC. 2015.
4. Jha, Pashupati. *Bicultural Ethos and Conflicting Claims in Jhumpa Lahiri's "Interpreter of Maladies"*. Khosla Publishing House: India. 2002.
5. Mehta, D. *Opportunity knocks*. Agni, No. 50 (1999), pp. 239-247, 1999  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/23007794>
6. Noor, Ronny. "Jhumpa Lahiri. *Interpreter of Maladies*". University of Texas, Brownsville New York. 2000. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40155634>
7. Sarabhai, D. "Lexical and Syntactic study of *Interpreter of Maladies* by Jhumpa Lahiri. Department of English & MEL, Banasthali University, Rajasthan. 2015 (<http://www.ijelr.in>)
8. Williams, "Food ways and Subjectivity in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*". L.A. MELUS 32(4) 69-79, 2007  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/30029832>.