CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION
CHAPTER VI
CONCLUSION

6.1. GENERAL

Story telling as an art has been in existence since the creation of human beings. They have had a perennial and abiding interest through the ages. The appeal and interest that a story creates, cuts across all cultures and continents.

Jhumpa Lahiri's collection in the 'Interpreter of Maladies' is built on this ancient but engrossing act of story telling. She, born to Indian parents, but brought up in America, negotiates the dilemmas of cultural spaces lying across the continents - India and America - with a deft and masterly touch.

A book of art is an embodiment of an image of life and human actions. The spectrum of life presented is discerned by the reader or critic through an analysis, which brings out the experience (theme) and expression (language) of the aesthetic content. We always look at a building as a whole and appreciate its aesthetic design from the outside, before we delve deep to find out its design and pattern. Srinivasa Iyengar has pointed out
“The form of the building is the first thing that strikes us. We enter the building by and by, explore its nook and corners, gauge its beauties, mark its contours; and as we go away at last, our eyes linger lovingly on the building. We enrich our initial sweep of impression by scrutinizing the matter, the many details and end by contemplating its beauty and harmony.” (Indian Writing in English, Sterling Publishers, 1996, 208)

Jhumpa Lahiri’s ‘Interpreter of Maladies’ is a fine collection of nine short stories that takes us into the lives of Indian protagonists, natives as well as immigrants in America. It helps to explore the different aspects of human emotions. It depicts the alienation and loneliness of immigrants immersing themselves in two drastically different worlds. The focus is on human values in interpersonal relationship. In Shri Aurobindo’s words:

“Art is not only technique or form of beauty, not only the discovery or the expression of Beauty— it is a self-expression of Consciousness under the conditions of aesthetic vision and a perfect execution. Or, to put it otherwise, there are not only aesthetic values, but life values, mind values, soul values that enter into Art.” (Shri Aurobindo, 2000, 153)
It is this stress on human relationship that makes Art wholesome and Lahiri's art has triumphed in the sense that it contains souls which have social and psychological recognition.

In Lahiri's collection of short stories, the insignia of Indian ness pervades through all the stories. Emotional isolation, loneliness and a deep sense of remorse revealed in her characters are common traits found the world over. Individuals of different nations and cultures, who are forced to live in a foreign land due to various reasons, experience the malady of living in a totally different culture and situation. Lahiri has made a successful and excellent endeavor to interpret the hardships encountered by these people. With a remarkable insight she has delved deep into the psychological depths of her characters and exposed their mind through a fascinating style.

'Jhumpa Lahiri' stories contain souls who undergo stress and tribulations through several undulating and serpentine pathways, but attain the acme of social and psychological recognition. The human effort has been conquered, individually and collectively. Society has triumphed in her collection and attained so much of power and glory that it creates a kind of satisfaction in the minds of the reader. Srinivasa Iyengar in his book 'The Adventure of Criticism' (Apt Books, 1986, 16) writes:
The raw stuff of life undergoes a certain obscure process of transformation in the hands of the artist and becomes a last thing of beauty. But the ‘process’ is not everything. And, the beauty of ‘form’ that we see in the finished work of art is also not everything.

The following tabular column indicates the Experience and Expression in the stories:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Story</th>
<th>Experience</th>
<th>Expression</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A Temporary Matter</td>
<td>Marriage, disintegration</td>
<td>Reconciliation through simile and metaphor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When Mr. Prizada came to Dine</td>
<td>Integration of ethnic and cultural groups</td>
<td>Unification at the end.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpreter of Maladies</td>
<td>Crisis of Identity</td>
<td>Narrative technique</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. Sen’s</td>
<td>Inability to integrate to foreign life &amp; culture</td>
<td>Usage of objects to show reluctance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Real Durwan</td>
<td>Disintegration due to obsession with hereditary status</td>
<td>Situation stirs up total disintegration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This Blessed house</td>
<td>Clash of Personalities</td>
<td>Psychological study of relevance of family life.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Treatment of Bibi Haldar</td>
<td>Unhappiness &amp; discontentment leading to disintegration.</td>
<td>Integration through society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexy</td>
<td>Attempt to integrate to Indian culture</td>
<td>Descriptive style</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Third and Final Continent</td>
<td>Non integration due to custom of Indian arranged marriage</td>
<td>Serialized approach to ramification and integration to family</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

199
Lahiri’s ‘Interpreter of Maladies’ has a unifying design, incidents and narrative techniques that carry a direct relation to the revelation of three significant aspects; viz,

- Conflict and Resolution.
- Balancing of Characters and Events
- Non-Integration and Integration

6.2. Conflict and Resolution

The stories are a combination of conflict and resolution. The conflicts progress throughout the stories, but eventually arrive at a resolution. Two types of conflicts are exposed through the collection: The External and the Internal. In the external conflict the character encounters an outside obstacle, while the internal conflict is one which the character experiences within him/her.

In the story ‘A Temporary Matter’, the conflict is between the main characters, the couple, Shoba and Shukumar. They feel that each one is unimportant for the other, especially after the birth of their still born child. The darkness of the power cut becomes a pretext for discovering their latent, sub-conscious fears, anxieties and secrets. But they discover the fragile nature of their relationship during a series of harmless little games around dinner time. Although incidents related to their conflict are narrated
sequentially, what becomes significant is the reconciliation towards the end when each one confides to the other about unknown things. This helps them to re-establish their love and faith and conjugality is revived and thus terminates the void that occurred at the beginning of the story. Their reconciliation is brought about both physically and mentally and such a situation is described by Luise Eichenbaum and Susie Orbach in ‘What Do Women Want’ (1985, 56) as:

“In love and in sex there are many unconscious factors that lie beneath the surface that motivate us in ways, which, if examined, would seem to have little to do with ‘healthy’ loving impulses. But in love and love making, there is a process of repair to the low self-esteem and sense of self that so many people suffer. For ‘being loved’ allows us to see and experience ourselves differently. We are taking in the love that another is giving (even if he or she may be giving in part of narcissistic needs.) This love can enter into the well of longing or emptiness that lives deep inside of us. It can feed us in profoundly important ways and transform deeply held images of unconnectedness”.

Here Lahri has used the indirect method to show that the reconciliation has been brought about in the family life. She has used
suggestive hints to show that the story has ended on a happy note. This is implied in the following lines:

“Shoba had turned the lights off. She came back to the table and sat down, and after a moment Shukumar joined her. They wept together for the things they now knew”. (6)

Thus the reader understands the situation and emotional status by himself / herself.

‘When Mr.Pirzada Came to Dine’ is the story in which the inner conflict of the protagonist is well brought out. He pines for his family in a war torn nation and is worried about their welfare. He seeks a temporary solace in the little girl, Lilia, the daughter of his family friend. He overcomes the conflict by helping the family in their routine chores, as well as the concern he shows towards the little girl, imagining her to be one of his own daughters.

The conflict in the story ‘Interpreter of Maladies’ is not revealed at the beginning of the story itself. Instead it occurs almost in the middle. The family of Mr.Das is on a tour to the Sun temple, there seems to be slight bickering between Mrs. and Mr.Das. This creates a sudden interest
for Mrs. Das in Kapasi. He imagines romantic possibilities with her. He explains to her his role as an interpreter to a doctor. The conflict occurs when Mrs. Das confesses to Mr. Kapasi of her illegitimate and momentary sexual involvement with a friend of Mr. Das, the result being one of her children. The resolution is brought about when she seeks a remedy for this internal psychological problem from Mr. Kapasi. By seeking his advice, she feels that she would be able to repair the damage caused to the family life and thus overcome her personal guilt.

Boori Ma’s story of the ‘A Real Durwan’ is a classic example of the expression of expatriate sentiments. Since she has moved in from another place, there is an immediate conflict between her and the occupants of a multi-storied building. As an expatriate she feels the loneliness and wants to satisfy herself mentally by recalling her luxurious past:

A man came to pick our dates and guavas. Another clipped hibiscus.

Yes, there I tasted life. (71)

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. (71)
Boori Ma is an example of the neglected, love-pining self who is stifled by the psychic atrocities of her own countrymen. She is intertwined in the chaos of expatriate dilemmas which is an inner conflict that she maintains in her mind. She remains an alienated character who is neglected totally by a social group. This state of affairs, coupled with her physical decay culminates in a disaster, when she is accused of conniving with the robbers in the alley, for the theft of the wash basins. Through the resolution, she experiences a cultural shock, along with the reader.

The cross-cultural conflict is the background theme on which the story 'Sexy' is based. The story is built around the western and Indian cultural perspective. Miranda is the comely protagonist who is excited to taste youthful love with a married Indian. She is portrayed as a pulsating sexual being, head over heals in love with Dev. Lahiri introduces her thus:

“She had silver eyes and skin as pale as paper, and the contrast with her hair, as dark and glossy as an espresso bean, caused people to describe as striking, if not pretty. She had a narrow egg-shaped head that rose to a prominent point; her features too were narrow, with nostrils so slim that they appeared to have been pinched with a clothespin. Now her face glowed, rosy at the cheeks, smoky below the brow bon. Her lips glistened”. (87)
But domestically she finds herself to be in an alien world. Her understanding of the meaning of ‘sexy’ through the young boy builds up the conflict, whereby she decides to avoid Dev so that he would re-adapt himself to the filial warmth.


Every story must have some action, but for a worthwhile story it must be ‘significant’ action. The main character may be pitted against some person or group of persons, he may be in conflict with some external force—physical nature, society or man against environment. Or he may be in conflict with some element in his own nature. The conflict may be physical, mental, emotional or moral.

In the case of Miranda, the conflict is physical, mental and emotional. She has a division within herself, between Dev and his wife and thus realizes her folly. The conflict is physical when she decides to let Dev reunite with his wife and family. The reconciliation is brought about thus.

External conflict is the basis on which ‘This Blessed House’ is built. The newly married immigrants are greeted by quaint discoveries in the form
of effigies of Christ around their new home. The conflict arises between the couple. When Christ enters into their conjugal life, Twinkle, the wife is thrilled and she is ready to accept them as sacred air prevailing in the house. But Sanjeev is unable to digest this as his religious pride does not allow him to do so. Therefore through the conflict, considerable thrill, enough disappointment and much curiosity is aroused. The same icons help to bring about their reunion at the end of the story.

‘The Treatment of Bibi Haldar’ is the story of a woman whose ailment “baffled family, friends, priests, palmists, spinsters, gem therapists, prophets and fools.” (158).

All kinds of treatment were of no avail. She represented the misery of marriageable girls who were denied that bliss, because of the family members who shirked that responsibility. This leads her to an inner conflict whereby she communicates her emotional pain to those in the neighborhood. Her desolation was taken note of by her friends and neighbors who came to her rescue by beautifying her.

“She was determined to lure a man”. (167)

This internal conflict gets resolved towards the end with an unconventional incident. Bibi, even without marriage, delivers a baby and
The child now becomes her sole aspect of sustenance of her life. This child is the solace into which the conflict moves and it structures her further life. The change is described as follows:

"She raised the boy and ran a business in the storage room, and we did what we could to help. For years afterward, we wondered who in our town had disgraced her. A few of our servants were questioned, and in tea stalls and bus stand, possible suspects were debated and dismissed. But there was no point in carrying out an investigation. She was to the best of our knowledge, cured". (172)

The story is a celebration of humanitarian aspect. Although fate had been cruel to Bibi Haldar, she endeavors through the whole strife and becomes settled with life. The quirk of circumstances brings in a myriad of changes in her that she transforms from a destitute being to that of an industrious, affable and loving individual.

The story ends on a happy note with the flow of transcendental experience. Here Lahiri has exhibited her pure individuality by her superbly impressive, captivating style of narration and writing.

The last story in the collection, 'The Third and Final Continent' is an exposure of immigrant life in the west, but Lahiri in her inimitable style has
brought out the theme of how it transcends all geographical boundaries. The protagonist is the tenant of an old lady who is patriotically proud about the American’s landing on the moon. Later on in the story, he takes his wife, on her arrival from India, to visit the old lady in order to show her his respect and adoration for the old lady, Mrs. Croft. The cultural marks on Mala’s personality impress the old lady, who labels her a ‘perfect lady’, which the narrator feels to be a treasure of a reward.

Here the conflict lies in the acceptance of global living by both the husband and the wife. Although the narrator first arrives alone in America, after having been in several other continents, the conflict of his mind gets resolved when he meets the very amiable Mrs. Croft, who recognizes his individuality and accepts the cultural variations after the arrival of Mala. Thus this story transcends geographical and cultural hurdles and brings about the resolution in mutual respect and global living. This is well brought out by Lahiri in the following lines:

'I know that my achievement is quite ordinary. I am not the only man to seek his fortune far from home, and certainly, I am not the first. Still there are times I am bewildered by each mile I have traveled, each meal I have eaten, each person I have known, each room in which I have slept.’ (198)
6.3. Balancing of Characters and Events

Lahiri's collection features seemingly diverse and unrelated characters, uncommon locale, which transcends national boundaries. But the stories are weaved through an intricate pattern such that the fabric is attractive and colorful. The stories are bound together by the recurring themes of the barriers and opportunities for interpersonal communication, societal living, marital and extra-marital life, the family relationship and the dichotomy of integration and disintegration. In the stories she reveals to us that there is a tradition in all of us that at the most opportune time clicks us into choices and behaviors that we are incompetent to handle. This seems to be the crux of the analogous tension that people find when reading ethnic literature. Although the diversity and individuality of any ethnic group is revealed, the logical representation implies that a work depicting a part of a community would 'represent' the whole.

'Interpreter of Maladies' works towards solving the problem of bringing about bits and pieces of ethnic life, especially that of an entire community (Indians in America) within the limitations of a single work, by especially balancing a variety of representations as indicated below.
Lahiri has also balanced the plots of the stories, which is evident from a comparative reading of the stories. The first story in the collection, ‘A Temporary Matter’ deals with the possible destruction of the marriage of Shoba and Shukumar, due to the death of their child. But this plot is balanced in the last story, ‘The Third and Final Continent’. It provides the tale of a couple who initially has reservations about each other, care for their only child with much of love and affection. The final story emphasizes on the need for mutual love and respect between couples. Although Mala and her husband had traveled across several continents, they settle down in America for the sake of their only son and their experiences are their achievements.
In the story, ‘When Mr.Pirzada came to dine’, Mr.Prizada’s involvement with the Indian family in America is well brought out. He wishes to learn about Indian culture and rituals. This is balanced through the character of Mrs.Croft in ‘The Third and Final Continent’. She is proud about the achievement of America, which puts man on the moon.

Although several comparisons are possible between the stories, namely ‘A Real Durwan’ and ‘The Treatment of Bibi Haldar’, the plots of the stories are balanced through the role of society. The community neglects and expels Boori Ma in the earlier story, but the same society comes to the help of a destitute Bibi Haldar in the latter.

The American immigrant tries to learn about Indian culture and customs in ‘Sexy’, but finding that it is difficult to adhere to minute details she finally gives up her Indian paramour. This nature is balanced in ‘This Blessed House’ where although the couple find Christian paraphernalia strewn around their dwelling, and have bickering between them due to that, they finally reconcile to American life. Thus the basic plots are balanced.

In ‘Mrs.Sens’, the protagonist is totally unhappy with her life in America and is unable to settle down, being obsessed with the thoughts of
India, her homeland, in spite of all comforts. But this plot is balanced in the story, ‘Interpreter of Maladies’, wherein the Indian family from America is able to learn more about the Indian life and carry back indelible memories of India. The balancing of these experiences of integration and non-integration is the focus of the collection.

A reader would base his/her interpretation on a work of art through his/her understanding of a particular demographic unit. But in the process it is possible that sometimes the part and the whole theme are obscured by one’s own reading. In the case of short stories, this works to the advantage as in the case of ‘Interpreter of Maladies’, wherein the genre works towards the variety of representations and interlinking them to represent a basic plot structure and that of an entire community. Lahiri’s success lies in this construction.

Scholars have identified many common themes among the stories, which often focus on the sense of displacement due to the immigrant experience. A sense of exile and the potential for and frequent denial of human communication can be found in all the stories of her collection along with the defining, structuring elements of her short story cycle. It is with this commonality of themes that Lahiri has carved a niche for herself as a short story writer.
6.4. Integration and Non-Integration

All nine stories deal with the theme of Integration and Non-integration. This is represented distinctly in the collection through evidences of extreme care and neglect. Repetitions of this dichotomy do occur frequently without sparing a variety of communities, marital and extramarital relationships as well as children and adults. It is portrayed as a period of significant tension, a permanent flaw, a human failure etc. The cause of integration is the care which is linked to love, duty and responsibility. Non-integration is the offshoot of mostly homesickness. These help to focus on the character’s emotional states and processes.

In the first story, ‘A Temporary Matter’, the description of the woman arriving home from office is itself an example of carelessness.

‘Shoba let the strap of her leather satchel-----slip from her shoulders, and left it in the hallway’. (1)

On further reading one comes across the description cited below:

She looks ‘like the type of woman she’d once claimed she would never resemble’, namely one who came home in gym clothes and with her make-up either rubbed off or smeared. (1)
This helps the reader realize that a dramatic change has come over the woman once noted for her physical beauty who was careful and precision conscious in all things. It is her husband who puts her things away later but he himself seems to be marked by personal neglect and non-integration into the family life:

He ran his tongue over the tops of his teeth; he had forgotten to brush them that morning and had been lying in bed and avoiding work on his dissertation or even leaving his home. (2)

The couple becomes much estranged after the birth of their still born child that they start neglecting each other. This is exposed through minor incidents such as their failure to water a plant. Their mutual trust and love seemed to wane:

‘Now he had to struggle to say something that interested her, something that made her look up from her plate or from her proof reading files’ (16).

Lahiri has brought out the state of shock and the disintegration of the couple. But the integration in the story is brought about by the revelation of
the couple during the time of power cut, and thus their separation emotionally remains only a temporary matter.

In the story ‘When Mr. Pirzada came to Dine’, the Indian family is quite empathetic to the emotionally disturbed state of their friend, Mr. Pirzada, who is worried over the welfare of his family in the war torn city in Bangladesh. His love and affection for the child, Lilia, is a source of solace for him. He also integrates with their family life by taking part in certain Indian religious rituals. His carving of the jack-o-lantern is an example:

“first go around the top, like this”, I instructed demonstrating with my index finger. (35)

This story is thus a classic example of integration and Lahiri reveals that even though people belong to different nations, their emotions are same and mutual trust and love will help humanity prosper.

‘Interpreter of Maladies’ is a story that describes the discord of a couple, Mrs. and Mr. Das and the revelation of the woman about her extramarital relationship. The story itself begins with bickering over the care of their child. As the story progresses, one finds that small signs of neglect lead to deeper emotional detachments. The couple takes care of their
children but their family life remains estranged, although they remain a family. Moreover, Mr. Kapasi’s dream of ‘serving as an interpreter between nations’ is shattered, when the paper with his address, handed over to Mrs. Das, is very carelessly thrown off into the wind. This reveals that his dream of integrating globally is destroyed, along with his family life and fantasy.

The culmination of non-integration is the story of the title character in ‘Mrs. Sen’s’. Here, in sharp contrast to ‘Interpreter of Maladies’ or ‘A Temporary Matter’, Mrs. Sen, a baby sitter, takes care of her ward, her husband and the family life. She always reminisces about the life in India and has a total disregard for her American way of life.

Here in this place where Mr. Sen has brought me, I cannot sometimes sleep in total silence. (115)

Mrs. Sen is always homesick and always compares life at home in India and that of in America. She wants to lead a community life in America also. Her desire to learn driving is the metaphor used to reveal her difficulties to integrate herself into the life in America. When others driving along with her on American roads view the other vehicles as mere scenery and negotiate with ease, Mrs. Sen is hyper conscious of the existence of other things on the street. She is therefore, unable to perform in such a way
as to mingle with others. In domestic life also she is never at home in America and criticizes the compartmental living there:

“Eliot, if I began to scream right now at the top of my lungs, would someone come?”

“At home that is all you have to do. Not everybody has a telephone. But just raise your voice a bit, or express grief or joy of any kind, and one whole neighborhood and half of another has come to share the news, to help with the arrangements”. (116)

At the end of the story a minor car accident results in the termination of the limited community life she had with Eliot and his family.

Two stories set in India, namely ‘A Real Durwan’ and ‘The Treatment of Bibi Haidar’ deal with the theme of community as a source of integration as well as disintegration. Lahiri deviates from her usual style of using a third person narrative. These stories depict characters who manage to suffer through and survive extreme adversity. Here the community has a significant and indispensable role to play as any other single character. The community is more the protagonist than the individual characters themselves.
Boori Ma is a ‘real durwan’ or doorwoman of an apartment in Calcutta. Her duty consciousness is revealed in the lines:

maintained a vigil no less punctilious than if she were the gatekeeper of a house on Lower Circular Road or Jodhpur Park, or any other fancy neighborhood. (73)

She is introduced as inspecting her tattered bedding for insects before retiring to bed. A resident sympathizes with her and asks “Do you think it is beyond us to provide you with clean quilts?” (75)

These statements expose the fact that the community around her is ready to absorb her in spite of her social status. But as the story progresses, it is found that the neighbourhood turns hostile. The people in the apartments are in the process of a renovation spree of their apartments. This proves detrimental to Boori Ma. She is accused of conniving with the thieves and responsible for the loss of a wash basin. Whatever good she has done to the neighborhood and the community around, seems to wane in their memory and the result is that she is thrown out of the building. She loses even her paltry saving and keys and becomes totally destitute. The sink here is the source of disintegration. The preoccupation of the community in something very petty shows the nature of disintegration.
In stark contrast to the role played by the community in the above story, its very helpful and Good Samaritan nature is exposed in the story ‘The Treatment of Bibi Haldar’. Here the story is narrated through “a group of women with no particular identity”. The role of the community is inevitably emphasized by the first person narrative. Unlike the neighbors in ‘A Real Durwan’, here the community is able to absorb and remains responsible to a fellow member, thus integrating itself with the individual and vice-versa.

In this story the community is concerned over the welfare of an individual and takes turn in feeding, clothing, teaching and taking care of Bibi. The array of “family, friends, priests, palmists, spinsters, gem therapists, prophets and fools, as well as other concerned members of our town” (158) is ample testimony to the fact that the individual and the community integrate very well.

After the death of Bibi’s father, she is left in the care of her cousin Haldar and his wife. She begins to yearn for marriage. The ill treatment meted out to her by the family, brings in her integration with the neighborhood and the community as a whole. This is revealed in the lines:
"At every opportunity— reminded her that we surrounded her, that she could come to us if she ever needed advice or aid of any kind".

(171)

Meanwhile they drive away Bibi’s cousin who seems to be hostile to her, by boycotting his cosmetic shop. But when the community leaves her to herself at night, she is eventually found to be pregnant. This brings about a total metamorphosis in her and with the integration of the community; she gives birth to a child. The integration makes her a capable, self supporting business woman who with the help of the community is able to take care of her child also.

The above stories are in a contrast between them, as in ‘A Real Durwan’, the community neglects and are unable to integrate the individual, whereas in ‘The Treatment of Bibi Haldar’, the community aids the destitute in every possible way. Thus Lahiri through her narration has brought out the theme of disintegration and integration to be exposed skillfully.

Disintegration occupies the beginning of the story in ‘This Blessed House’. The couple in America, Sanjeev and Twinkle, quarrel over petty
reasons. She is interested in antics of Christ’s found around the house, while Sanjeev is more religion biased and is unable to accept her approach.

He hated its immensity, and its flawless, polished surface, and its undeniable value. He hated that it was in his house, and that he owned it. Unlike the other things they’d found, this contained dignity, solemnity, beauty even. But to his surprise, these qualities made him hate it all the more. Most of all he hated it because he knew that Twinkle loved it. (157)

The integration over minor wrangling is brought about by the realization that his friends instill in him. They make him realize his wife’s objective value, which he had earlier failed to appreciate.

The closing of the story is the reconciliation brought about in the couple. Sanjeev carries the silver bust of Christ to the living room where Twinkle had intended it to be placed. The last few lines and this act of Sanjeev make the reader understand that the couple have reconciled.

In the end we find him carrying the bust of Christ “careful not to let the feather hat slip” from the statue and following his wife. This indicates the eventual reconciliation brought about in the couple and Sanjeev’s
following of Twinkle shows his resolve to lead a more spontaneous and playful life with her.

6.5. Lahiri’s Creative Potential

A short story writer is a miniature artist. He/She does not use sweeping bold strokes on a vast canvas. The strokes are precise, deft and intricate. The holistic perfection is brought about by focusing on the trivial and insignificant details. Lahiri has achieved this perfection of a true miniaturist by straddling across the two continents, India and America with enviable ease, and bringing out their respective flavors. Her manner and diction adhere to the distinct marks of a short story writer. Her characterization is sharply defined that she carries the reader along with the story.

Simplicity has been her forte and her stories create an endearing interest. Lahiri negotiates the predicaments of Indians who trapeze between two traditions: one inherited, but left behind; the other encountered but not properly assimilated. This cultural dislocation is interwoven in the stories without any superimposition of character, action etc. She has succeeded in this art through her intricate handling of its nuances and manifestations.
Exile is built around inbuilt diffidence and ambivalence. It is not only a sense of not belonging, made up of a physical or geographical fact. The situation is itself inherent and the cultural dilemma has to be picturized with such a fine tune and sensitiveness. Lahiri has succeeded in this mission with a skillful ease.

Lahiri has cited examples from her own birth and migration to America with her parents. Her parent’s preoccupations and the resultant dislocation are brought out precisely in the story ‘When Mr. Pirzada came to Dine’. The protagonist, Lilia, a girl of 11, is intrigued by a visitor to their house, whose watch is set to the corresponding time in Bangladesh. But her parents feel the dislocation from their native land and search for compatriots by trailing

“their fingers at the start of new semester, through the columns of the university directory, circling surnames familiar to their part of the world”. (24)

The little girl is unaware of the significance of a war and its negative impact on lives. She is also not worried of the difference between religions and the rituals connected with it.
In contrast, Mr. Pirzada, though is worried about the welfare of his family in war-stricken Bangladesh, participates in the rituals of Hindus by helping the family with the preparation for the celebrations. The following bring out the contrast clearly:

"Mr. Pirzada is a Bengali, but he is a Muslim", my father informed me.
"Therefore, he lives in East Pakistan, not India."
"As you see Lilia, it is a different country", (26)

In contrast Mr. Pirzada’s involvement is:

"You make a jack-o-lantern", I said grinning ferociously.
"Like this, to scare away people"
"Yes, let’s carve it", Mr. Pirzada agreed. (27)

Lahiri has thus brought about the sense of dislocation and its impact lucidly. The story of Boori Ma in ‘A Real Durwan” is engrossing, because it creates empathy in the reader. The theme of dislocation is well brought out.

In this story, Boori Ma stays but does not belong. She is a sweeper of the stairwell in an old Calcutta building. Lahiri creates sympathy in the reader at the beginning of the story itself by graphically bringing out the pathos of her situation.
As she started up the four flights of the roof, Boori Ma kept one hand placed over her knee that swelled at the start of every rainy season. That meant that her bucket, quilts, and the bundle of reeds which served as the broom all had to be braced under one arm. (70)

In spite of her pitiable health, she always chronicled her earlier true or untrue aristocratic life. At least twice in a day she used to enumerate the details of her plight and losses suffered since her deportation to Calcutta after partition of Pakistan. Lahiri here narrates the pathetic life of Boori Ma as crouched instead in doorways and hallways and observing gestures and manners in the same way a person tends to watch traffic in a foreign city. (76)

She is accused of theft and is thrown out of the building by the residents. Lahiri has not used any dramatic statements, or philosophical theorizing to emphasize the feeling of dislocation of Boori Ma. Linguistic gyrations or efforts are not there to impress, subdue or awe the reader in this empathy. Irony laced with empathy runs throughout the narration. This is
where Lahiri has succeeded with a rare sense of objectivity and with lack of intrusiveness.

In Lahiri’s stories the situations speak for themselves. She prefers to ‘show’ rather than ‘tell’ the story. This allows the reader to enjoy a tremendous amount of autonomy and freedom to interpret.

Lahiri’s charm and dexterity of story telling is best revealed in ‘Interpreter of Maladies’. The interlude between Mina Das and Kapasi is a classic example of Lahiri’s style of narration. Mr. Kapasi, a tourist guide and a polyglot who interprets the maladies of the patients to a doctor in order to relieve them of their suffering, turns a priest while taking the family of Mrs. Das around the Konark temple. She has been bearing the cross of her pain of transgression and infidelity. Lahiri, here, has created a kind of ritualistic atmosphere of church confession. It takes place against the backdrop of imposing monastery. The description of how the self absorbed Mrs. Das marches on ahead, regardless and unmindful of monkeys posing a threat to her illegitimate son, and how the family looked as if “they were all siblings” is very well portrayed.

The manner in which Lahiri switches viewpoints with consummate ease is enviable. She creates a mosaic of shifting terrain with her narratives.
This is best brought out in the story ‘Sexy’, wherein a mid-western girl falls in love with a married Indian, without being aware of his marital status. The protagonist, Miranda, has hallucinations of her childhood memory of Goddess Kali. But these trepidations do not deter her from her love for the Indian. She dreams of her romantic moments in India among deserts, elephants, marble pavilions floating on lakes beneath the full moon. This transformation is deftly handled by Lahiri through her style of narration.

The theme of ‘exile’ is also examined minutely in ‘Mrs.Sen’s’ from the viewpoint of the majority culture. Here Mrs.Sen, a baby sitter, is exposed through the eyes of an 11 year old left in her charge. She feels lonely in her new environment in America, although people at home in India think that she ‘lives the life of a queen in a palace’. Lahiri explains and has well brought out the pathos of loneliness of Mrs. Sen through her description. This is depicted through the manner in which Mrs.Sen waits for letters from relatives in India, plays cassettes of people talking in her language and nostalgic moments in India. She refuses to learn car driving to keep her job and this symbolic gesture of resistance is ample testimony to her basic aversion to adapt to her new life. Lahiri has succeeded through her symbolism here.

Lahiri has used symbolism in such a deft manner in the story ‘The Third and Final Continent’ to bring out importance of Indian culture
and its ability to withstand the times. It is through the eyes of the 103 year landlady in America, whom he admires, does the protagonist realize the greatness of Indian culture. When Mrs. Croft dubbed his wife Mala as a ‘perfect lady’, he recognizes the importance of Indian culture. He then felt a strange closeness to her and discovered the magic of love, in contrast to his earlier notion of ‘arranged marriage’ as something that lacks concern and enthusiasm.

He is able to see the same ambition that had hurled him across the world, later in his son.

“Whenever he is discouraged, I tell him that if I can survive on three continents, then there is no obstacle he cannot conquer. While the astronauts, heroes for ever, spent mere hours on the moon, I have remained in this new world for nearly thirty years. I know that my achievement is quite ordinary. I’m not the only man to seek his fortune far from home, and certainly I’m not the first. Still, there are times, I am bewildered by each mile I have traveled, each person I have known, each room I have slept. As ordinary as it all appears, there are times when it’s beyond my imagination”. (198)

Thus, be it the tragedy of Bibi, the enthusiasm of Boori Ma, the poignancy of Mrs. Sen, Lahiri’s characters are flesh and blood who can
move the reader to tears or make them smile. Reading her is like discovering the truth behind the words of her character. Reality is maintained in the story through her narration, but simultaneously, it never fails to excite the imagination of the reader. The reader is bewitched in such a manner that it is difficult to believe and one wonders whether such gripping and memorable tales can be cast with just ordinary mundane lives. India and its culture reverberate throughout all the nine resonant stories.

Lahiri has been successful through her inimitable style and her knowledge of both Indian and American cultures to provide a kaleidoscopic view of the characters adjustment to new circumstances, relationships and cultures. They bring out moving tales, pictures of cultural shock and displaced identity. Her writing is delicate but assured. These stories have all the force and assurance of art. They easily amaze the reader with both the acuity of language and its deep analysis of the human heart. She has achieved this not just by her eloquence but by her spectacular ability to portray unassuming characters and for making stories featuring these same characters remarkably suspenseful. Her crystalline writing naturally dazzles as these lines of two different stories 'Mrs.Sen’s' and 'The Treatment of Bibi Haldar' indicate:

'Instead of a knife she used a blade that curved like the prow of a Viking ship traveling to distant seas. The blade was hinged at one
end to a narrow wooden base. The steel, more black than silver, lacked a uniform polish and had a serrated crest, she told Eliot, for grating'. (114)

and

‘For the greater number of twenty-nine years, Bibi Haldar suffered from an ailment that baffled, family, friends, priests, palmists, spinsters, gem therapists, prophets and fools. (158)

These sensitive explorations of the lives of Indian immigrants and expatriates touch on universal themes, making them once specific but simultaneously broad in their appeal. Here the reader is easily able to comprehend the ironic points the author is making.

The hint of melody in this collection is best brought out through certain examples of her writing as indicated below:

‘They served themselves, stirring the rice with their forks, squinting as they extracted bay leaves and cloves from the stew.’ (11), from the story ‘A Temporary Matter’.

She disregarded him, shaking the little plastic dome so that the snow swirled over the manger’ (138) from ‘This Blessed House’.
‘The Interpreter of Maladies’ thus bears the insignia of Indian culture but with universal relevance. Lahiri’s endeavor to interpret the maladies of the minds of people through realization of their flaws is a very successful attempt. With remarkable deftness she has delved deep into the psychological depths of the characters and narrates their inner world and heart through her simple style. It has more universal reality and is a potent medicine to the maladies of society.

Lahiri’s stories are simple with ordinary commonplace characters, a myriad of thoughts and lucid plots. The focus on real situations, emphasizing the varied experiences of life is the hallmark of her writing. The stories are integrated with irony, pathos, flashbacks, fantasies etc. revealed through an omniscient narrator in most cases, through well chiseled dialogues. She has thus successfully exposed the most transient of relationships that offer a hope of fostering individual understanding, an understanding of what it is to be unique and of what it is to be part of the human collective with her deft workmanship. The stories do churn out Lahiri’s appetite for Indian culture in a foreign setting. The cultural displacement that is explored reveal her acutely wider implications, however. They serve as an ‘index of a more existential sense of dislocation’. She has achieved this by investing an emotional depth in her stories. Lahiri writes with deft cultural insight and nuanced depth. With an
undeniably fine talent, her choice of words, the selection of details to emphasize and the clarity of her authorial voice, she has established herself as a new and powerful writer.

The remarkable discovery one makes in this collection definitely synchronize with the view of John Arthos who in his essay ‘On the Validity of the idea of Self’ (2003, vol.89. No.41) asserts:

“We credit all uniqueness, not abandoning our knowledge and honoring of this even when communication is most satisfactory. We recognize ourselves in others, persons in life or in fiction. The fictions are the shadows of their authors much as we are of our friends, shadows cast by the light of others’ minds, sharing something that is invaluable to us in coming to know ourselves, and yet not all. Socrates explained to Alcibiades that as the eye, in order to see itself, looks into another eye so that soul that is to know itself must look upon another soul.”

Lahiri’s collection of ‘An Interpreter of Maladies’ is thus in her own words as used in one of her stories

“The last word in elegance” (79)