

Fictional Techniques of Jhumpa Lahiri in Her Short Fiction

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Abstract

Many Indian diasporic writers focus their narratives on the people out of their home (India) to a foreign land (particularly to America and England) and the ordeals and trials that they experience and their endurance in surviving various odds. Jhumpa Lahiri is one such eminent contemporary Indian diasporic writer whose narratives are replete with metaphors of pain and predicaments of immigrants. Her stories reflect a 'double vision' of 'yearning backward' and 'looking forward'. This work attempts to find and evaluate the techniques that Lahiri uses in the narration of the stories in her short fiction *Interpreter of Maladies* and *Unaccustomed Earth*.

Keywords: *Diaspora, Multicultural, Autobiography, Aemory, Symbolism, Immigrants, Bengali, American Culture, Arranged marriage, Dilemma.*

Jhumpa Lahiri is a major contemporary Indian writer writing in English and her works are based on the first and second generation Indian diasporas in the USA. She too is a second generation Indian diaspora living in the USA. Born in 1967 to Bengali Indian parents in London, the family moved to Rhode Island (USA) where she grew up. She received her B.A. degree from Barnard College in 1989 and earned multiple M.A. degrees in English, Creative Writing, Comparative Literature and Ph.D. in Renaissance Studies from Boston University. She has taught creative writing at Boston University and the Rhode Island school and has been a fellow at the Fine Works Center in Princetown, Massachusetts. In 2001, she married an American journalist and currently lives in Brooklyn, New York with her husband and two children. She has produced three acclaimed books. The first is *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) which is a collection of nine short stories. The second work is a novel *The Name sake* (2003) and in the third book *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008) containing eight stories, she returns to the genre of short stories.

Jhumpa Lahiri has received many awards and

accolades, among them is the Pulitzer Prize for fiction (2000), the O.Henry Award for short stories (1990), the PEN/Hemingway Award for best fiction debut (1999), *The New Yorker's* best debut of the year (1999), Addison Metcalf Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters (2000) and a Guggenheim Fellowship (2000).

Though Lahiri is an Indian, the subjects are not about Indians in India but Indians (especially Bengalis) in the USA because that is what she is. In this sense she is an honest writer as she deals with themes she is comfortable with. Like all Bengali immigrants, Lahiri was well aware of holding dual responsibilities- loyal to the old world and fluent in the new. This shuttling between the two worlds gave her a sense of alienation, marginality and feeling of nostalgia. She adopts these feelings in her writings and they expose the complexity of diasporic life.

As a diasporic writer, she deals with the multicultural society- partly from 'inside' and partly from 'outside'. She strives for her native identity and simultaneously endeavours to evolve a new identity in an adopted Anglo-American cultural

landscape. However, in this clash of cultures, she faces an immigrant's dislocation and displacement... Hence the sense of belonging to a particular place and culture and at the same time being an 'outsider' to it creates an inner tension in her characters. (Kadam 121-22)

The term 'diaspora' was originally used to refer specifically the population of Jews who were forced to exile from Judea by the Babylonians in 586 B.C. In modern time it has adopted a wider term and is applied to describe any group of people who go dispersed - "the movement of people from any nation or group away from their own country" (OALD 412).

Interpreter of Maladies also subtitled 'Stories of Bengal Boston and Beyond' and *Unaccustomed Earth* are books of short fiction which reflects the angst of Indian diasporas. Diaspora can be either voluntary or forced. In *Interpreter of Maladies*, Lahiri delves into the world of Bengali immigrants in the USA - the issues of intercultural miscommunication and conflicts too often experienced by both the first and second generation Indian immigrants. Thus, the stories expose the cultural dilemmas experienced by them- caught between the native culture which they have left behind and the entirely different ways of their adopted home. "Jhumpa Lahiri's elegant stories tell the lives of Indians in exile, of people navigating between the strict traditions they've inherited and the baffling New World they must encounter" (preface *IOM*). In *Unaccustomed Earth*, the emphasis is on the same theme as the earlier, but the focus is now shifted on to the second generation immigrants, often referred to as *American Born Confused Desi (ABCD)*, who must straddle between the traditional values which they have inherited from their immigrant parents and the American culture in which they were born and brought. "Unaccustomed Earth" returns to the terrain- the heart of family and the immigrant experience- that Jhumpa Lahiri has made utterly

hers, but her themes, this time around, have darkened and deepened" (preface *UE*).

Fictional Techniques

Autobiography is an important fictional tool that Lahiri depends on. In an interview she admits that "some writers write completely outside of their own experiences. Others write more on the margins of their experiences. I am the second kind of writer" (Padmanabhan 3).

It is clear that her work stems from her life, her community and her world. Almost all the stories reflect her life in one way or another, be it character, the general plot, a scholar in New England or a tourist in India are ripped from the pages of Lahiri's life.

Lahiri's characters can be classified into two types - the first generation and second generation Bengali settlers in the US. In case of the first generation, 'home' is India. To the younger group, India is a far off exotic land yet they cannot cut off the connection they have with the country of the birth of their parents. Lahiri says of herself "my parents were fearful and suspicious of America and American culture when I was growing up" (Das 177-78). This is reflected in the character Ruma in "Unaccustomed Earth" who says her mother was horrified and intimidated by American culture and she made sure that Ruma did not turn into that sort of American child. Thus the parents have to:

keep alive the traditions of their forefathers in the "little Indias" that they create in their apartments. The occasional visits to India also keep them in touch with their 'roots' and the magic that is India. (ibidem 63)

Lahiri recalls that as a child, she spent much time-rich and idle-in Calcutta at her grandmother's house. Calcutta inspired her as a writer as there is legacy and tradition which is not found 'here', *i.e.*,

America she says. Shoba in “A Temporary Matter” like Lahiri mostly vacationed in Calcutta. She warmly remembers the power failures during which all her relatives would gather at her grandmother’s house and share jokes, poems and current affairs. Amit in “A Choice of Accommodation” misses Calcutta because he was used to going there as it was where his relatives lived. The fact is he missed the closeness and warmth that Bengalis are known for. In “Unaccustomed Earth”, Ruma’s father says that, his wife was interested only in travelling to India and throughout their marriage “it had been an unquestioned fact that visiting family in Calcutta was the only thing worth boarding a plane for” (UE 19) and he acknowledges that “those returns to India had been a fact of life for him, and for all their Indian friends in America” (ibidem 8). It was in India when the family had come for vacation that Mrs Das in “Interpreter of Maladies” finds an outlet to her emotional crisis. So Lahiri and her fictional characters find consolation in their cultural root.

Growing up, Lahiri was in confusion as to where she belonged “I never knew how to answer the question “where are you from?” If I say I’m from Rhode Island, people are seldom satisfied. They want to know more based on things such as my name, my appearance”(Lahiri:Das 177). This dilemma is reflected in the character of Amit in “A Choice of Accommodation”. Amit was put in a prestigious school called Langford by his parents. He was the only Indian and “people always assumed that he’d been born and raised in that country and not in Massachusetts. They complimented him how good his English was” (UE 97). Kaushik in “Going Ashore” voices this dilemma. He says, being a photojournalist, he does not belong anywhere. He thinks that his origins were irrelevant and he does not have anything to do with India. And yet, where ever he went “in Rome, in all of Europe, he was always regarded as an Indian first” (ibidem 310).

A trait that is common to the immigrant

parents is the imposition of expectations on the children. The children too are unable to set aside those expectations. Lahiri says that she felt that the expectations of her parents on her were in “direct opposition to the reality of the world we lived in” (Lahiri:Das 178). This part of her is fictionalised in Sudha of “Only Goodness”. While growing up, Sudha’s father always compared his children with other Bengali children and she recalls that he had no patience for failure or indulgences. Sudha grew up to be “among those successful children, her collection of higher degrees framed and filling up her parents’ upstairs” (UE 151). Many other children in Lahiri’s books are successful academics like herself.

Again Sudha is an example of the two lives that the immigrant children led. Lahiri in an interview mentioned that the youth culture of America like dating, living on one’s own, listening to American music and the like was a mystery to her parents. While growing up she “felt like she led two separate lives”(Lahiri:Das 178). The character Sudha narrates that she lived according to the expectations of her parents, taking double majors and studying hard but little did they know that on “weekends she learned to let loose, going to parties and allowing boys into her bed” (UE 129). Usha in “Hell-Heaven” too led similar life, going out with boys, partying and drinking while telling her mother that she was sleeping over at a friend’s place. Hema in “Going Ashore” is a typical successful immigrant child. She has earned a PhD and the job of a professor. But behind this goody facet is someone who is secretly cavorting a relationship with a married man. Whenever she went on a trip with her boyfriend, she invented excuses so impressive that her parents never questioned her. Thus children are experts in steering a double-dealing life. The reason for this is because the children are acculturated to the American ways of life yet they are still strongly influenced by their parents’ principles and want to meet their expectations. Lahiri says of her own experience “I wanted to please my parents and meet their expectations. I also wanted to meet the

expectations of my American peers” (Lahiri:Das 177). She describes this situation as a “classic case of divided identity” (ibidem).

Arranged marriage is a subject that Lahiri is much interested in. It is a tradition which her parents as well as many of their generation exercised.

I do think it’s a question that has preoccupied me in all the books I’ve written. My parents had an arrange marriage, as did so many other people when I was growing up. My father had a life in the United States one way and my mother had a different one...I continue to wonder about it, and I will continue to write about it. (qtd. in Chotiner)

Hence, the husband usually would earn a PhD in the US and marry a traditional Bengali girl from Calcutta arranged by the family. “The Third and Final Continent” details the course of arranged marriage. The narrator leaves India (to England) for education and eventually gets a job in America. At this time, his family arranges a marriage for him. He accepts the marriage without objection nor enthusiasm as traditionally, it was a duty expected of every man. He flies to India, gets married and travels back without his wife. Six weeks later when his wife arrives to join him, he says “I regarded her arrival as I would the arrival of a coming month or season- something inevitable, but meaningless at the time” (*IOM* 187). Their interactions are awkward as they are strangers. Years into their marriage, comfortability sets in and they raise a son who attends Harvard University. This story is a stark reflection of arranged marriages that Lahiri witnessed. Through her stories, Lahiri also probes the reality of arranged marriage. Rahul in “Only Goodness” states that “Baba left India to get rich, and Ma married him because she had nothing else to do” (ibidem 138). This statement foretells the loveless relationship between the parents. Consequently the parents’ marriage lacked emotion where both are neither happy nor unhappy. It is the similar state of the marriage of Ruma’s parents’ in

“Unaccustomed Earth”. She says of her mother as someone who is “trained all her life to serve her husband first” (ibidem 16). This kind of marriage is obvious in the marriage of Shyamal and Aparna in “Hell-Heaven” and Mr and Mrs.Sen in “Mrs.Sen’s”. Lahiri’s marriage to a non-Indian is also reflected in many of her younger generation characters- Ruma and Adam, Amit and Megan, Sudha and Roger. The character Ruma who is married to an American is expecting her second child like Lahiri who has two children with an American husband.

Most obvious commonalities between the stories and Jhumpa Lahiri are the main characters in the stories. In many stories the main character is an academically successful woman in her thirties living somewhere in America and in some way or the other is associated with someone of Indian descent, be it themselves, a co-worker or a friend. Ruma is thirty-eight and a top-notch lawyer, Megan is a doctor, Hema is thirty-seven with PhD and a professor, Shoba is thirty-five and an editor...*et al.*

A lot of stories are based on the lives of her parents. She admits that she writes constantly about her parents and they are present and alive in each of her books. Lahiri’s father was a University Librarian and the story “The Third and Final Continent” is based on her father. Her father’s comment after reading the story “my whole life is that story” indicate Lahiri’s great ability to fictionalise a true account. Lahiri’s mother is also reflected in many stories. She recalls that for her mother, cooking “was a jurisdiction. It was also her secret”. The passion of cooking and food is dealt extensively in the stories. Ruma’s mother had been an excellent cook. The mother in “Hell-Heaven” prepares elaborate meals. Cooking activity of Hema’s and Kaushik’s mother abounds in “Once in a Lifetime”. Lilia’s mother is another character who is preoccupied with cooking and food. The entire story of “Mrs.Sen’s” revolves round the obsessed cooking activity of Mrs.Sen. Lahiri informs that the character Mrs.Sen was depicted keeping

her mother and many other women of her generation in mind. Therefore, the many characters' predilection for cooking and food in the stories is the direct influence of her mother.

In 2001, Lahiri chose to get married in Calcutta, a place where she never lived. The marriage was commenced in traditional Bengali rituals. Hema in "Going Ashore" goes to Calcutta for her marriage to Navin and marries in a true Bengali tradition. Both Lahiri and Hema find consolation in going back to their roots. Thus all the above illustrations prove that the use of biographical elements is an important technique in Jhumpa Lahiri's writings.

The return to past through memory is another prominent technique in Lahiri's works. There is no chronological or sequential development of the stories and the mode of narration is flashbacks. Therefore the structure is fragmented. It is because Lahiri uses her own memories and experiences and makes stories out of them. In most stories she employs a third person narration. "A Temporary Matter" starts almost at the end of the story when Shoba and Shukumar is almost at the brink of their divorce. They are observed by a third person. The plot is triggered by a temporary matter, *i.e.*, load-shedding in the evening for five days. From this point, the story flashes back and forth and the readers learn about their childhood, how they met and then the narration move to the present revealing the state of their relationship. It is only at the end the readers come to know that the reason they drifted apart is because of the death of their child. Amit and Megan in "A Choice of Accommodation" come to Amit's old school in Langford. Amit is extremely worried of his daughters though they are safe with their grandmother. Arriving at Langford digresses Amit's thoughts to his past and in the course of the remembrance of his past, reveals his life. One realises that Amit's state of insecurity is due to his abandonment when he was fifteen. The stories of the lives of Mr and Mrs. Das and Mr. Kapasi in "Interpreter of Maladies" is unfolded by a third person narration by rolling back and forth.

The narration of "Unaccustomed Earth" starts almost at the end of the story when Ruma is awaiting the visit of his father. In flashbacks the reader learns that Ruma had lost her mother recently, that Ruma is expecting and that the father is returning from an European tour. From this point, two simultaneous narration starts, that of her Ruma's and her father's. At intervals they bring their pasts and their lives are unveiled. "Hell-Heaven" is a good example of the return to the past. The narration starts from the remembrance of the past and the stories of three lives are unfolded simultaneously and ends in the present. Part II of *Unaccustomed Earth* comprises of a trilogy. The journey of Hema and Kaushik are projected first from Hema's perspective, then from Kaushik and finally from that of third first person. The connections between Hema and Kaushik are intricate as the narration. The story commences with the account of childhood memory. In Hema's memory, they first encountered when she was six and Kaushik was nine 1974 when his family were moving back to Massachusetts after living a few years in Bombay. Hema's memory reveals that the parents met in the 60's before Hema's birth and that their parents came from two different worlds in India, one middle class and the other upper. Kaushik's narration of his memory reveals his mother's cancer and her eventual death. His father meanwhile moves in another direction, finding refuge in a second marriage. The third person in the story narrates simultaneously the present state of the two lives.

It is human desire to move and change as well as the need of the past and this desire is felt more by the immigrants. They may acquire new culture but it is their link to the old culture that gives them identity and so memories become important to them. Therefore, memories and celebration of the past is an important craft that Lahiri uses. She is someone who acknowledges both Indian and American cultures. So she is tied to both the past and the present and this may have influenced her style of writing of going back and forth. The past is the foundation of the present and therefore shifting

between the past and the present is important for giving justice to the story.

Symbolism is a technique Lahiri skilfully incorporates in the narration of her stories. Symbols are used to present things such as ideas, emotions and the turmoil of the characters effectively.

Darkness during the periods of power cuts provides movement in the plot of "A Temporary Matter". Shoba and Shukumar loss inhibitions in the dark and for the first time since the death of their child they could talk. "Something happened when the home was dark. They were able to talk to each other again" (*IOM* 190). In the light they could hardly communicate as people assume to certain social norms and expectations. But darkness provides a blanket/cover and give space to let go of their consciousness. It is in the dark that Shoba and Shukumar are capable of performing acts of intimacy that they almost forgot. Shoba turned off the lights and they cried. Darkness provides them opportunity to lighten their pain. In this sense darkness is symbolic of freedom. In a part of the story, Shukumar is hurt when he brushes with the toothbrush which was bought by Shoba. "The cheap, stiff bristles hurt his gums and he spit some blood into the basin" (*ibidem* 6). This is indicative of the extreme misunderstanding that both are in. The blood signifies bitter feelings between them.

Mrs.Das in "Interpreter of Maladies" suffers from a serious malady. An event from the past haunts her like a ghost and she struggles with it secretly. She closely guards this secret and the sunglasses act as a curtain to shade her guilty conscience from the world. The Mr and Mrs.Das' family is visiting the magnificent Sun Temple in Konark. The guide Mr.Kapasi informs that "the Chandrabhaga River once flowed one mile north of here. It is now dry" (*ibidem* 57). Flowing river is a symbol of life and vitality. The present dry condition of the river indicates the present lack of life of Mrs Das - "the present for her is parched, devoid as it is of the waters of love, devotion and

spiritual depth" (*ibidem* 53). The scrap of paper with Mr.Kapasi's name and address which he gives to Mrs.Das signified a connection between Mrs. Das casually ripped a paper from a film magazine for Mr.Kapasi to write his address so that she can post the photographs to him. A tiny picture of hero and heroine embracing under a eucalyptus tree in the scrap paper indicates Mr.Kapasi's growing physical attraction towards Mrs.Das. This scrap of paper even gives him high hopes of having future contacts with her:

She would write to him, asking about his days...and he would respond eloquently... In the meantime she would reveal the disappointment of her marriage. In this way their friendship would grow. (*ibidem* 55)

However when she revealed her son's birth and she did not get the kind of reaction that she expected from him, she walked away and went in search of her husband and children. When they re-entered the taxi, the paper with the address blew away with the wind. The only person who noticed the paper flutter was Mr.Kapasi. This serves as a symbol of loss of infatuation to Mr.Kapasi and the end of their relationship. Monkeys and their antics maybe interpreted in many ways. When the family and Mr.Kapasi are first on the road, the monkeys leaped into the middle of the road and bounced onto the hood of the car, then sprang away. Then at the end, they are described "the monkeys now sat, solemnly observing the scene below. Mr.Kapasi observed it too, knowing that this was the picture of the Das family he would preserve forever in his mind" (*ibidem* 69). The actions of the monkeys may represent Mr.Kapasi's feelings during the trip. When the monkeys stop the car and excite everyone, Mr.Kapasi is just realising the beauty of the woman in the back seat and his excitement could be equivalent to that which the monkeys express. The monkeys quietly staring down at the family shows Mr.Kapasi's own realized feelings towards the experience, now being separated from them, but having greater understanding of who they are.

In many stories food plays an important role in the lives of the characters. Food attends the symbol of connection. Lahiri's detail description of food in "A Temporary Matter" reflects the state of marriage between Shoba and Shukumar. Shoba's particular fondness to food and to keep the kitchen well stocked reflects her marital bliss. When the husband and wife are well connected and happy, the author describes the state of their kitchen:

The pantry was well stocked with extra boxes of olive and corn...endless boxes of pasta in all shapes and colors, zippered sacks of basmati rice, whole slices of lambs and goats...chopped up and frozen in endless plastic bags. (ibidem 6)

Shoba had been a good cook and the food never went to waste as they entertained guests very often. She also had cooked ten-course dinner just for him on their first anniversary. Of course, it was while having meal at a restaurant that Shukumar realised that he would marry Shoba. So abundance of food corresponds to happy times. But with the death of their child, things change between them and so does the kitchen. Shoba is completely disinterested in cooking and food and the haunting absence of food in the household is parallel to the lack of attention in their marriage. The couple's disintegrating marriage is reflected in their eating habit:

they'd served themselves from the stove, and he'd taken his plate into his study, letting the meal grow cold on his desk before shoving it into his mouth without pause, while Shoba took her plate to the living room and watched shows. (ibidem 8)

Therefore, abundance of food in Shoba and Shukumar's household indicates their marital connection and the absence of food indicates their disconnection.

Food serves as a tool of connection between Mr.Pirzada and Lilia's family in "When Mr.Pirzada

Came to Dine". Night after night, Lilia's parents and Mr.Pirzada enjoyed long leisurely meals prepared by Lilia's mother. Though they are from two different countries, they share similar food items and this similarity greatly helps in setting the connection between them. Lilia says:

They ate pickled mangoes with their meals, ate rice every night for supper with their hands. Like my parents, Mr.Pirzada... chewed fennel seed after meals as digestive, drank no alcohol, for dessert dipped austere biscuits into successive cups of tea. (ibidem 25)

In "Mrs.Sen's", Mrs.Sen is a lonely housewife whose husband is busy with his job. She misses her Calcutta family, her neighbourhood and above all the community feeling. She tries to strike a connection with Eliot's mother through food. Eliot says:

Each evening she insisted that his mother sit on the sofa, where she served something to eat: a glass of bright pink yoghurt with rose syrup, breaded mincemeat with raisins, a bowl of semolina halvah. (ibidem 118)

But his mother just nibbled the concoctions with the eyes cast upwards. The disinterest of Eliot's mother in the food offered by Mrs.Sen represent her critical and sceptical attitude toward the immigrant. Eliot's mother is not interested to form any connection with Mrs.Sen.

Names become a formidable symbol in Lahiri's stories. She uses Indian names to Indianize her stories. Most of the stories are referred to by the first names or their surnames or titles of address. This suggests the generalization of the characters. Sudha, Ruma, Hema, Usha, Amit, Kaushik and others could be any conflicted, well educated, successful second generation immigrants. Mrs.Sen does not have a name because she does not have an identity of her own. She is just a reflection of her husband's identity. Sen is a very common

Bengali surname but in Boston the existence of single Sen in the telephone directory suggest the solitary existence of Mrs.Sen. Boori Ma also has no name as she has no personality or individuality. She is given the name “Boori Ma” by the residents because she is an old woman and she is like a mother to the residents who make sure the building is safe, chasing away any suspicious people. The nickname also indicates the whole lot of homeless women who are in similar condition due to various circumstances. The narrator in “The Third and Final Continent” does not have a name because he signifies the thousands of first generation Indian immigrants during the 1960’s and 1970’s who went through the process of alienation and gradual adaptation.

The state of nature in “Year’s End” reflects the emotional condition of Kaushik. His mother has been dead for three years and he still struggles to come to term with that fact. Kaushik describes his first New Year at home after his father marries a much younger and more traditional widow with two children. To see his father’s new wife in the kitchen aroused revolting feelings towards her. “I was sickened by her, by the sight of her standing in our kitchen...the space retained her [mother] presence more than any part of the house” (UE 263). When he discovers his stepsisters opening a secret box containing pictures of his mother, he bursts out with unkind thoughts and runs off not knowing where he was going. The narrator observes his simmering rage and his lingering grief. Kaushik takes the direction to Maine and the jerking sound of the wind from the ocean sounded “like that of a fire burning, penetrating the closed doors and windows” (ibidem 287). This symbolizes the rage that was engulfing his entire being. He felt lethally frigid and observes the sky “was different, without color, taut and unforgiving” (ibidem 289) like him.

Jhumpa Lahiri insists that her writings neither give a message nor instruct. That is why she uses the technique of **open ending**. There is no closure in the stories. She leaves to the readers to arrive to

conclusions or to give judgement. In “A Temporary Matter”, Lahiri leaves the story hanging. A young couple, Shoba and Shukumar whose marriage is in deadlock receives a notice that their neighbourhood will be without power one hour each in the evening for five days. Shoba proposes a game of exchanging something they’ve never told before to each other in the dark. What ensues is a series of confessions revealing “the little ways they’d hurt or disappointed each other, and themselves” (IOM 18). These confessions seem to restore their relationship, so thought Shukumar. But on the fifth night, Shoba announced that she had leased an apartment and that she has been planning to move out. Shukumar too reveals a truth which he had earlier decided he would never tell her - he had held the baby before he cremated and it was a boy. The story ends with the narrator commenting “they wept together, for the things they now know” (ibidem 22). For the first time they mourned the loss of their child but it is not clear whether the conflict in their relationship would be “a temporary matter” or an understanding achieved or whether there will be no cementing of their relationship. “The knowledge attained in the dark, it may be hoped, can sustain the relationship. But the story which is open-ended does not give any clear indications of that” (Lahiri:Das 52).

“Interpreter of Maladies” is about the story of Mr and Mrs.Das and their children who are tourists in Orissa. They are guided by Mr.Kapasi whose other job is interpreting the maladies of Gujarat patients to a doctor. Mr.Kapasi notes that the husband and wife are in discord as they constantly bicker with each other. They are not even attentive to their children. Meanwhile Mrs.Das takes quite an interest in Mr.Kapasi’s work which she deem as “romantic”. Mr.Kapasi is flattered and he begins to develop a romantic interest in Mrs.Das. In the course of their conversation, Mrs.Das discloses the secret that her son Bobby had been born out of her adultery. For eight years she has guarded this secret and she now seeks Mr.Kapasi’s advice. She is confused whether she should tell this to her husband or not. She hopes he can interpret her feelings as

he does for his patients. She thinks he can provide some kind of remedy. However the story ends with Mr.Kapasi asking a question to her- “is it really pain you feel, Mrs.Das, or is it guilt?” (*IOM*, 66). He is unable to provide any remedy to her. Lahiri leaves the ending open to the readers’ imagination. Suman Bala comes up with many possibilities/ questions as to the end of this story- “would she share the secret with her husband? If yes, how would the husband respond? Would they stay together or go for a separation” (p.16) or would she choose to guard the secret forever and live with pain of guilt?

In “Mrs.Sen’s”, eleven year old Eliot begins staying with Mrs.Sen (who is a university professor’s wife) after school. She is lonely and babysitting is a way to fill her lonely afternoons. Eliot and Mrs.Sen spent time with Mrs Sen chopping vegetables and preparing food as she tells Eliot of her past life in Calcutta. Eliot becomes Mrs.Sen’s companion and confidante. He discovers that she lives for the two things that make her happy: letters from home and fresh fish from a local seafood market. However reaching the market requires driving car, a skill Mrs.Sen is still learning with great disinterest. Her husband is busy and resentful of her persistent requests to take her to the market. At one time Mrs.Sen attempts to drive to the market without her husband and ends up in an accident. The story ends with the accident. In this story too, the narrator does not give any judgement nor give a concrete closure. Would Mrs.Sen receive some kind of sympathy and affection from her husband in any point of life? Would she be able to carve an identity of her own, not just the reflection of her

husband’s identity? Or would she remain like a housemate for the rest of her life? Would she ever be able to shake off her obsession of her land, her people and fish? The reader feels the story of “Mrs. Sen’s” has not ended yet.

The characters and plots of Jhumpa Lahiri’s stories closely bear a resemblance to her own life. The backdrop of the plot, the individual characters and the storylines are related to her one way or the other. Thus her stories are replete with autobiographical elements. Non-linear narrative of return to the past through memory is also an important fictional tool of Lahiri. Thus the structures of the stories are fragmented. The stories start at almost the end of the story and in flashbacks, the crux of the story is unfolded. Lahiri as well as her characters are tied to both the past and the present and this is the reason why her stories move back and forth. Symbolism is a technique which Lahiri uses subtly. It is to represent the problems/dilemmas and the emotions of the characters more effectively. Lahiri does not give closure to her stories. The reason is because she considers herself just an interpreter of human maladies. She simply writes a story. She leaves to the readers to make conclusions or give judgements to the stories and this technique effectively arouse suspense in the readers. Lahiri’s writings do not instruct nor send message. She says that when she writes, she does not think about an idea, a message or morality. Neither does she give judgements. That is why one reading is not enough to understand her stories. She has a distinctive voice and the human drama that she unfolds is deeply moving.

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