Chapter III

*The Interpreter of Maladies*

Indian English diasporic writers are categorized into three classes. The first category is of the writers who are completely assimilated in the host country and refuse to call themselves immigrant writers. The second category presents a group of diasporic writers who drift between different continents. These writers have a variety of themes in their writings. Some of them write about the experiences of immigration whereas others define the exoticism of their home country or of characters which go as aliens and try to fit into the western world. The third category presents the writers of Indian origin whose writings are not connected to the country of their origin. Instead, they write about the culture and life-style of the host country.

Jhumpa Lahiri belongs to the second category of Asian American writers who deal with India as an exotic land, and also with the problems of Indian immigrants adjusting in an alien land. The nine stories of Lahiri’s *Interpreter of Maladies* attest this fact. These stories are the examples of various aspects of Indian immigrants living in America. *The Interpreter of Maladies* indicates an interpreter of emotional pain and affliction. Each story interprets the character’s
sufferings, sacrifices and struggles. Indian heritage is the basis of these short stories in which she deals with the question of identity, alienation and the plight of those who are physically and psychologically displaced. Most of the characters in the stories have fluid identities like other contemporary postcolonial literary characters. In most cases they are the citizen of two countries. Hence, their national and cultural identities are not fixed. They are physically in the USA and psychologically their minds are in South Asia.

The first story “A Temporary Matter” presents the casual but systematic build-up towards a crucial revolution of a young and financially independent woman against an unbearable, loveless marriage. It is a story of a husband and a wife, Shukumar and Shoba, whose life was filled with joy and after the death of their first-born baby both started drifting apart. Each one felt uncomfortable in each other’s presence and a forced blackout for eight consecutive nights to repair damage done by an ice storm made them unmask their faces and start conversing and confessing their deepest fears and thoughts. Her act of walking out of such a marriage is an assertion of independence, identity, determination and capacity to choose her own way of life and to get rid of the emotional and physical stress. The title of the story does not refer to the temporary power failure alone.
Their stillborn child has created distance between them. Shoba is incapable of dealing with her pain and frustration at losing her baby and projected her anger and frustration on her husband because he was absent during her labour. Shukumar was not there by her side at the time in the hospital as he was attending an academic conference in Baltimore that he “hadn’t wanted to go to . . . but she had insisted” as it was “important to make contacts” (IM 2-3). However, he had come back in time to hold the child for few minutes before the child was cremated. Shukumar was neither indifferent nor irresponsible towards Shoba or the child; rather he looked forward towards being a father. They lost touch with one another in their relationship; Shoba silently blames Shukumar for the tragedy. Within six months of the incident “he and Shoba become experts at avoiding each other in their three bedroom house, spending as much time on separate floors as possible” (IM 4). The power cuts in their area force them to spend time together by candle light. The power cuts for a notified duration form the ‘temporary matter.’

During these phases of darkness, they could restart talking and sharing. A happy reunion is expected after the closeness that Shoba and Shukumar shared by exchanging untold experiences. But Shoba announces her decision to move into a new apartment. The death of
the child completely changed the lives of both the husband and the wife. Somehow, their relationship had reached a stage where “he didn’t want her to be pregnant again. Shoba’s confession leads to a further revelation by Shukumar. Both Shoba and her mother assume Shukumar to be a heartless, absent father” (IM 22). Shoba’s problem is her inability to deal with her anger and frustration of losing the baby for whose arrival she has planned elaborately, and her strong but failed belief was that the yet-to-be born child would give a meaning and direction to her life. As they grow increasingly cold towards each other, the marital relationship becomes a burden for both of them.

The child was the only bond that tied them together as couple. The poignancy of the situation is revealed when he tells his wife that the baby was a boy and describes him for the grieving mother. He says that he had not told her because she wanted the sex of the baby to be a mystery and now in their shared grief they “wept together, for the things they know new” (IM 22). Thus, their separation is over and they are able to regard their gap as ‘a temporary matter’. This clarification is much more a satisfying ending. The theme of the ‘temporary matter’ means that it is their separation, and not their marriage, that is
temporary. This is reinforced by Shoba’s declaration that “she needed some time alone” (IM 21) not that she wants to get rid of their relationship.

The second story “When Mr. Pirzada came to Dine” is written from the third person point of view. Lahiri presents how geographical and historical occurrences may change one’s identity. She also posits that politics can change the identity of a whole society. The narrator is a seven year old girl, Lilia. Mr. Pirzada is an Eastern Pakistani immigrant. He is a lecturer of Botany at Dacca University and comes to Boston on a fellowship of the government of Pakistan to study the foliage of New England. The story is written against the backdrop of Indo-Pak war of 1971. During his stay in Boston, political unrest starts in Dacca owing to the struggle for autonomy by Eastern Pakistanis. The narrator Lilia’s parents live on the campus of Boston University. Living in an alien culture, cut off from their homeland, Lilia’s parents have a yearning to associate with their compatriots. On the basis of cultural proximity, Mr. Pirzada is invited by the narrator’s parents. Lilia as a small child believes Mr. Pirzada to be an Indian, but is soon corrected by her father. Even then, her young mind is incapable of imbibing this distinction.
It made no sense to me. Mr. Pirzada and my parents spoke the same language, laughed at the same jokes, looked more or less the same. 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 after meals as a digestive, drank no alcohol, for dessert dipped austere biscuits into successive cups of tea. Nevertheless my father insisted that I understand the difference, and he led me to a map of the world taped to the wall over his desk. (IM 25)

During the pandemonium in Dacca, created by the Pakistani army, everything collapsed. Mr. Pirzada could not contact his wife and seven daughters because of the upheaval. The war finally ends in December 1971 and Pirzada goes back to Bangladesh in January 1971. Several months later Lilia’s family receives a card and a short letter from Mr. Pirzada who says he has been reunited with his family. Therefore, Mr. Pirzada’s temporary migration comes to an end; he does not return to the United States and Lilia’s family does not see him again. Mr. Pirzada’s identity has always been attached to Bangladesh, which becomes independent from Pakistan. Mr. Pirzada
rushes back to reunite with his family. Lilia has learned through this stranger what it means, “to miss someone who was so many miles and hours away” (IM 42).

Lilia and her parents have different notions of identity; for Lilia, race is the identity whereas her parents consider culture and religion as the root of one’s identity. Lilia tries to categorize Mr. Pirzada on the basis of external features such as same race and colour of skin but her father insists that she categorizes Mr. Pirzada on the basis of the shared culture, tradition and practices. For Lilia, and similarly for Mr. Pirzada, the relationship between identity and nationality is unstable and fluid. On the one hand, Mr. Pirzada and Lilia can be read as universal that transcend history and geography and that connect the two Bengals; but equally easy, the connection is a broad sign towards the universalism of human feelings. This is a universal bridge of unity through age and gender.

However, Lilia, as a child, suffers from identity crisis as most immigrants do. When she wears a witch costume for Halloween, she is not identified as American by the neighbours. Ignoring her American citizenship, they remark that they have never seen an Indian witch before. Her father’s disappointment of lack of her knowledge of Indian history instigates her to read about the country of her parents.
But her teacher, Mrs. Kenyon forbids her to do so. Mrs. Kenyon’s emphasis is on learning U.S. history. This exemplifies the superior dismissive outlook towards the third world. Her scolding of Lilia can also be interpreted as her desire to delink her from her ancestral roots and bicultural identity. Instead she demands that Lilia internalize American history and culture.

The title story “the Interpreter of Maladies” reflects the psychological trauma of Mina Das, an Indian-American woman who visits India with her husband and children. The story shows the distancing of second generation Indian-Americans from their ancestral country. The story is narrated in the third person. This is the story of an Indian-American couple, Raj and Mina Das who comes to India along with their three children. They hire a tour guide, Mr. Kapasi. Besides working as a guide, he also works as an interpreter in a doctor’s office. Mina Das dubs Mr Kapasi “an interpreter of maladies” and “romantic.” This arouses a feeling of romanticism in Mr. Kapasi whose marriage is on the rocks. He begins fantasizing about her.

At first glance, Mr. Kapasi classifies the Das family on the basis of race. They share Mr. Kapasi’s complexion. But soon, he realizes that for the Das family, nationality is more important than their race
as Mr. Das emphasizes his purely American identity and not the hyphenated one.

‘You left India as a child?’ Mr. Kapasi asked when Mr. Das had settled once again into the passenger seat. ‘Oh, Mina and I were born in America,’

Mr. Das announced with an air of sudden confidence.

‘Born and raised. Our parents live here now, in Assansol. They retired. We visit them every couple years.’ (IM 45)

Mr. Kapasi’s impression of the Das family as Indian comes to an end when he analyses their behavioural pattern. The family is “dressed as foreigners did” (IM 44) and Mr. Das shakes hands as Americans do. This shows that the family is not only concerned about their national identity but also has internalized the American way of life.

A contrast between the first generation and the second generation immigrants is presented through the characters of Mr. and Mrs. Das and their parents. Their parents return to India and make it their home whereas Mr. and Mrs. Das, alien to the culture and tradition of their ancestral land, visit India as a tourist spot. To Mr. and Mrs. Das the sight of an emaciated “barefoot man,… head wrapped in a dirty turban, seated on top of a cart of grain sacks
pulled by a pair of bullocks” (IM 49) represents not the poverty but stark reality of India, which he photographs.

Most of the characters are suffering from psychological or social diseases. In this story both Mr. and Mrs. Das were born and raised in America, although their retired parents have now moved to India. Soon after marriage as Raj becomes busy with his teaching assignments, life became dull and drab for Mina: “she was left at home all day with the baby . . . Always cross and tired” (IM 64). Her problems were further complicated when she conceived her younger son Bobby because of a sexual intimacy with a friend of her husband who once happened to stay with them for a few days. She kept the secret for eight years before revealing it to Kapasi, the interpreter of maladies, hoping that he would help her feel better by saying the right thing or suggest some kind of remedy.

She tells Kapasi that she is troubled by her secret, though Raj, her husband, “doesn’t even suspect it” and thinks she is “still in love with him” (IM-65). Kapasi, because of his typical Indian background and patriarchal ideology, cannot understand the complicated and taxing situation. Mina has been through as a young lonely housewife and mother. Mina is not ready to accept that it is her guilt that makes her suffer. Ignoring him and his diagnosis completely, she seeks
refuge, at the end of the story, in her parental duties, nursing the injured Bobby, her illegal son. Kapasi believes that like Raj and Mina, he and his wife were “a bad match [and] had little in common” except “the bickering, the Indifference, the protracted silences” (IM 53). The thematic conclusion is also clear in order to overcome maladies, one has to interpret them and seek refuge within one’s own self.

The narrative’s focus is generally on the female protagonist, Mina Das, a lonely individual struggling to come to terms with her new environment, oppressive matrimonial or extra matrimonial relationships, and with an alien culture, social and economic insecurity or her natural support to survive with an identity of her own. Marriage, as portrayed in this collection, is neither stable nor valuable as a social or religious institution nor is it as dependable or fulfilling as a personal relationship based on mutual respect, emotional dependability, human understanding or shared interests or attitudes. There is no attempt to present the matrimonial relationships explored in these stories as typical representative of Indian or even expatriate Indian population in general.

This story has a definite feminist orientation, explores the nature and usefulness of certain patriarchal institutions like marriage and family in the contemporary society, and raises some disturbing
questions about security, dependability, fulfillment, meaningfulness, happiness, love and affection. Mina has been through as a young lonely housewife and mother. Rather than understanding the complete dryness and dullness of her married life as the cause of her complete indifference towards extramarital sexual advances, Kapasi considers it an act of unfaithfulness and traces her pain and suffering to her feelings of guilt. She is not ready to accept that it is her guilt that makes her suffer. Ignoring him and his analysis completely, she seeks refuge, at the services of others such as her aged parents and the injured illegal son. Mina’s limited sphere of activity resembles that of Mrs. Kapasi’s typical Indian lower middle class selfless, housewife completely devoted to the service of the husband and the family.

In this story, Lahiri shows the difficulties that Indians have relating to Americans and the ways in which Indian and Americans were caught in the middle of two different cultures. Mr. Kapasi wishes for a close connection with Mrs. Das, but when she finally does leak her secrets, her affair, and her true feelings about her husband, Mr. Kapasi is overwhelmed and disgusted. Mr. Kapasi thinks that he and Mrs. Das have a connection because he recognizes her situation, the isolated wife and troubled marriage from his own life.
These relationships explore the idea of displacement through isolation and identity both cultural and personal. Kapasi’s attitude towards his wife is similar to that of Raj towards Mina at a more distinct level: both ignore individual, emotional and physical needs of the wife condemned to the boring repetitive domestic backbreaking responsibilities. The problems for both the couples are caused by the nature of marital relationships dramatized in the story, which are unsatisfactory for the man as well as the women.

The family is not a homogenous group where all the members occupy equal positions and derive equal benefits in terms of source, training opportunities and entitlements. The socialization of members and especially girls lead to women themselves accepting their secondary role in family . . . gender difference that are culturally produced are, almost invariably, interpreted as being rooted in biology, as part of the natural order of things. However, gender roles are conceived, enacted and learnt within a complex of relationships. (Desai and Thakkar 80)

The husband with his patriarchal ideology almost completely ignores the individual needs of the wife. There are many themes in the story: communication gap, broken marriages, and the danger of
romanticism. Mr. Das misses the reality of the world around him, both in his marriage and in the scene outside the cab. The common thread throughout the stories in this collection is the same kind of malady that the Das family suffers. All characters are defined by isolation of some form or other: husbands are isolated from wives; immigrants are isolated from their families and their homes; children are isolated from their parents; and people are isolated from the communities in which they live. In their isolation, these characters feel that they are missing something very important to their identities.

The fourth story is “A Real Durwan,” which is about a woman, Boori Ma, who did not migrate to India from Pakistan not for financial reasons but for political reasons. Boori Ma is a sweeper of the stairwell in an old building in Calcutta, who was deported to Calcutta after partition. In 1947, the South Asian subcontinent was divided into two countries, India and Pakistan. The partition created a mass migration of Hindus and Muslims from India to Pakistan.

Partition is remembered and recounted or forgotten and hidden, but sometimes, it emerges in specific contexts. Resurrected and imported to Britain through visits by elder generations, ‘Partition becomes a beginning point and an anchor for many peoples’ life stories. (Raj 58)
During this mass migration, some people lost everything including their identity. To the tenants, the partition and its trauma are the things of the past and they listen with surprise to the old woman’s narrative of loss and homelessness. Boori Ma was a refugee. Her name means ‘big mother’ in Bengali. This kind of name is usually given to an old female servant in South Asia. She works as a sweeper cum security guard (durwan) in a building of a poor neighborhood in Calcutta. She had been sweeping the stairwell since her deportation to Calcutta after partition had separated her from a husband, four daughters, a two-story brick house, a rosewood almari, and a number of coffee boxes, whose skeleton keys she still wore, along with her life savings, tied to the free end of her sari (IM 70-71).

Throughout the story, Boori Ma’s identity is attached to those keys that are stolen at the final stage of the story. Her past identity of a rich man’s wife of East Bengal is important than her present identity as a sweeper of the stairwell in Calcutta. She left a rich life style in Pakistan for a poor life style in India. She is fixed with her upper class identity and remains alienated from the West. This story focus on the plight of the lower class casually in that selection of the social strata because of forced diaspora and political struggle. In exchange for her services, the residents allow Boori Ma to live on the roof of the
building. While she sweeps, she tells stories of her past: her daughter’s extravagant wedding, her servants, her estate and her riches. She cannot forget her identity relating to her first homeland.

She claims

Yes, there I tasted life have I mentioned that I crossed the border with just two bracelets on my wrist? Yet there was a day when my feet touched nothing but marble. Believe me, don’t believe me, such comforts you cannot even dream them. (IM-71)

The residents of the brick building hear continuous contradictions in Boori Ma’s storytelling, but her stories are seductive and compelling, so they let her contradictions rest. Mrs. Dalal often gives Boori Ma food and takes care of her ailments. When Mr. Dalal is promoted at work, he improves the brick building by installing a sink in the stairwell and a sink in his home. While the Dalals are away, the other residents become obsessed with making their own improvement to the building. Boori Ma even spends her life savings on special treats while circling around the neighborhood.
However, while Boori Ma is out one afternoon, the sink in the stairwell is stolen. The residents accuse Boori Ma of informing the robbers and in negligence for her job.

“This is all her doing,” one of them hollered, pointing at Boori Ma. She informed the robbers. Where was she when she was supposed to guard the gate? (IM-81)

When Boori Ma protests, the residents continue to accuse her because of all her previous inconsistent stories. The story concludes as the residents throw out Boori Ma’s belongings and begin a search for a real durwan.

Thus, alienation and identity crises explore the idea of displacement because Boori Ma is displaced from Pakistan to India. She lost her financial and economic identity. At the end of the story, Boori Ma is expelled from that building. The ‘basin’ incident is like the driving accident of “Mrs. Sen” symbolizing that she has been always alienated in West Bengal and her identity will be always attached to East Bengal. Throughout the story she is depicted as an alienated figure. Her description of the past life is treated by the inhabitants as fabricated.
The character of Boori Ma can be seen to have the shades of womanhood. She leaves her family back in the country where she feels where she belongs to; she lives a life of seclusion. Her acceptance of her own situation and her hope for better future are the proof of her maturity and understanding. Truly, she is a real durwan.

The fifth story of the collection is entitled “Sexy.” It deals with a brief adulterous relationship between Miranda, an American Indian woman, and Devajit Mitra, a Bengali immigrant. An expatriate Bengali married man (his wife temporarily away from him) accidentally meets a young white girl and gets involved in an extramarital affair with her. Dev, Luxmi’s cousin (Luxmi is Miranda’s colleague) returns from India to see his wife and son in Montreal. He happens to sit next to an English girl, half his age, on the flight, and is so impressed by a conversation he has with her that he decides to desert his family to be with her in London.

The story presents the cultural displacement of the immigrants and the feeling of exoticism of the native Americans towards South Asian immigrants. Miranda tries to adopt Bengali culture, and she tries to learn the Bengali language, eat Indian food and watch Indian movies. She finally realizes the uselessness of this relationship. Lahiri beautifully captures Miranda’s various ranges of emotions: joy, doubt,
and grief. The story develops against the background of man leaving his wife and child for another woman whom he met on a plane journey from USA to UK. The child Rohin explains the meaning of sexy to Miranda “When you love a person without knowing them at all” (IM 107). A double sense of charm and danger is overtly dramatized in the sexual appeal that exists between Miranda and Dev.

Rohin has travelled with his mother from their home in Canada to Miranda’s in Boston on their way to California, his history lies in India half a world away. Despite the decades of more life experience Miranda possesses, Rohin trumps her in every area of intelligence. Even though Miranda is the adult, the one with the book and the answers, Rohin possesses more knowledge because he holds it within himself. He is forced by his environment and the inability of his mother to be more adult in this story.

“Mrs. Sen” is a story of an expatriate Indian Bengali housewife who is trying to make a mini India in her house. Mrs. Sen is a thirty-year-old helpless, obedient, Bengali wife brought to America by her husband. Mr. Sen, an Assistant Professor of Mathematics in a university, spends most of his time at his workplace. As a result, Mrs. Sen remains lonely and alienated in her home. The main point of her alienation is that “Mrs. Sen did not know how to drive” (IM 111).
Eliot’s mother is also concerned about the fact that Mrs. Sen does not know how to drive. Driving is an essential skill in the United States. However, Mrs. Sen is attached to India: “Yes I am learning,” Mrs. Sen said. “But I am slow student. At home, you know. We have a driver” (IM 113). She spends her time doing household work and baby-sitting for an eleven-year-old American boy, Eliot.

However, Mrs. Sen is attached to India, as she is physically in the United States but mentally in India. The activity sphere of Mrs. Sen is limited. Ironically, the main desire for fresh fish that she might cook for her husband is the only passion that keeps her going in the alien American environment. Her interest in learning how to drive a car is directed at achieving freedom not to move around independently of her ever-busy husband, but is a reflection of her cultural propaganda in native Bengal that a wife must be a good house-keeper and cook and that she must carefully select fish to be bought relying on her senses. Mrs. Sen continuously confirms her nostalgic memories of India. Being isolated, her family and friends and displaced from her home, she finds the North American life irritating and aggressive.

As Eliot, the young boy she babysits, recognizes, “When Mrs. Sen said home, she meant India not the apartment where she sat chopping vegetables” (IM 116). Her daily activities are arranged upon
the theme of escape. While she prefers delaying her driving practices, which are obviously the necessity of her new life, she steadily keeps her special Indian-cooking daily practices and cooks heartily despite the fact that her husband and she alone could eat all the food. It is as if her cooking style and her interest in buying and having fish, which have links with her idea of homeland, and her means of asserting her cultural identity. Although useful in lubricating the process of change and paving the way towards the formation of her future hybrid identity, Mrs. Sen’s attachment is also simultaneously blocking the acculturation process which M.J. Esman defines as “acceptance and adaptation of basic elements of the local culture, its language and its lifestyle” (103).

She talks about her experience of a joint cooking with neighbors in Calcutta or how the letters from India make her happy. It seems Mrs. Sen did not think that she would leave her home one day as she tells Eliot: “When I was your age I was without knowing that one day I would be so far” (IM 123).

The seventh story in the collection is “This Blessed House.” It is the story of an young Asian couple, Sanjeev and Twinkle, who have just started their married life in the USA. The parents of Twinkle and Sanjeev “were old friends, and across continents they had arranged
the occasion at which Twinkle and Sanjeev were introduced though his parents still lived in Calcutta and that of her in California” (IM 142). They come from different cultural backgrounds with different experiences. This story deals with a relatively early period of the married life when the partners are quite emotionally attached to each other. Still the incidents captured in the narrative reveal the inherent incompatibility of Twinkle and Sanjeev because of their contrastive temperaments and tastes. The couple keeps encountering flashy Christian things left behind by their home’s former owners in the USA. There they find the statue of Christ. Twinkle is excited at this discovery and start calling the house “a blessed house” but Sanjeev is not happy about it. He says, “We are not Christians” (IM 137). The existence of Christian symbols at home is uncomfortable for him. In order to remove these symbols from the house, Sanjeev quarrels with Twinkle. She explores both the complications of an arranged marriage and the adjustments that must be made to accommodate a couple’s different personalities within any relationship.

Twinkle represents the second-generation female immigrants who, being submerged in the culture of the other for rather a long time, have fashioned such hybrid diasporic identities, which let them survive and succeed even far above their male counterparts. Twinkle’s
parents have lived in California. It is a preference to welcome multiplicity and to embrace the conflicting aspects of the blended culture. Later, when Twinkle’s guest considers her name as strange, she shows no signs of shame and sorrow. Instead, she accepts the ridiculous ring to names like hers in an American context. “There is an actress in Bombay named Dimple Kapadia. She even has a sister named Dimple” (IM 151). She is able to start a self-derision without being upset or disturbed. It is this dynamic positive hybridity present in Twinkle that makes her survival definite and gives her superiority and charm over other female characters.

With her Americanized orientation, Twinkle responds to Christianity and its symbols in a way in which Sanjeev cannot. Their contrastive religious and cultural orientation soon manifests itself in a kind of open antagonism. Thus, one can say that national and cultural identities are not fixed. Lahiri explores both the complications of an arranged marriage and the adjustments that must be made to accommodate a couple’s dissimilar personalities within any relationship.

An individual’s sense of identity is neither completely conscious nor unconscious, although, at times, it appears to be exclusively one or the other. At some place identity is
referred to as conscious sense of individual uniqueness, at others, to an unconscious striving for continuity of experience, and yet other places as a sense of solidarity with a group’s ideal. (Kakar 16)

The eighth short story entitled “The Treatment of Bibi Haldar” is a product of the effects of globalization in India. Although the Indian government officially eliminated the caste system in 1949, it is still part of the social structure in India because of its deep-rooted tradition in history. If marriage creates a problem for other couples, getting married is the problem for Bibi Haldar in “The Treatment of Bibi Haldar.” Bibi is twenty-nine year old poor sickly Indian girl gripped with the idea that her life would be meaningful if only she got married and had a family of her own. Staying with her elder cousin and his wife in a rented apartment in Calcutta in pitiable and humiliating conditions, she desperately wants to get married like other girls in her cultural background. Initially, she feels more frustrated at being denied the participation in the ceremonies connected with marriage that she cherishes and values so much.

Bibi suffers from a strange unknown disease, and while numerous possible treatments are suggested, none has proved to be useful. Bibi longs for a normal life in which she can have a husband
and bear children. Yet, her attempt fails as nobody agrees to take the sick Bibi Haldar as a wife. The twist comes at the end of the story when Bibi who has led a life of loneliness and isolation on the roof of the building, gets pregnant and, gives birth to a son. The lonely, neglected and underprivileged girl had neither the physical attributes, the social and financial status nor any relatives to find a husband for her. In addition, she suffers, since early childhood, from a mysterious malady that could not be diagnosed despite the best efforts of her father and others. Bibi is “liable to fall unconscious and enter, at any moment, into a shameless delirium, Bibi could be trusted neither to cross a street nor board a tram without supervision” (IM-159).

To add to her woes, her cousin and his wife, finding her too much of a liability and nuisance, desert her by moving out of that building, leaving her alone to fend for herself. Her friendly neighborhood comes to save her and she survives on her own. She wishes to deny a man of any power or right on her offspring. She is not amazingly cured of her almost incurable sickness. She also becomes financially independent with the help of neighbours and sympathetic women by taking control of the shop vacated by her cousin. Reading the story in the light of female identity-formation process, one can come up with the view that “The Treatment of Bibi
“Haldar” is a commentary on the contradiction of the Indian notion of feminity and its possible burden on the life of the marginalized female in Calcutta, India. “Bibi had never been taught to be a woman” (IM 178).

Women’s poverty is a direct link to the lack of access to education and legitimate healthcare. Bibi is isolated because of her illness. She is unable to communicate her needs to those around her because she is marginalized by society. Lack of communication leads to isolation, and isolation leads to displacement. Therefore, displacement can be considered “the central theme” of the story. This story ignores the immediate cultural and social context to give a direction to the sequence of events that assert the dispensability not only of man but also of the institution of marriage. Rather than the husband or a religiously or socially solemnized marriage, it is the child or the procreation of a woman (as a mother) and her independence and ability to survive on her own that gives purpose and meaning to the life of a woman.

“The Third and the Final Continent” is the last story in the collection. It is unfolded by a male narrator. He is born in Asia, travels to Europe to study, and finally immigrates to North America. Although he has adapted to the British way of life as a student, it is not a true cultural integration as “he lives in a house occupied entirely by
penniless Bengali bachelors like him” (IM 173). He attempts to keep his cultural identity intact by keeping the most trivial of Indian traditions alive, such as eating egg curry. When he is posted to America, he relies on the British ways he has learned in London, converting ounces to grams and comparing prices to things in England as a survival strategy. Even in America his wife, Mala, depends completely on her husband.

The story presents a contrast of attitudes and culture between two women whose husbands die early leaving the families to fend for themselves. The narrator’s mother was completely devastated by the death of her husband. Physically, she did not commit sati (self-immolation) with him, as an orthodox patriarchal ideology would have expected her, back in the nineteenth century. Mrs. Croft, the tenant of the narrator became a widow and lost completely her sanity, reason and dignity. She had to be protected and cared for by her sons. She “refused to adjust to life without her husband; instead she sank deeper in to a world of darkness from which nothing could save her” (IM 187). Even as one hundred and thirty years old woman she hates having to depend on her daughter or anyone else. She has a passion for and involvement with life which makes her celebrate the landing of two Americans on the moon in 1969.
Mrs. Croft is contrasted with the narrator’s wife Mala who as a twenty-seven year-old bride missed her parents and wept after her marriage. When she arrives in America, Mrs. Croft called her a perfect woman after seeing her in the Indian sari. This compliment from Mr. Croft evokes a sympathy and love in his mind for his wife because until now he had an aversion to the idea of an arranged marriage. The speaker sees only their differences, whereas Mrs. Croft appreciates Mala’s grace and charm. The speaker’s ability to adjust to the situation is a human adaptation. He has discovered that the ability to feel at home no matter what country he lives in comes only from having a strong sense of self. The “ambition that had first hurled him across the world” (IM 197) is part of his ability to know himself and to recognize that the strength he gains from his origins is the ideal foundation on which to build a strong identity. The core of this story lies in his interactions with Mrs. Croft, which affected his own arranged but adjusted marriage, and his consciousness of the differences between Indian and American ways bring about a long and loving relationship with his wife, Mala. The main reason for his migration seems economic. The narrator gets an offer of a full time job in America in processing the apartment of a library at MIT.
Lahiri shows the marital relationships and different factors responsible for disharmony and discontent at different stages of relationships. The remarkable thing about these relationships is that in most cases the spouses are faithful towards each other and are not exceptionally mean or selfish. Happiness and dignity appear to lie in self-sufficiency and freedom from dependence on any man or any patriarchal institution like marriage and family. The narrator thinks that he and his wife became Americans but still attached to South Asian food and Indian tradition. The narrator wants his son to retain his Indian culture. Eating rice by hand and speaking Bengali are two important symbols in this story, which proved the original nationality is still important for the migrant. The narrator philosophically asserts that once adjustment was simply a figment or the imagination for him, and now he has become accustomed to changes in his life. This story expresses the narrator’s impulse to adjust in the new environment.

The next chapter focuses on presenting the story of Lahiri’s Namesake, and on identifying the shades of the key aspects of Indian diasporic womanism.