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**Cosmopolitan Approaches in the Two Short Stories of Jhumpa Lahiri**

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**Abstract:**

Jhumpa Lahiri is the daughter of Indian Bengali immigrants to America. Born in London, England in 1967 as Nilanjana Sudeshna. Her parents moved to the United States when she was three. Jhumpa is her nickname given by her school teacher. *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), her debut short story collection won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 2000, also the PEN/Hemingway Award for Debut Fiction in the same year respectively. Her first novel, *The Namesake* (2003), was adapted into a popular film of the same name in 2006. A few other works written by her are: *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008), *The Lowland* (2013) won the 2015 DSC Prize for South Asian Literature, *In Other Words* (2015) originally written in Italian as *In alter parole*, *Hell-Heaven* (2015), and *The Clothing of Books* (2016), *Whereabouts* (2018) written in Italian as *Dove Mi Trovo*, etc. Jhumpa Lahiri's writings confirm cultural hybridity as encounters in the works written by other diasporic authors including Amitav Ghosh, Salman Rushdie, etc. Lahiri's works mostly rotate around Indian immigrant parents to America and their effort not only to raise a family in a country very different from theirs but also to keep their children acquainted with Indian culture and tradition. This double consciousness or split consciousness of being Indian and American at the same time is the result of diasporic individuals' yearning to unite two cultures and languages without abandoning either. Her characters, often Indian immigrants to America, strive to navigate between the cultural values of their birthplace and their adopted home.

**Keywords:** Transnationalism, Culture, Identity, Cosmopolitanism, Diaspora.

**I**

Cosmopolitanism is perceived as a way for spontaneous encounters with others in odd situations and places. The cosmopolitan world gives us the possibility to progress our own culture and have the benefit of liberty beyond national and cultural boundaries. The inter-mixing of people is both the disruption and the re-ordering of previous structures which can be

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seen as the commencement of a cosmopolitan imagination. Such circumstances may act as a stimulus for innovation and a shift in consideration that provides an alternative for a cosmopolitan experience. It also helps in tackling the fear of difference or, otherness. The dissimilar cosmopolitan ideas work parallel to each other. It provides the platform to learn from others and to share own cultural experience, simultaneously. That demands a comprehensive outlook and progressiveness. Meanwhile, cosmopolitanism means going beyond the stereotype of any particular country and recognizing differences. Hence, it may have a chance to dismantle the make-believe boundary of language, class, race, religion, gender, community, etc.

## II

The first and foremost short story “Sexy” deals with the inter-racial sexual desire of Indian men towards foreigners, particularly for white women. This story exhibits perspectives of both Indian and American, men and women. On the other side, the second story “Interpreter of Maladies” explores the vicissitude of two cultures. Of course, one is the homeland and the other is the adopted country through the eyes of Mr. and Mrs. Das, a young American couple of Indian origin. The diasporic sensibility is present in the narratives between individuals and communities. Here, the author may be seen as one who stands for the diasporic community of which she is also a part. The narrative shuffles between Indian traditions adopted by new-generational Indians in other countries and the foreign culture of Indians in America.

The setting of the “Sexy” is Boston, America. The story weaves through the viewpoints of two worlds represented by Laxmi and her office friend Miranda (protagonist). It showcases the experiences of a married Indian man (Dev) and his extra-marital affair with an American maiden (Miranda). The main narrative tends to individualize the problem by not secluding white women i.e., 'Miranda' as temptress or seductress. In the story, Laxmi, a colleague of Miranda is ignorant that Miranda has an affair with Dev. This accentuates the ironic circumstance in two parallel narratives. Eventually, after a few trysts, Miranda senses that her relationship with Dev is momentary because of the lack of commitment from Dev's side. Despite this, Miranda lets her love deepen for Dev. “Sexy” makes it clear that this sense of intimacy with people continents away is indeed a fantasy; moreover, it is a fantasy predicted on the power structures of the colonial past and the desires and stereotypes of the post-colonial present. As such, they allow Miranda to imagine closeness only through the lenses of the other and the erotic” (Apap 67).

The multifarious structure of the narrative moves the readers to witness the problem of diasporic Indians where the peripheral culture (American) is dominant to the mainstream culture (Indian). The turning point in the story comes with the introduction of Rohin, seven years old boy, and his naive understanding of the word 'sexy'. Once, when Miranda accepts to babysit him, Rohin calls her 'sexy'. It sounds like an ironic echo of Dev's the same utterance during their visit to Mapparium. The childish usage of the word 'sexy' by Rohin shakes Miranda to realize her futile relationship with Dev, a dilemma that generally connects people from other cultures. In the closing stages of the story, cultural differences play a pivotal role in dismantling Miranda's relationship with Dev. In sum, we can state that Rohin acts as the

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conscience of Miranda. Lahiri writes, "Miranda felt Rohin's words under her skin, the same way she'd felt Dev's. But instead of going hot she felt numb" (Lahiri 59).

In the core section, Miranda is fascinated by Dev's racial otherness. She tries to imitate the Indian accent. She also tries to gain knowledge of a little bit of Bengali script to transliterate the Indian part of her name i.e., 'Mira'. Once, she focuses on the geographical location of Bengal on the Map. With that, she becomes curious to know about the countenance of Dev's wife who lives in India. When she comes to know that Dev's wife resembles a Bollywood star, she is spellbound to imitate the beauty of Madhuri Dixit. Her lack of knowledge of Bollywood's popular actresses, the Indian Map, and the Language of other countries exposes her limited knowledge and ignorance of other parts of the world. Here, Miranda is depicted as an exceedingly unc cosmopolitan when she misunderstood Bengal as a 'religion' instead of a 'region' in India. She never goes to explore beyond her homeland which limits her knowledge about other countries.

"She looked up at the videos on the shelves behind the counter. She saw women wearing skirts that sat low on the hips and tops that tied like bandannas between their breasts. Some leaned back against a stone wall or a tree. They were beautiful, with kohl-rimmed eyes and long black hair. She knew then that Madhuri Dixit was beautiful" (Lahiri 56). The scene at 'The Indian grocery' in the story reveals that Miranda's sexist behavior is related to her privilege of being a white woman. Her fetishization of racial difference seems like a means to escape from limitations. The above-mentioned lines from the story demonstrate the same.

"Although Miranda is not our narrator, she serves as our lens: we read the story's cosmopolitan, global spaces alongside and against her provincial perspective. Indeed, the narrator underscores Miranda's lack of worldliness and her limited exposure to diverse populations" (Wilhite 85). Other than Dev and her office friend Laxmi, Miranda knows an Indian Dixit family in her locality i.e., Michigan. Like her neighbor, she doesn't like Dixit's family because of their indifferent attitude and lack of interest in mingling in the locality. "The mothers never invited Mrs. Dixit to join them around the neighbor's swimming pool. Waiting for the school bus with the Dixit children standing to one side, the other children would say 'The Dixits dig shit,' under their breath, and then burst into laughter" (Lahiri 53). With that, Miranda also recalls her visit to the birthday party of Dixit's girl. She got scared by looking at the slight differences in Dixit's home i.e., their cuisines, attires, and religion. By pointing out Dixit's lifestyle, Miranda exposes her racist thoughts. In sum, it shows a lack of egalitarian attitude as well as discrimination in her towards people from other countries. Thus, it expounds on the limitations and failures of the cosmopolitan worldview.

### III

The narrative of "Interpreter of Maladies" explores the difference between the two cultures. Mr. and Mrs. Das come to India as American tourists with their two sons (Ronny, and Bobby) and a daughter (Tina). Mr. Kapasi, their tour guide, drives them to the Sun Temple at Konark. Their demeanor, speech as well as attire, are typically American. Throughout the story, we come to know that, in his youth, Mr. Kapasi dreamed of becoming an interpreter exclusively

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for diplomats and dignitaries, but ended up with an 'alternative career'. Now, he is working for a non-Gujarati-speaking doctor as the interpreter of maladies that Mrs. Das finds 'romantic'. Mrs. Das gauges the gravity of Mr. Kapasi's work and demands accurate interpretation as an effective means of communication. "But so romantic," Mrs. Das said dreamily, breaking her extended silence" (Lahiri 17).

In brief, "Interpreter of Maladies" focuses on a young couple. They have numerous issues related to their married life. Purposely, their recklessness is shown in the treatment of children. Mr. Kapasi (guide and interpreter) thinks that the Das family is "all like siblings...it was hard to believe [Mr. and Mrs. Das] was regularly responsible for anything other than themselves" (Lahiri 16). At the onset of the story, while crossing the road Mrs. Das does not hold the hand of her only daughter and begins quibbling with her husband. Intrinsically, Mr. Kapasi critiques Mrs. Das when she paints her nails while ignoring her daughter's questions. "From this viewpoint, her maladies are of a culturally hybrid generation to which Mr. Kapasi can no longer relate. Because he has lived in India his whole life, he probably has been inscribed with local views of race, women, family, interpreting, romance, guilt, and consciousness" (Chiu 173).

Throughout their sojourn, the Das family shows no conscious effort as well as interest in asserting their ethnic identity when they visit their homeland. Mina alias Mrs. Das is moved by the anxiety of cultural dislocation, without anyone to turn to, she turns expectantly to Mr. Kapasi, her tour guide to express her personal 'malady' and insecurity. It is the aura of Mrs. Das, who seems indifferent to everything surrounding her. The major confusion over her identity emerges quite abruptly in her mind. Unexpectedly she reveals her top secret to Mr. Kapasi related to her second son (Bobby). Once she carries a clandestine affair with her husband's friend. However, Mrs. Das withdraws her interest in Mr. Kapasi because of his inadequate understanding of her feelings. This signifies the failure of communication between cross-cultures and the ability of people to comprehend the feelings of others. Thus, the lines mentioned below expound on the identity crisis in the ever-shifting cultural space.

Mr. Kapasi, don't you have anything to say? I thought that was your job.

My job is to give tours, Mrs. Das.

Not that. Your other job. As an interpreter.

But we do not face a language barrier. What need is there for an interpreter?

That's not what I mean. I would never have told you otherwise. Don't you realize what it means for me to tell you?

What does it mean? (Lahiri 27)

From the Marxist point of view, in "Interpreter of Maladies", we can remark that Indian beauty acts as an alternative or catalyst for the visual economy and sexual capital. The sexual desire for NRI woman Mrs. Das mediates between intra-racial encounters and the notion of domestication. This complicates the prevailing situation. Mina alias Mrs. Das acts like a channel for middle-class Indian men approximating 'Mr. Kapasi' to define emerging transnational identity. The story provides the best exemplar of the 'middle-class' dream to have

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a romantic involvement with an NRI woman. The male gaze of Mr. Kapasi at Mrs. Das problematizes the vantage point of Indian men over NRI women. It violates the boundaries and complicates the situations of new-generational diasporas. After all, Kapasi is a struggling middle-class Indian who has limited access to social and cultural domains that he needs badly.

As for Mr. Kapasi, Mrs. Das seems like an approachable individual, which is why she shifts between the object of desire and otherness. Through Mrs. Das, Mr. Kapasi would be able to liberate his immobile, bourgeois, national as well as parochial identity. Also, at the same time, he wants to overcome his capital deficiency by using Mrs. Das as a sexual as well as economical object. It appears that his dream to become a language interpreter was the only way to travel across nations that would also allow him to uplift his class identity. Furthermore, the carving at Konark Temple is appreciated by Mrs. Das which invokes sexual feelings in Mr. Kapasi that are usually suppressed by him in the case of other tourists. On the lawn of Konark Temple, Mrs. Das transcends her erotic energies by confessing her past. Her confession turns the narrative from specific to general. It also decentres the perspectives of Mr. Kapasi towards Mrs. Das. At last, Mr. Kapasi's opinion exposes his envy toward anyone superior to him including Mrs. Das. It also mars his insights toward Mrs. Das as an object of love and sympathy. Thus, dissolves the transnational connection between them across different nations.

Mrs. Das's confession problematizes the aspirational models of cross-gender identification. Mrs. Das and Mr. Kapasi, belong to opposite gender roles. They flunk to assert their sensitivity toward the opposite sex. Somewhere, it also degrades Mr. Kapasi's ethics. Ultimately, it dismantles his participation in the transnational world. As a tour guide or a language interpreter, Mr. Kapasi should maintain a boundary with his tourists. But, in the case of Mrs. Das, he fails to do so. The conclusive part of the story shows the failure of both Mr. Kapasi as well as Mrs. Das, because of the linguistic barriers between them.

#### IV

Both short stories deal with the contact of cosmopolitan 'Indian beauty' and 'style'. Here, beauty operates as a socializing force within moments of cross-cultural and interracial encounters. Lahiri's stories "Sexy" as well as "Interpreter of Maladies" encounter the global impacts of the beauty of Bollywood actress (Madhuri Dixit) and NRI (Non-resident Indian) woman, Mrs. Das. The influence of beauty, its yearning for cosmopolitan and transnational reach, and its limitations are discussed in these stories. For instance, in "Sexy", Miranda desires to compete with the beauty of Bollywood icons because of her provincialized status as an unc cosmopolitan and lack of complete belonging in America. Also, in "Interpreter of Maladies" Mr. Kapasi's wish for a cosmopolitan identity by coming in contact with the NRI family because of his unfulfilled dream reveals the unsatisfactory nature of people across the various countries. Meanwhile, Lahiri maintains a critical judgment on the subject like cosmopolitan Indian beauty and functions of the sexuality of white women. It can be understood as part of her proto-feminist as well as the cosmopolitan literary project. Keith Wilhite rightly mentions:

Lahiri's fiction works through neoliberal conceptions of dispossession and displacement, place as commodity and property, and relations of power and privilege that the individual

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stories refract through images of home, sexual conquest, and networks of friends, families, and neighbours. Yet the stories also trace a different kind of territory, one more attuned to the fluidity of contemporary global subjectivities (77).

As we know, Language and empathy play vital roles when we argue about multicultural or transnational worldviews. It is dyadic communication processes that can make the cosmopolitan world order a reality. Thus, Lahiri's two select stories attempt to transcend national boundaries while focusing on themes such as national barriers, ineffective human communication, ethnic minorities, etc. In a nutshell, we can say that Lahiri's cosmopolitan project is based on her critical understanding of transnational and diasporic world orders.

At the primary level in both of these stories, Lahiri balances the dichotomy by screening the infidel husband in "Sexy" and the disloyal wife in "Interpreter of Maladies". Mostly, human communication is a frequent theme used in Lahiri's stories. Likewise, Miranda understands the deeper meaning of 'sexy' uttered by Rohin, also when Mrs. Das (Mina) also understands the futility of communicating with Mr. Kapasi. In such manifestations, recklessness and indifferent attitudes between would-be-close relationships are presented as a permanent flaw. At the secondary levels, Lahiri depicts sensitive bonding between parents and children. For instance, in "Sexy" Rohin is neglected by his father, also the three children of Mr. and Mrs. Das; Ronny, Bobby, and Tina are ignored by their parents respectively. Such attitude of unc cosmopolitan people portrays the self-centered nature of parents across various countries that in turn affect the upbringing of children. Hence, the author's main motive is to represent the under-represented ideas in diasporic literature.

Poignantly, Chiu remarks on Lahiri: "Considering her upbringing and education, some critics question Lahiri's cultural authenticity in her translation of India, even criticizing her arbitrary representations of native Indian culture in her narratives. However, she never regards herself as an authentic native Indian, but a visitor from the United States" (174). Meanwhile, the focus of the research paper was to glance at the concept of cosmopolitanism as a mode of everyday exchange of culture and its active involvement in daily life. This paper presented as well as critically analyzed the cosmopolitan ideas while focusing on two select short stories of Jhumpa Lahiri. Thus, it shows an alternative way of living that characters like Miranda and Kapasi fail to accommodate.

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