CHAPTER – III

CHARACTERIZATION
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3.1. GENERAL

The dynamics of characterization is an important aspect of a writer's art. At the outset of stories, some leading figures are projected with certain potentialities. This is followed by the illumination or delineation of characters, depending upon the influence of other people or their experiences with the circumstances. The writer traces the moral growth or deterioration of his/her characters. The reader and the critic enjoy the immense freedom to follow the growth and changes of the characters in the course of progress of the story. The chief aim of the writer is to present characters from real life situations with whom the reader is familiar. The successful story writer has power to describe vividly, graphically and make the reader understand the peculiarities and behaviour of the characters. The writer may adopt either the direct analytical or the indirect dramatic method to present the characters and their psychology. In the former, their passions, motives, thoughts, feelings are dissected and commented upon. In the latter, the writer stands apart and allows the characters to reveal themselves through their dialogues and action as well as the comments of other characters in the story. Sometimes, a combination of both these methods is adopted.
3.2. EXISTENCE OF CHARACTER AND THEORETICAL CONSTRAINTS

Literary critics have always been anxious about the manner in which a character is said to have been portrayed. There are two schools of thought in this. They are called the 'purists' and the 'realists' respectively. The argument of the purists is that the characters do not exist at all except insofar as they are a part of the images and events which bear and move them. So, any attempt to view them out of their context and make discussions is a sentimental misunderstanding. On the other hand, the 'realists' opine that characters are totally independent of the course of an action and therefore they can be discussed outside their context. The 'realists' view the characters as part and parcel of real life situations and imitations of people who are like one's neighbours and friends, thus abstracting them from the verbal texture of the text. This gives room for analyzing the characters unconscious motives, past and future, from the psychological point of view. In a text, characters are nodes in the verbal design, in the story they are by definition pre-verbal abstractions, constructs. They may not be human beings in the real literal sense of the word, but they are modeled on the conception of people. Similarly in the text, characters are inextricable from the rest of the design, whereas in the story they are extracted from their textuality. (Weinsheimer, 1979, P.195)
3.3. CHARACTERIZATION IN SHORT STORIES

Characters in short stories play a significant role either in the development of the plot or they create an atmosphere where in the reader is able to pick up threads to understand the fitness of the characters to the story. The writer sets his/her mind on the revelation of the deeper chords of human consciousness. A character may not be portrayed merely on the basis of external personality such as the habits, manners, physical appearances, etc., or on the basis of actions of the person, but on the basis of the inner self.

3.4. TWO TYPES OF STORIES

Jhumpa Lahiri has utilized two types of writing to drive home the message of the struggle for assimilation of the Indians in an alien land. Her stories can be broadly divided into

1. Stories in which the Situations dominate.

2. Stories in which Characters dominate.

The collection of stories can be grouped as above:

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3.4.1. Stories in which SITUATIONS dominate

The situations in the stories range from mere household and domestic preoccupations to inter-continental affairs. The theme of assimilation and reconciliation after certain misgivings and misunderstandings predominates the stories. Apart from the family members, the society around is also given due focus and thereby the situations in the stories are felt to be dominating.

In the story ‘A Temporary Matter’, Lahiri has used the prop of electricity (the situation) to bring a reconciliation between an estranged couple.

In ‘When Mr.Pirzada came to Dine’, Lahiri has beautifully brought out the desperation and separation pangs of the characters through the situation of a father who is worried over the well being of his family during the time of war in his native land, while he is away in a foreign land eking out his living.

In ‘The Treatment of Bibi Halder’, the society involved helps an epileptic woman find a cure for her ailment. In this story too, the situation of the woman trying to find a remedy dominates.
‘This Blessed House’ is the story wherein the situation of a young couple who clash over a petty issue of finding Christian paraphernalia all over their new house, reconcile in the end through the same icons.

It is therefore clear that situations dominate in the above stories. These stories end on the positive note of the search for integration.

3.4.2. Stories in which CHARACTER dominates

In the other stories, it is the character which wholly predominates the plot. Certain characteristic traits are revealed through certain passages. The whole story revolves around such characters.

In the title story, ‘Interpreter of Maladies’, the main character, Kapasi, a tour-guide as well as an interpreter at a doctor’s clinic, comes out with his story of his marriage being on the rocks and tries to find solace in a woman who has come on tour with her family, but becomes a victim of infidelity herself.

The nostalgic moments of her past, the woes and sufferings of her present life and her reconciliation to her life as a sweeper, form the basis of the story of ‘A Real Durwan’, which is built around its protagonist, Boori Ma. She expresses the sufferings encountered by her since she was
deported to Calcutta. She is entrusted the security of a household, but her failure to stop an anonymous theft leaves her a victim and finally she is thrown out of the house.

In ‘Sexy’, the Indian girl in the US, who falls in love with a married Indian, wishes to familiarize herself with the Indian culture. Her various emotions of joy, scepticism and grief permeate throughout the story and thus this story becomes ‘character centric’.

In ‘Mrs.Sen’s’, the title character is pre-occupied with the thoughts of her native land and thus the reader is able to delve deep into her frustration, isolation and homesickness of this character.

‘The Third and Final Continent’ is the story of an Indian immigrant who with his aversion to arranged marriages is reconciled to a loving and everlasting relationship with his wife in the end. His reminiscences of his bachelor life as a student of an American University and his acquaintance with a very old house lady helps him to change his idea of an arranged marriage and he develops sympathy and love for his wife acquired through a customary arranged wedlock.
Although there is dichotomy in the manner in which the plot is constructed in the stories using the situation on the one hand and the characters on the other, the dominating theme remains to be the alienation and loneliness experienced by expatriates. A review of the characters helps the reader to have an insight into the Indo-American life and appreciate the Indian culture as well.

3.5. CHARACTERIZATION IN THE ‘INTERPRETER OF MALADIES’

It is through portrayal of characters that the struggle for assimilation and its framework is projected. From the narrative point of view, the central action of the collection is interwoven with the plot. The social, moral and personal implications of the problem are delineated along with the characters. The stories are a probing into the minds of the characters and their feelings of cultural displacement. The chief aim is to draw the attention of the reader to the theme of assimilation. The narration helps to provide information in bits and pieces about the theme. At the end it is the experience of a class that comes through the connected incidents, its effect on everyone and their emotions and relationships etc., that are brought about. Lahiri’s characters are individuals located within a framework of a larger kind. Thus when we consider some as protagonists, scapegoats, etc., still they contribute to the whole as parts of the plot or meaning of the work.
Through her characters Lahiri has portrayed the theme of assimilation and cultural variations excellently.

3.6. GALLERY OF PORTRAITS

There are many ways in which a narrative artist can project the psyche of the characters. The simplest way of presenting the inward life of the characters is through direct narrative statements. One way in which the characterization can be appreciated is by examining the passages which describe the great moments of the characters and the instances of a character wrestling with his/her personal problems. The author can bring tremendous pressure of pathos to a focal point through particular expressions: Lahiri, for example, has used the following few lines to drive home the focal point of pathos:

"Could I drive all the way to Calcutta? How long would that take, Eliot? Ten thousand miles, at fifty miles per hour?" (119)

and

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)
The narrative consists mostly of immigrants settled in America. They consist of people of different status, from a scholar to a maid servant. Lahiri has, with her deftness, balanced the situations and the characters to bring home to the reader the theme of cultural identification.

A cursory glance through the stories reveal with elegance that Lahiri’s characters are vignettes from the lives of mostly undimensional people. Her characters reflect different status and nature, and play multiple roles.

Characterization in this collection can be presented under the following categories

I. One or two dominant characters and their traits.

II. Characters wrestling with personal problems.

III. Comparison and contrast of certain characters, especially women and their roles.

IV. Gender roles in the stories.

V. Special characters and objects used as characters.

VI. Common features in the characters.
3.6.1. **One or two dominant characters and their traits.**

Lahiri's characters are realistic. She deals with them like a psychologist, describing their appearance, their manners, their minds and consciousness. She subordinates the roles of characters, but fits them to depict the theme of assimilation through social situations.

It is possible to delve deep into certain character sketches by analysing one or two **dominant characters** and their traits. Two such examples are the character of Shukumar in 'A Temporary Matter' and Kapasi in 'Interpreter of Maladies'.

Shukumar in 'A Temporary Matter' is described as a person six feet tall with too big hands.

![Character Diagram](image)
He is in his sixth year of graduate school, although 35 years of age, married, but a mediocre student. He is a researcher and simultaneously good in culinary skills. Cooking made him feel productive. He is more interested in taking care of the house, when his wife is away at work. The following lines reveal some of his idiosyncracies:

He ran his tongue over the tops of his teeth, he had forgotten to brush them that morning. It wasn’t the first time. (2)

*Revelation of lethargic nature.*

The more he wanted to stay in, not even leaving the house to get the mail or to buy fruit or wine at the stores by the trolley shope. (2)

*Uninterested in family life.*

It was often nearly lunch time when Shukumar would finally pull himself out of bed and head downstairs to the coffeepot, pouring out the extra bit Shoba left for him, alongwith an empty mug, on the countertop. (5)

*Lethargic nature.*

He imagined running a family life but in reality he was still a student at thirty five. (5)

*Shows him to be a mediocre student.*
He pushed the blazing ivy pot to the other end of the table, closer to the piles of books and mail, making it even more difficult for them to see each other. (11)

*Elusive in nature.*

"You made rogan josh", Shoba observed, looking through the glass lid at the bright paprika stew.-------- he prodded a larger piece with a serving spoon to make sure the meat slipped easily from the bone. ‘It’s ready’, he announced. (10)

*Good at culinary.*

Such instances are a revelation of his traits. They, in particular, reveal Shukumar’s uninterested nature in family life. Lahiri has used particular words and instances to expose certain characteristic traits of the protagonist.

Another such dominating and enterprising character in the collection is that of Mr.Kapasi in the title story ‘Interpreter of Maladies’.

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He is a taxi driver and guide for tourists visiting India. He is of a butterscotch complexion, forty-six years old with silver receding hair, but liked to make up to look younger. He had a more responsible job of interpreting the maladies of patients to a doctor and seeking remedy for them. Some of the examples quoted below from the text help to bring out the character sketch of Mr. Kapasi:

Before starting the ignition, Mr. Kapasi reached back to make sure the cranklike locks on the inside of each of the back doors were secured. (47)

*Concern and care for people who depended on him.*
‘The roads to Konark are poor. Actually it is a distance of fifty-two miles’. (47)

*Exposition of perfection in the profession.*

“I work in a doctor’s office”.

“You are a doctor”.

“I am not a doctor. I work with one. As an interpreter”.

*Balancing between two jobs: as tour guide and medical interpreter.*

Kapasi was succinctly involved in two jobs simultaneously. He was involved and dedicated in both, that he was concerned and took care of the people who depended on him. Such instances are abundant in the story.

Examples are:

Doesn’t it get tiresome, Mr.Kapasi, showing people the same thing every day?

I look forward to it, actually’, Mr.Kapasi said as they continued their way. (49, 50)

*Dedication to the job.*
If ever she referred to his position, she used the phrase ‘doctor’s assistant’.

*Job of intellectually challenging nature.*

In its own way this correspondence would fulfill his dream, of serving as an interpreter between nations.

*Wishful thinker, higher expectations.*

Lahiri, in the above examples, has invested the emotional depth in her individual characters. These characters are a necessary backdrop for a complex portrayal of that sense of disappointment and displacement. Their experiences are painfully intimate, fraught with risk as well as possibility of developing pathos in the minds of the reader.

3.6.2. **Characters wrestling with their own problems**

Lahiri’s characters are delineated from her observance of Indian life in general and that of the Indians living abroad. She has deftly used situations wherein the character is wrestling with personal problems.

Indians living abroad have always pined for India and its culture. Lahiri feels that it is the same with the other communities of people abroad. For instance, two of her characters in different stories, wrestle with their
personal problems, which have their influence on the observers and the readers as well.

One such story is 'When Mr. Pirzada came to Dine'. Mr. Pirzada is a Bangladeshi, who during the civil war with Pakistan earlier, fears for the safety of his family back home.

Mr. Pirzada is an urban educated, middle class, who is involved in research in America about shrubs and trees. He is of compact stature, with a slight belly, tufts of greying hair over his ears, thick eye lashes; but charming and of rotund elegance. He enjoyed leisurely meals and was known for his ease of gestures. But what disturbed him totally was the welfare of his family consisting of his wife and seven daughters, in a war-ridden city, Dacca. Lahiri has skillfully used this situation to reveal how Mr. Pirzada pines for them. Some such instances from the text are quoted below:

In the autumn of 1971 a man used to come to our house, bearing confections in his pocket and hopes of ascertaining the life or death of his family. (23)

*Concern for family welfare.*
Each week Mr. Pirzada wrote to his wife and sent comic books to his seven daughters. (24)

*Expression of love and concern.*

The above gestures of bonhomie helped Pirzada to live peacefully abroad. (28)

I prayed that Mr. Pirzada’s family was safe and sound. (32)

*Love for unknown people through influence of another character.*

As weeks passed, it grew more and more rare to see any footage from Dacca on the news. (34)

*Concern and worry.*

During a festival celebrated by Indians in the U.S., Mr. Pirzada was involved in the rituals and functions. He used such occasions to divert his mind.

Mr. Pirzada dutifully carved the crescents for eyebrows, and another triangle for the nose. (36)

*Relaxation of mind from preoccupied troubled thoughts.*
‘Please forgive me’, he raised his hand to one side of his face, as if someone had slapped him there. (36)

*Lack of concentration due to worries*

The war was to be waged on East Pakistani soil. (40)

*More room for concern about family welfare.*

Mr. Pirzada stopped bringing candy. (40)

*State of mind in a pall of gloom.*

He was reunited with his wife and children. (42)

*Ecstasy of reunion.*

The expressions used by Lahiri in such situations are instant revelations of the mind wrestling with problems. Different expressions have been used by her in this story to bring out clearly the inner mind of the character in times of crisis and how he hides them.

Another such interesting character sketch is that of Mrs. Sen in the title story ‘Mrs. Sen’s’. She is the wife of a professor of Mathematics, settled in the U.S. She is slightly gap toothed with faded pock marks on her chin, but with beautiful eyes.
She adheres to maintain Indian culture abroad by always wearing a sari, and applying vermilion on her forehead.

Mrs. Sen is the wife of a professor settled in the U.S. As a past time, she takes up the job of a baby sitter. She looks after Eliot, who is eleven years old, in the absence of his mother. She wrestles with three problems, viz., assimilation to the life abroad, car driving and unavailability of her favourite staple food, fresh fish. She cares for hygiene.

As you can see, our home is quite clean, quite safe for a child! (112)

*Importance of hygiene.*
She was ready to look after Eliot at her house, which she maintained quite well. Plush pear colored carpet, white drum shaped lampshades, yellow fabric with scalloped edges. (112)

*Aesthetic sense of the character.*

Mrs. Sen always wanted to maintain her Indian tradition, even while living abroad. She was also very particular about perfection in dressing and always applied vermilion and scarlet powder to her forehead, as is the custom with married Indian women. She neatened the border of her sari where it rose diagonally across her chest. (114)

*Penchant for Indian dress. Meticulous and conscious of personality.*

Mrs. Sen was good at culinary skills and prepared tasty Indian dishes. She took the whole vegetables between her hands and hacked them apart. She could peel a potato in seconds. (114)

*A good cook and deft at culinary skills.*

She was fond of maintaining cleanliness. She cleaned everything as soon as the work was over. She kept the house spic and span.
By the time Eliot’s mother arrived, twenty past six, Mrs. Sen always made sure all evidence of her chopping was disposed off. (125)

*Penchant for cleanliness.*

In spite of all these excellent qualities that Mrs. Sen possessed, she was totally unhappy with the life she lived in the U.S. She was always obsessed with thoughts of life in India, her family and her comforts in the homeland, which she could not get in America.

Lahiri has used certain passages and words to drive home to the reader the three problems that Mrs. Sen was wrestling with: Inability to assimilate to the life abroad, her hatred for learning car driving and her desire to consume fresh fish everyday.

There are certain instances through which it is revealed that Mrs. Sen was finding it difficult to assimilate herself to the American way of life.

It is impossible to fall asleep those nights, listening to the chatter. (at home in India, during a family celebration). Here, in this place (America), where Mr. Sen has brought me, I cannot sometime sleep in so much silence. (115)

*Cultural variations.*
By then Eliot understood that when Mrs. Sen said “home”, she meant India, not the apartment where she sat chopping vegetables. (116)

Inability to assimilate.

I must wear the powder everyday, she explained when Eliot asked her what it was for, ‘for the rest of the days that I am married.’ (117)

Maintenance of cultural benchmarks, lack of mind to assimilate.

My sister has had a baby girl. By the time I see her, she will be three years old. Her own aunt will be a stranger. (122)

Longing to meet dear ones.

‘Send pictures’, they write. ‘Send pictures of your new life. What picture can I send?’ She sat, exhausted on the edge of the bed. (125)

Frustration with changed culture.

Although Mrs. Sen was settled in the U.S. with all facilities, she found it difficult to assimilate herself into the life there and pined for her homeland and relations at every possible instance. Her mind was always obsessed with life in her native land, its people and its rich and varied culture.
Mrs. Sen had another problem literally at hand. And that was an abomination for car driving. This problem is quite evidently presented throughout the story. She was all the time wrestling with this another personal problem of hers. A few such instances are:

Mrs. Sen told Eliot she didn’t feel right leaving him alone in the apartment, but Eliot knew she wanted him sitting beside her (while driving) because she was afraid. (119)

*Learning to drive as a necessary evil.*

Mr. Sen says that once I receive my license, everything will improve. What do you think, Eliot? Will things improve? (119)

*Sceptical about success.*

How am I doing, Eliot? Am I going to pass? (120)

*Expects motivation.*

But what about the car from the right, do you see? And look, a truck is behind it. Anyway I am not allowed on the main road without Mr. Sen. (120)

*Lack of confidence.*
How do you expect to pass the test if you refuse to crive on a road with other cars? (126)

*Inability to overcome the problem.*

A car beeped its horn, then another. She beeped defiantly in response, stopped, then pulled without signalling to the side of the road. ‘No more’, she said, her forehead resting against the top of the steering wheel. ‘I hate it. I hate driving. I won’t go on.’ (131)

*Finally giving up.*

Inspite of being motivated, Mrs.Sen lacked the confidence to learn car driving and found it to be a confounded problem, which she could never overcome.

Another problem that was haunting Mrs.Sen was her inability to procure the staple food, fresh fish, as at homeland. Mrs.Sen was a typical Bengali woman for whom fish is the ultimate in food.

The other thing that made Mrs.Sen happy was fish from the seaside. It was always a whole fish she desired, not shell fish, or the fillets Eliot’s mother broiled one night a few months ago........ (123)

*Burning desire to get fresh fish.*
'It is very frustrating,' Mrs.Sen apologized. 'To live so close to the ocean and not to have so much fish'. (123)

*Expression of total frustration.*

Mrs. Sen shook her head. ‘In the supermarket I can feed a cat thirty two dinners from one of thirty two tins, but I can never find a single fish I like, never a single. (123)

*Anguish at unfulfilled desire.*

At the food shop the ice beds were nearly empty, as were the lobster whose rust colored stains were visible through the water. (132)

*Indication of unavailability of fresh fish.*

Fish, which is almost the staple food of Bengal becomes an obsession with Mrs. Sen since one does not always get good whole fresh fish in America. The arrival of fish at the local store is greeted as a piece of news from home and she is always too eager to hold it, to cook it and to serve it. At any cost she wishes to acquire fish.

The incorrigible Mrs. Sen finally on one occasion decides to drive to the store to procure fish. The car meets with an accident, but she and Eliot escape unhurt, to be finally rescued by Mr. Sen.
Mrs. Sen's existence as also her survival in an alien land revolves around these three problems, which although she is unable to overcome, becomes a part and parcel of her life abroad.

3.6.3. Comparison of Characters

Jhumpa Lahiri has characters drawn from the lower strata of society, such as a house maid, a clerk in an office and a car driver etc. Some of these characters are identical and can be compared to bring out the contrast in them, as well as the use of language by Lahiri according to their needs, economic background, literacy etc. Two such comparable characters are Boori Ma in the story ‘A Real Durwan’ and Bibi Haldar in ‘The Treatment of Bibi Haldar’. Both these are women characters, but they differ on several counts. Lahiri has used language in variation according to the characters to bring home to the reader the difference in them.

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<th>Point of Comparison</th>
<th>Boori Ma</th>
<th>Bibi Haldar</th>
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<tr>
<td>Birth</td>
<td>Migrated from Pakistan</td>
<td>Indian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Illiterate</td>
<td>Certain level of literacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occupation</td>
<td>House maid/ durwan (gate keeper or watchman)</td>
<td>Inventory keeper in shop</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Personal Sensibility | Nostalgic about her past | Not pretty. Yearned to marry and settle in life. Always ridiculing and raving about her poor condition
---|---|---
Superb entertainer, patrolled the alley, very helpful. | An extrovert | An introvert.
An extrovert

Belief | Follower of customs and rituals plus orthodoxy | Cannot even wear a sari by herself minus orthodoxy
---|---|---

The above said differences denote that Boori Ma, although illiterate was very helpful by nature, but despised by her employers. She was a durwan (watchman), who looked after the welfare of the people in the apartment, but no body came to her rescue at her time of distress.

Bibi Haidar, on the other hand was a totally psychotic character, who felt that every problem of hers would be solved if only she gets married. People around were ready to help her, probably because they took pity on her. Examples:

Boori Ma was sixty four years old, but was very enthusiastic in her work. She patrolled the activities in the alley, screened the itinerant peddlars, summoned a rickshaw at a moment’s call, frightened away any stranger in the area. (73)

*Involvement in the work as a durwan (Watchful).*
In short, over the years, Boori Ma’s services came to resemble those of a real durwan. Though under normal circumstances this was no job for a woman, she honoured the responsibility, and maintained a vigil no less punctilious than if she were the gatekeeper of a house on Lower Circular Road........ (73)

*Self confidence and will power.*

All agreed that she was a superb entertainer. (73)

*A socialite.*

She washed her face, rinsed her feet and rubbed two fingers over her teeth. After this she began to beat the quilts on each side with her broom. (74)

*Hygienic nature.*

Our linens were muslin. Believe me, don’t believe me, our mosquito nets were as soft as silk. Such comforts you cannot even dream them. (74)

*Propagating past aristocratic life.*
She enjoyed drifting in and out of the various households. The residents for their part assured Boori Ma that she was always welcome. (76)

*Liked by everyone.*

She helped children shoot chips across the carom board. Knowing not to sit on the furniture, she crouched, instead in doorways and hallways and observed gestures and manners in the same way a person tends to watch traffic in a foreign city. (76)

*Vibrant nature.*

Boori Ma’s mouth is full of ashes. But that’s nothing new. What is new is the face of the building. What a building like this needs is a real durwan. (82)

*Accused of direlection of duty and discarded.*

People around Boori Ma were usorious in nature and tried to find fault with each and everything that she said, particularly her past aristocratic life, and finally deserted her in dire times of need.
Bibi Haidar on the other hand was a character liked by her neighbours and friends. Although she was alone, it was her neighbours who cared for her well being.

Each day she unloaded her countless privations upon us, until it became unendurably apparent that Bibi wanted a man. She wanted to be spoken for, protected, placed on her path in life. (160)

*Bibi's yearning for a married life.*

Amid tins of talc and boxes of bobby pins she would curl up on the floor of the storage room, speaking in non sequiturs. ‘I will never dip my feet in milk,’ she whimpered. ‘My face will never be painted with sandalwood paste. Who will rub me with turmeric? My name will never be printed with scarlet ink on a card’.

*Bibi's hallucination of marriage*

Besides, who would marry her? The girl knows nothing about anything, speaks backward, is practically thirty, can't light a coal stove, can't boil rice, can't tell the difference between fennel and a cumin seed. Imagine her attempting to feed a man. (163)

*Neighbours pitiful comments and sympathy for Bibi Haidar.*
“Apart from my x-rays I have never been photographed”, she fretted.

‘Potential in-laws should know what I look like.’ (164).

_Dismay at inability to get married._

“Apart from my condition I am perfectly healthy”, she maintained, seating herself on a bench along the footpath where courting men and women strolled hand in hand. (167)

I have never had a cold or flu. I have never had jaundice. I have never suffered from colic or indigestion. (167)

_Total frustration about remaining a spinster._

Lahiri’s use of the words, especially in this context, reveals the pinnacle of frustration of Bibi Haidar. She feels capable of leading a family life filled with enthusiasm and grit.

The comparison reveals that while Bibi Haldar is remembered and helped by everyone, Boori Ma is accused, ridiculed and thrown out of the house.

The author’s use of certain words and coherence of the sentences add flavour to the description of the character. Boori Ma’s ‘drifting in and out of households’ is one such example, through which it is revealed that she is a
socialite, who was liked by all, until such time she was accused of conniving with the thieves, thus jeopardising the security of the apartment.

On the other hand, Bibi Haldar, though liked by everybody finds that finding a remedy for her personal problem is a daunting task. Through the usage of particular contextual words, such as ‘x-ray’ etc., the author brings out the character wrestling with her own problems, that becomes a factor of sympathy for the society.

Thus Lahiri has used solitary as well as violent situations in her collection to bring out the idiosyncracies of the particular character through vivid and excellent descriptions.

3.6.4. Gender roles in the collection of short stories

Most of the characters in this collection appear to be generalized. Many of her characters, depicted in the diasporic situations hold onto role definitions that American readers find as stereotypes of Indian culture. These generalized roles and sometimes their reversal act as literary tools that add to her most sympathetic characters and her most poignant storylines.
The husband-wife role within marriages is sometimes depicted with a reversal of them. In India a strict set of guidelines dictate how husband and wives should act both publicly and privately, while in America such guidelines are not that clear-cut, and are sometimes not adhered to at all. Lahiri’s married characters often are in confusion with regards to marriage roles in relation to the conduct within and outside the home. With the arrival of children, women in India, are completely domesticated. Men are responsible for working and providing their families with a monetary income.

But many of her characters, specifically the ones in diaspora, cope with new and sometimes shockingly different stereotypes and roles in their new homelands. Generation gaps, culture shock upon moving away from homeland; and question of sexuality seem to play their roles predominantly in Lahiri’s interpretation of these characters through the various stories.

In such a background, **Women’s role** in society are dissected and thoughtfully examined in Lahiri’s ‘Interpreter of Maladies’. She delves deep and provides insights into the diasporic condition through stories of Indians in America and the profound nature of the immigrant experience. Her characters are diverse in many ways and through the examination of
their lives, one is able to better understand not only India’s rich culture, but also its preservation through a variety of difficult situations.

In Indian culture, man takes the role of the primary breadwinner while the women’s role is a restricted one. Lahiri’s women characters deviate from this misconception of Indian culture and take a firm hold of their individuality and freedom. They refuse to be bound by the limitations society places on the way traditional Indian women are expected to live. The following reveals the versatality of one of the woman characters.

*Shoba* in ‘A Temporary Matter’ is a working woman. She carries with her a satchel, filled with files from work.

Shoba was always gone by the time Shukumar woke up---------

where she searched for typographical errors in text books and marked them, in a code. (4)

*An independent working woman.*

She had bought them (extra tooth brushes) once when they were on sale, in the event that a visitor decided, at the last minute, to spend the night.

*Ability to foresee things and readiness for eventualities.*
Her labeled mason jars lined the shelves of the kitchen, in endless sealed pyramids, enough they’d agreed, to last for their grandchildren to taste. (7)

Systematic even at household chores.

In the family, Shoba is the only means of financial support. Her husband Shukumar is still in his sixth year of graduation and involved in research. Here traditional roles are reversed which shows that the male character, contrary to Indian culture, is solely reliant on his wife to provide the means for his livelihood.

Another such female character is that of Mrs. Das in the title story, ‘Interpreter of Maladies’. She is also a working woman, a teacher. Exactly, I teach middle school there. (46)

Other traits in her are:

‘Yes, a big responsibility you have there, Mr. Kapasi’, Mrs. Das agreed.

Ability to appreciate others appropriately.

Although Shoba and Mrs. Das are different in several aspects, the common thread that links them is that they have careers and therefore do
not depend on their husbands to eke out their living. This concept of Lahiri is in contrast to the widely held stereotype view that Indian women often do not have their own careers, especially after marriage.

Variation in the portrayal of women characters galore in the stories. Married woman are not confined to fit a certain type. Lahiri shows how the roles of married woman differ greatly, through a large spectrum of behavior and action.

“A brave little boy”, Mr.Kapasi commented.

“It’s not surprising”, Mrs.Das said.

“No ?”

“He is not his”.

“I beg your pardon ?”

“Raj’s. He is not Raj’s son”. (62)

This is an example reflecting the infidelity of Mrs.Das and in total reveals how women are being as unfaithful as men can be.

No, of course not. And no one knows, of course. No one at all. I’ve kept it a secret for eight whole years. (62)
Mrs. Das's confession of having an extramarital affair with a friend of her husband, admitting that her youngest son might have been conceived as a result of the affair.

In respect to infidelity, it is uncommon to think of married Indian woman, especially. They are, in general, expected to be as faithful to their husbands as the husbands are to be faithful to their wives. The key foundation for a successful, loving married life is a monogamous relationship.

Indian women are usually supposed to fit into the traditional housewife stereotype. She performs the household chores, such as cooking, cleaning and taking care of the children. But Lahiri, in her collection shows that this concept is far from truth. She emphasizes the fact, that although the world is separated by myriad boundaries of culture, language and religion, people are alike in many other ways. Lahiri's creation of these women characters could be true and applicable to even women of any other ethnic background.

The United States is said to be a nation of immigrants. In Lahiri's anthology, she has also narrated the experiences of immigrant women. She focuses on their stories of isolation in a foreign land. The story of
‘Mrs. Sen’s’ is one such. She is one who has come to dwell in America after her marriage. She is a baby sitter of a boy who comes from school and quite often confides her isolation, segregation and feelings about her native India to the boy. Lahiri’s use of language in these circumstances is skillful.

Instead of a knife she used a blade that curved like the prow of a Viking ship sailing to battle in different seas. The steel, more black, than silver, lacked a uniform polish and had serrated crest, she told Eliot, for grating. (114)

She had brought the blade from India, where apparently there was one in every household. (115)

*Reminiscences of homeland*

Mrs. Sen is also the one who had come to live in America with little or no knowledge of the life there. She is frustrated with the thought that her family thinks she is living the life of a queen, which is ultimately far from the truth.

‘They think I live the life of a queen, Eliot.’ She looked around the wall of the room. ‘They think I press buttons and the house is clean. They think that I live in a palace’. (125)

*Frustration with alien life.*
Throughout the story, it is evident how lonely Mrs. Sen is in her new environment. With her husband away at work, she is left at home awaiting letters from her family in India.

Two thing, Eliot learned, made Mrs. Sen happy. One was the arrival of a letter from her family. (121)

*Mrs. Sen’s solace in petty things.*

Many immigrants of America have the misconception that life there is better and success is easier to come by. But Lahiri’s stories include women who have come to America with their husband, only to find isolation instead of companionship and a deep sense of loss instead of the gains or riches. Mrs. Sen remains frustrated at several things unavailable to her in her new environment, such as good neighbours and relations, her favourite food, fish, her inability to drive a car through the streets of America, and thus remains homesick of India, where life could be lived as she wished.

Arranged marriages are a common feature in Indian culture. In the story ‘The Third and Final Continent’, Mala, a newly married, is left behind in India while her husband is in search of new pastures in America soon after their marriage. The story deals with the immigrants adjusting to the
life in America as well as to the love that blossoms from their arranged marriage.

One day the narrator of the story found an Indian woman at the mercy of a dog which leapt up and seized the end of the sari between its teeth. The woman had to fix her sari in the middle of the footpath.

Such a mishap, I realized that morning, would soon be my concern. It was my duty to take care of Mala. (190)

*Love and care revealed in the absence of the spouse.*

At the airport I recognized Mala immediately.

What did they give you to eat on the plane?

I didn’t eat. (191)

*The concern for spouse expressed.*

We have a son who attends Harvard University. (197)

*Settling down to family life.*

In a few years he will graduate and pave his way, alone and unprotected. But I remind myself that he has a father who is still living and a mother who is happy and strong. (197)

*Satisfaction at fulfilment.*
The awkwardness the two feel towards each other is expertly written and Lahiri gives readers an understanding of what arranged marriages are like. Her portrayal of the life of immigrants in America through these characters is well planned. She fearlessly has delved deep into their inner feelings. The love and pathos addressed in the story is tangible which makes one understand one’s own humanity as a result.

The tenacity and empowerment of women is picturized by Lahiri in two brilliant stories, ‘The Treatment of Bibi Haidar’ and ‘This Blessed House’. As illustrated earlier, Bibi Haldar struggles with her own sexuality, wishing to lead a normal life and to overcome the illness that prevents her from functioning normally.

She applied glycerine to smooth her lips, resisted sweets to reduce her measurements. (162)

*Preparation for marriage as a remedy to her illness.*

One day she asked one of us to accompany her to the tailor, who stiched her a new salwar-kameez in an umbrella cut, the fashion that season. (162)

*Bibi Haldar’s obsession with fashion, obviously to get married.*
Even when she was thrown out of the house by her employers, she refused to be bogged down and moved away.

"I don't mind", Bibi told us. ‘It's better to live apart from them, to set up house on my own’. (170)

The world begins at the bottomm of the stairs. Now I am free to discover the life as I please. (170)

*Tenacity to encounter any eventuality*

Some months passed. Bibi had retreated into a deep and prolonged silence. (171)

We found her lying on the camp cot. She was about four months pregnant. (172)

*Ability to survive through all obstacles.*

She carried the baby to the full term and one evening in September, we helped her deliver a son. (172)

From Bibi we purchased our soaps and kohl, our soaps and powders ----using her profits to restock her shelves. (172)

In this manner she raised the boy and ran a business in the storage room---(172)

*Lahiri's delineation of empowered and determined women.*
In the story 'This Blessed House', Twinkle shows a great deal of empowerment and persistence as well. Around their new home in America, the couple, Twinkle and Sanjeev find a great deal of Christian paraphernalia around her new home. She is enamoured by the artefacts and at every stage persuades her husband, a staunch Hindu to keep them on display.

And at the very least get rid of that idiotic statue.

‘But it could be worth something, Who knows?’ She turned it upside down, then stroked with her index finger, the minuscule frozen folds of its robes.

It’s pretty. (137)

_Determination exemplified._

‘Or perhaps it’s an attempt to convert people’, Twinkle mused.

Clearly the scheme has succeeded in your case.

She disregarded him, shaking the little plastic dome so that the snow swirled over the manger. (138)

_Twinkle’s empowerment._

‘Oh, Sanj.’, Twinkle groaned. ‘Please, I would feel terrible throwing them away.’ (138)
‘Oh, we must, we must simply put it up. It’s too spectacular.’ (139)

Twinkle’s persuasive nature.

For this reason it irritated him when Twinkle insisted on wearing high heels. She dragged him to a tiny bookshop on St.Mark’s Place, where she browsed for nearly an hour. (140)

Another instance of her audacity.

She was like that, excited and delighted by little things, crossing her fingers before any remotely unpredictable event, like tasting a new flavor of ice cream, or dropping a letter in the mail-box. (142)

Delight at little things.

Indian food, she complained, was a bother; she detested chopping garlic and peeling ginger, and could not operate a blender, so it was Sanjeev who on weekends, seasoned mustard oil with cinnamon sticks and cloves inorder to produce a proper curry. (144)

Twinkle’s refusal to attempt anything she detested.

He took a breath and then he informed her very calmly that after finishing his drink, he was going to put on his shoes and go outside and remove the Virgin from the front lawn.--------------
‘Don’t you dare’. She stood up, letting the book fall into the water, bubbles dripping down her thighs. (149)

Sanjeev’s wish and Twinkle’s ferocity at something against her.

“Would you mind terribly if we displayed it on the mantel? Just for tonight?

I know you hate it”.

He did hate it.

‘I’ll keep it in my study from tomorrow.’ Twinkle added.

I promise.

She would never put it in her study, he knew. (157)

Twinkle’s stubborn nature.

These two stories of Bibi Haldar and Twinkle reveal that they are women who refuse to let other people tell them how to live their lives. Their defiance is the predominant nature by which they show great strength of character and personality.

Through these characters, Lahiri has explained that women, specifically Indian women, cannot be categorized into one group. Their roles are ever changing with the time and environment they live in, giving them the voice needed in today’s society.
women, and the different roles they undertake in their respective societies. Each story may not be a revelation of the truth of women's lives, but it shows that there are many kinds of truth. Lahiri's women characters though represent variety like her stories, have common traits binding them.

It is their gender, culture and strength of character that tie them together in a common bond. Their roles in society are vastly different from the traditional Indian housewife stereotype. The writer has used her deftness in creating the women characters with awareness and wisdom and every woman refuses to comply with the consequences each obstacles hurls towards her.

Lahiri has thus ventured into a different territory, giving a new picture of the Indian woman. This helps one to understand the true background of women raised in Indian cultural milieu. They are an embodiment of courage, freedom, defiance and individuality. The characters reveal that freedom and individuality fostered so dearly by the western society is universal in nature. Lahiri takes the reader on journeys of struggle and success, of isolation and self-discovery. She helps one to examine oneself only to discover that in the midst of chaos and disillusionment that is part and parcel of everyday life, the components that
are predominant are essentially human. With her skillful use of language, Lahiri offers a chance for one to break down the walls that obscure the reality of what an Indian woman is. She has given a kaleidoscopic view of woman and makes the reader see them, perhaps for the first time. Thus her approach to delineation of woman characters can be said to be on a totally different perspective.

3.6.5. Special Characters and Objects used as Characters

Lahiri concentrates not only on the major characters of her stories, but infuses blood and flesh to thé plot through certain minor characters. It is the overall amalgamation of her minor characters into the mainstream of the story that makes it a memorable readable material. Though Lahiri has used these characters only on a smaller scale, yet their contribution to the theme and plot construction cannot be overemphasized or neglected. The role of a piece of a paper in one of the stories in the collection contributes largely to the delineation of the plot. Such contributions enhance not only the role of the major characters, but contribute to view the writer from a broader perspective.

Such characters can be divided into the following categories:

1. Spatial
2. Temporal
3. Objects
4. Institutions.

5. Beliefs

Their contribution to the overall development of the plot is discussed in the following pages:

3.6.5.1. Spatial Characters.

Spatial Characters are those that are not repeated, but are contextual promoters of actions, thoughts, and expressions of main characters contributing considerably to the plot construction. Lahiri has used even such spatial characters to bring out the overall theme of the story.

In 'A Temporary Matter', while Shoba and Shukumar feel that they are moving away from each other, their neighbors, the Bradfords are introduced.

Outside the evening was still warm, and the Bradfords were walking arm in arm. (22)

*Reveals the reconciliation of Shoba and Shukumar, the estranged couple.*
This meant that through their confessions, the couple had reconciled to a life together at least hereafter, and the author uses the Bradfords as a happy couple, who are inspirational to Shoba and Shukumar to settle for a peaceful life.

In the story, 'When Mr. Pirzada came to Dine', the family of Mr. Pirzada plays a very important role, although they are far away in their homeland, Bangladesh. The story revolves around their welfare, although it seems that the author has used them as is if to fill up the space.

In the Autumn of 1971 a man used to come to our house, bearing confections in his pocket and hopes of ascertaining the life or death of his family. (23)

---seven daughters between the ages of six and sixteen whose names all began with the letter A. (23)

*The welfare of the family of Mr. Pirzada is the primary concern of the story.*

The story ends on a happy note when Mr. Pirzada writes about the welfare of the family, after joining them there, to his family friend in America.

He was reunited, he wrote, with his wife and children. (41)
His seven daughters were a bit taller, he wrote, but otherwise they were the same. (42)

*The family and its reunion is the crux of the story.*

Another spatial character in the story is that of *Mrs. Kenyon*, the school teacher. She is used to bring out the character sketch of Lilia, who is inquisitive to gather more details about Pakistan and its war in Bangladesh. She chides Lilia for referring to a book on Pakistan during her study time.

“Is this book a part of your report, Lilia?”

“No, Mrs. Kenyon”.

“Then I see no reason to consult it”, she said, replacing it in the slim gap on the shelf. “Do you?” (33)

*Lilia’s involvement in knowing more about Pakistan and its civil war is expressed here. Her inquisitive nature is more kindled and she wants to learn more about the land and war to understand about the welfare of Prizada’s family in a better way because her action is ridiculed by Mrs. Kenyon.*

*The monkeys* in the story ‘Interpreter of Maladies’ play an important spatial role. The family from America is on a visit to Konark in India. In the
midst of their tour, they are fascinated to see monkeys in the natural surroundings.

'I'm not coming. Anyway those monkeys give me the creeps'.

Mrs.Das and Mr.Kapasi watched as Bobby and the monkey passed the stick back and forth between them.

"A brave little boy", Mr.Kapasi commented.

"It's not surprising", Mrs.Das said.

"No?

"He is not his"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Raj's. He is not Raj's son. " (61-62)

This dialogue between Mrs.Das and Mr.Kapasi takes place when the children of Mrs.Das are playing with the monkeys, being fascinated by them. The monkeys are the spatial characters and play partners of Bobby.

They help Mrs.Das to recollect her past incidents and bring out her confessions of infidelity. The monkeys in this context are not merely used as an entertainment, but to develop the plot and bring out the character of Mrs.Das.
Another significant spatial character is Mr. Sen in the story ‘Mr. Sen’s.’ He is a ‘short stocky man with slightly protuberant eyes and glasses with black rectangular frames’, who was a Mathematics professor at the university.

Mrs. Sen feels loneliness at their house in America, because of the pre-occupation of Mr. Sen in his job. But Mr. Sen is not only her husband but her instructor when she drives the car and comes to her rescue in times of need.

He once accompanied Eliot and Mrs. Sen to purchase fish and instructed Mrs. Sen while she drove the car.

In the story ‘A Real Durwan’, the climax is achieved by the use of spatial characters, the robbers. Boori Ma, the protagonist, becomes a villain in the eyes of the neighborhood when they find that the new wash basins kept in the alley of the apartments was found to be stolen.

“This is all her doing”, one of them hollored, pointing at Boori Ma.

“She informed the robbers. Where was she when she was supposed to guard the gate?”. 
"For days she has been wandering the streets, speaking to strangers", another reported. (81)

*Boori Ma is accused of conniving with miscreants and robbers.*

The robbers are the cause for *Boori Ma* being stamped as a thief herself. The result is that she is thrown out of the house of Dalals.

In the story ‘The Third and Final Continent’, the character of *Helen* is merely a spatial character. She is the daughter of a hundred year old woman, and takes care of her mother. She was sixty eight years old, short and thick waisted with cropped silver hair and bright pink lipstick. She is actually lonely, a spatial character and does not have much role to play for the development of the plot. She narrates with nostalgia how her mother, Mrs.Croft, raised the family by giving piano lessons, after their father’s death.

*Helen is marginal. She is the mouthpiece through which the character of Mrs.Croft is narrated to the protagonist. It is through her, the protagonist comes to understand the problems, sufferings, age and the indomitable spirit of Mrs.Croft.*

### 3.6.5.2. Temporal Characters

*Temporal Characters* are those that indicate time. They are set in by the author to add to the movement of the plot. Their role in the overall
development of the plot is significant, because the story or plot construction revolves around such characters. They also keep commenting on the role of other characters and are part and parcel of the main theme.

One such character is *Shoba’s mother* in the story ‘A Temporary Matter’. She had come to stay with Shoba, her daughter and Shukumar for a few days.

She was polite to Shukumar without being friendly. (9)

*Reveals her duty consciousness alone.*

She never talked to him about Shoba; once when he mentioned the baby’s death. She looked up from her knitting and said, ‘But you weren’t there’. (9)

*Her expression of unhappiness at Shukumar’s non-involvement in family life. It is through this comment on Shukumar which helps the reader understand Shukumar to be a recluse who has no interest in family life.*

In the story, ‘When Mr.Pirzada came to Dine’, *the family of Mr.Pirzada* is a temporal one. It consisted of Pirzada’s wife of twenty
years, and seven daughters between the ages of six and seven. It is their welfare, in a war-torn city, that Mr. Pirzada is worried about in America.

*They find a place only at the beginning and end of the story, although the whole story revolves around their well being.*

*The neighbors* play a great role in the story ‘A Real Durwan’. In this story it is the society that dominates towards the end and hence temporal in nature and plays a major role in the climax. When Boori Ma is accused of conniving with the robbers, the other occupants living in the apartments drive her out.

“This is all her doing”, one of them hollered, pointing at Boori Ma.

“We shared our coal, gave her a place to sleep. How could she betray us this way?” a third wanted to know. (81)

One of the second floor residents said, ‘Boori Ma has endangered the security of this building’. (82)

*Thus the neighbors turn hostile. They are therefore the cause of Boori Ma being stamped and ridiculed as one conniving with thieves.*

*Lakshmi* is another temporal character in the story ‘Sexy’ but is an important one. She narrates the whole story to the reader:
After nine years of marriage, Lakshmi told Miranda, her cousin’s husband had fallen in love with another woman. (83)

‘She’s decided to let him come to his senses’, Lakshmi said one evening.

She says it is for the boy. She is willing to forgive him for the boy. (91)

Lakshmi appears in the story mostly to comment on the movement of the plot and thus further advances it. No other temporal character in the collection has been given so much importance in any of the stories as much as Lakshmi.

The temporal role of the guests in ‘The Blessed House’ is remarkable. Characters such as Douglas, Nora, Prabal and Sunil appear to appreciate the wedded life of Sanjeev and Twinkle in America as well as to congratulate them on their arranging aesthetically the Christian paraphernalia they discovered around the house, although they were Hindus from India.

‘Great lawn, Sanjeev’ Douglas remarked. (151)

‘I hope you don’t mind my asking’, Douglas said, ‘but I noticed the statue outside, and are you guys Christian?’ (151)
'Great house, great rice', Sunil. (153)

Appreciation of the hosts. They help Sanjeev understand that religion is not of much importance in an alien land, but it is the capacity and mind to adjust and live together that makes family life aesthetic.

3.6.5.3. Objects as Characters

The role of Objects in the stories as characters establish the peculiar style of Lahiri. In several of the stories she has used objects as characters. They enhance the plot construction by playing vital roles. Even a piece of paper or a picture is important for the movement of the tale. In certain stories these objects bring out the nature of the other characters and aid in the development of the plot. Objects can be divided into static and dynamic ones. A few such examples are:

He was torn between admitting that he had once ripped out a photo of a woman in one of the fashion magazines she used to subscribe to and carried it in his books for a week, or saying that he really hadn’t lost the sweater she had bought for their third anniversary------(18)

He told Shoba about the sweater on the third night, the picture on the fourth. She said nothing as she spoke, expressed no protest or
reproach. She simply listened, then shook his hand, pressing it, as she had before. (19)

*Here the objects mentioned are dynamic in nature since they are objects of confession which help the estranged couple reunite.*

*A book* plays a significant role in story ‘When Mr. Pirzada came to Dine’.

Inquisitive to see and know about Mr. Pirzada’s family, the little girl, Lilia, refers to a book in the library, which she uses to find out more about Pakistan.

I returned to the blond-wood shelves, to a section I had noticed labeled ‘Asia’. I saw books about China, India, Indonesia, Korea. Eventually I found a book titled *Pakistan: A Land and its people*. (35)

*A book, the dynamic object, is used as a source of more knowledge and expression of Lilia’s attachment to Mr. Pirzada. The book helps her to learn more about Pakistan, its geographical features, so that Lilia learns more about the place of residence of Mr. Pirzada’s family and its welfare.*
The longing for Indian culture is well brought out through the use of a ritual, in which a **pumpkin** is used, in the above mentioned story. This is clearly explained through the participation of the family of Lilia in one such ceremony.

"Pumpkins, my mother replied. 'Lilia, remind me to pick one up at the supermarket'.

"And the purpose? It indicates what?"

"You make a Jack-o-lantern, I said, grinning ferociously".

"Like this. To scare people away". (35)

*Here the pumpkin is a static object that brings out cultural prejudice in a foreign land. Even while living in a foreign land Indians maintain their identity through such objects and rituals. It shows that Pirzada, a Pakistani, feels to be closer to Indian friends in America and thus integrates into Indian culture, though not of the native land.*

A few objects find a place of importance in the title story ‘Interpreter of Maladies’.

*The car* used by the tourist couple from America plays a significant role.
Daddy why is the driver sitting on the wrong side in this car too?
The boy asked. (48)

*Exposition of Indian formula through the dynamic object. Here it is used as an example of non-integration.*

Mrs. Das, one of the tourists, had referred to Mr. Kapasi as ‘romantic’. This made him feel elated since he was fed up with the bickering, the indifference and the protracted illness of his marriage. It is here that the *mirror* plays an important role.

He began to check his reflection in the rearview mirror as he drove, feeling grateful that he had chosen the gray suit that morning and not the brown one, which tended to sag a little in the knees. (53)

*Role of the static mirror to express hypothetical romance of Mr. Kapasi.*

*The camera* used by the tourists is another object of interest. It helps in one way Mr. Kapasi to cherish dreams of romantic possibilities with the lady on tour.
Mr. Das placed the camera to his face and squeezed one eye shut, his tongue exposed to one corner of his mouth. "This looks funny".

Mina, you need to lean in closer to Mr. Kapasi. (55)

Camera is a **dynamic** object which enhances the hypothetical romance of Mr. Kapasi, who imagines that Mrs. Das would build up a relationship with him after her return to America and that is the reason she wants to possess a photo of Mr. Kapasi. It leads him to imagine that he could become an interpreter between nations and tries to bring in the theme of integration.

**A piece of paper** plays a very significant role in the movement of the plot. "What's your address, Mr. Kapasi?", she enquired, fishing for something in her straw bag.

"You would like my address?".

"So we can send you copies", she said. 'Of the pictures'. She handed him a scrap of paper which she had hastily ripped from a page of her film magazine. (55)

*Here the piece of paper is used as static object, on which Mr. Kapasi writes his address and hands it over to Mrs. Das imagining romantic possibilities in future, so that he could later on integrate into another land and culture.*
While Mr. Kapasi was nourishing thoughts of his attachment to the tourist lady, towards the end of the story, this romantic possibility is ruined by the piece of paper on which he had written his address and given her.

When she whipped out the hair brush, the slip of paper with Mr. Kapasi’s address in it fluttered away in the wind. No one but Mr. Kapasi noticed. (69)

Unfulfillment of dream and Mr. Kapasi’s romantic thoughts too are gone with the wind. The same object here is now dynamic in nature. Disillusionment follows.

The keys of a number of coffer boxes tied to one end of the sari of Boori Ma is a significant character in the story, ‘A Real Durwan’. First the character is introduced soliloquising on her previous rich heritage.

At the time she maintained, the turmoil had separated her from her husband four daughters, a two-storey brick house, a rosewood almari, and a number of copper boxes whose skeleton key she still wore, along with her life’s savings, tied to the free end of her sari. (71)

Boori Ma’s prior aristocratic heritage brought out by the static keys. It also is used as a mark of her authoritative nature of the character.
To which Boori Ma would reply, shaking the free end of her sari so that the keys rattled. (72)

*Expression of audacity.*

In another instance the keys are used by Boori Ma as a mark of emphasis. ‘It could be a case of prickly heat’, Mrs.Dalal suggested.

At this Boori Ma shook the free end of her sari and made her skeleton keys rattle. (74)

*Expression of anger as well shows her mannerism.*

A couple of *wash basins* installed in an apartment plays a pivotal role in the story. Mr.Dalal had decided to install one basin in the sitting room of their flat and the other on the stairwell of the building, on the first-floor landing. ‘This way everyone can use it’.

A sink on the stairwell is sure to impress visitors. (78)

*Reasons for installing two basins the static object in the same flat to show the aristocratic as well as the charitable nature of the Dalal’s.*

It is the theft of this basin on the stairwell that brings about the climax of the story.
“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?” (81)

*Her failure to guard the common treasure finally leads to her being ousted from her job as a durwan (watchman). She is thrown out of the flat accused of direlction of duty.*

So the residents tossed her bucket and rags, her baskets and reed broom, down the stairwell, past the letter boxes, through the collapsible gate, and into the alley. Then they tossed out Boori Ma. All were eager to begin their search for a real Durwan. (82)

*The object as a point of climax of the story.*

The *map* plays an important role in the story *Sexy*. Miranda wants to learn about India in general and Bengal in particular. She is helped by Dev, her paramour, who explains to her about Bengal, using a map in *The Economist*. At first she thought that Bengal was a religion. But when Dev explained to her, she understood that it was the place in India where Dev was born.

He pointed to the city where he had been born, and another city where his father had been born. (84)
Map as a static object of importance for integration.

Even after Dev left, Miranda retrieved the map from the dustbin and studied the borders of Bengal.

There was a bay below and mountains above. (85)

Map as an object of expression of expatriate sentiments.

In ‘Mrs.Sen’s’, a special kind of blade used by the title character is an object of importance.

Instead of a knife, she used a blade that curved the prow of a Viking ship, sailing to battle in distant seas. (114)

Blade static object as a source of native cultural identity. It also is an object of social integration in India, since every household possesses the same. Here it also helps to express the expatriate sentiment of Mrs.Sen and goes on to reveal her inability to integrate into the American way of life.

Another dynamic object is a wire pin (121) which is used by Mrs.Sen. As soon as they were inside the apartment she kicked off her slippers this way and that, drew her wire pin from her hair and slit the top and sides of the aerogram in three strokes. (121)
The wire pin is used to show Mrs. Sen's hurried nature to be closer to India and learn about the welfare of her relatives there, thus showing her disintegration to alien life.

Fish, the staple food of Bengali's in India, plays a significant role in the story.

'It is very frustrating', Mrs. Sen apologized with an emphasis on the second syllable of the word.

'To live so close to the ocean and not to have so much fish.' (123)

Fish as a source of inspiration to live in a foreign land. This dynamic object is used as a tool to show the disintegration of Mrs. Sen to the life in America, since she is unable to procure fresh fish, as is done by Bengali's in India.

The title character intends to learn car driving in America so that she would be able to drive back the whole way to India.

'Could I drive all the way to Calcutta? How long would that take, Eliot?'. (119)

The car as a means to get rid of American life.
It is the same car that finally ruins all her plans of learning to drive. In her attempt to get fish, Mrs. Sen attempts to drive the car to the fish store and ends up in an accident in which she and Eliot are injured. The dynamic car is also a source of escapism from the foreign culture, and proves to be a tool of non-integration.

The accident occurred quickly. After about a mile, Mrs. Sen took a left before she should have, and though the oncoming car managed to swerve out of her way, she was so startled by the horn that she lost control of the wheel and hit a telephone pole on the opposite corner. (134)

Car as an object of disintegration with alien culture.

In ‘This Blessed House’ the couple discover strange Christian paraphernalia, statues, thrown around their new house, left over by the previous occupants. These at first brings about a dichotomy between the husband and wife, Sanjeev and Twinkle.

“But it could be worth something. Who knows?”. She turned it upside down. Then stroked, with her index finger, the minuscule frozen folds of its Robes. ‘It’s pretty’.

“We’re not Christian”, Sanjeev said. (137)

“Oh we simply must put it up. It’s too spectacular”
"Now, look. I will tolerate, for now, your little biblical menagerie in
the living room. But I refuse to have this", he said. (139)

*Static paraphernalia as a source of discontentment in family life.*

But towards the end of the story reconciliation is brought out when
Twinkle, the wife discovers the solid silver bust of Christ. But this
contained dignity, solemnity, beauty even. Therefore towards the end of the
story,

Sanjeev pressed the silver face to his ribs, careful not to let the
feather hat slip, and followed her. (157)

*The initial dichotomy between husband and wife cleared by the
paraphernalia of Christ. They integrate into family life and thus to
their foreign culture.*

3.6.5.4. **Role of Institutions**

Cultural prejudices do play the role of characters in a couple of
stories. Lahiri has used such **Institutions** overtly to promote harmony of
life with the new surroundings in some of the stories, while in the others it
explains the pain and anguish of being in a foreign land. One such example
is found in ‘When Mr.Pirzada came to Dine’:
For Halloween I was a witch. Dora, my trick-or-treating partner, was a witch too. (36)

*Ritual games as integration of ethnic culture. The institution of Indian culture is exemplified here.*

Institutions again help one to adhere to traditions and make the expatriate Indians feel comfortable in their abode abroad.

But most of all she remembered a piece of fabric, about the size of a pillowcase, which hung on a dowel at the bottom of the stairs. It was the painting of a naked woman with a red face shaped like a knight’s shield. She had enormous-------------She stuck her tongue out at Miranda.

“*It is the goddess Kali*, Mrs. Dixit explained. (96)

*Learning to integrate with traditions.*

3.6.5.5. Beliefs as Characters

Beliefs in the form of characters add to the narrative element of the stories. In one story these beliefs are mingled as characters to help the development of the plot as a whole.

In the story ‘Interpreter of Maladies’, the family from America on a tour to India are taken around the Konark temple by their guide, Mr.Kapasi.
The lady who follows him enquires about a particular statue, which is that of Astachala Surya.

'He is the Astachala Surya', Mr. Kapasi said. 'The setting sun'. (59)

The belief is that such statues depict the Indian mathematical ideas and help in astrological foundations. The explanation of the belief of a particular religion leads to romantic possibilities between a couple.

This leads to a short dialogue between Mr. Kapasi and Mrs. Mina Das. Meanwhile Mr. Kapasi imagines that such enquiries would enable him to build up a strong relationship with Mrs. Das through letters, even after she gets back to America.

Thus in this context the Sun temple and statues, which are the depictions of eastern beliefs help the characters come together.

3.6.6 COMMON FEATURES IN THE CHARACTERS

An object that lacks presence in everyday life makes it startling and strange. The unfamiliar evokes in people a sense of beauty and creates inquisitiveness to know more about it. The characters of Jhumpa Lahiri are of two types in nature. They are both fantastic and appealing. In her collection 'Interpreter of Maladies', many of her stories are centred on how
the characters feel about and react to certain dilemma situations. Lahiri has used the dilemma to make room for the reader to more thoroughly identify her characters. It is this dilemma that brings people together as well as causes dichotomy between them.

Their inability to acclimate to their environment and grasp new concepts is a remarkable portrait of their own lives. Perhaps the dilemma is the sibling of strangeness and where one goes, the other follows. Lahiri has delineated characters in such a way that the reader feels as if he/she is on a roller coaster ride in the dark, which brings about both the excitement and the thrill through twists and turns.

The beauty and power of tone in such a situation is brought about in the story ‘Sexy’. Sexiness is itself defined by a seven year boy in the story as ‘loving someone you don’t know’. (107)

> Here sexiness and her dilemma to know the real meaning are intertwined and are inseparable.

‘Interpreter of Maladies’ also agrees with the child’s idea. Mr. Kapasi is drawn to Mrs. Das because she seems to be totally unique to him. Her self-centeredness and Americanized way of life is both exciting and
thrilling for Mr. Kapasi, who finds himself falling in love with her over the course of a single day.

In ‘This Blessed House’, the dilemma is a little different. Instead of sexiness, the situation here is intriguing. Twinkle is obsessed with the Christian paraphernalia she finds around their new home. She is unable to give up this habit and eventually falls in love with them, inspite of frequent arguments with her husband.

In each of the stories, the dilemma is dominant and the characters become immersed in the world of events inorder to satiate their desires. In the story ‘Sexy’, Miranda tries to learn Bengali and know more about India inorder to keep Dev arrested with her, but is also pained about the situation of Dev’s wife, and so feels threatened by it. Here Lahiri has used the dilemma both as a thrill and a threat. While Dev is thrilling for her, his wife is a threat to Miranda. But in ‘This Blessed House’, Twinkle feels that the objects she has recovered are a thrill, while Sanjeev sees it as a threat. But here the events bring about reconciliation in the couple and the threat is ruled out finally. In the story ‘Interpreter of Maladies’, the thrill and threat are reciprocal. Mr. Kapasi is enamoured by Mrs. Das, but comes to understand of her cruel nature. Here again Mrs. Das finds Kapasi as one who can cure her mental illness, but is dissatisfied when he is unable to do so.
Lahiri’s success here lies in bringing out the distinctions between the light and the dark in these stories, which the characters are themselves unaware of and are unable to recognize.

Another aspect that is brought out through the characters is that of the state of living as safe. In ‘A Temporary Matter’, the story of a couple who have lived long together find that there is no more thrill in their intimacy. They try to avoid each other in the same house. When fortunately there is a power shut down at dinner time, they decide to seek solace in the unknown darkness and speak to each other openly. They choose the darkness so that they will be safe and free from the their partner’s reactions which finally helps them to reconcile. In the story ‘Sexy’, Miranda feels safety in the company of Dev, because he is highly knowledged about the world, unlike her.

The distinction in the use of the events in these two stories is that while in the former, the characters are brought together by it, in the latter it shuts the relationship down (when Dev is allowed to get back to his wife) forcing people apart.

Another use of a dilemma situation in the characters is that of segregation and separation. In the story ‘When Mr. Pirzada came to Dine’,
the little girl Lilia struggles to recognize Mr. Pirzada's differences. She, as a child recognizes Mr. Pirzada as someone very similar to her own parents. She realizes her folly, when her father tells her that Mr. Pirzada is different, because he belongs to a different nation, religion and culture. It is this innocence that draws the readers in because they can recognize the discreet references to segregation while the child is in a dilemma about the true nationality of Mr. Pirzada. In this story as well as 'Sexy', it is the malleability and the personal understanding of the situations that brings insight into the characters.

The several uses of the grappling situations lends an insight into the making of the characters. Here the situation or event itself can be considered to be a distinct character because it has different roles: as a revelation of integration, disintegration, non-integration and a source of discomfort or provider of safety. It helps in the study of the characters because it evokes in the minds of the reader the various angles of a character, but still remains an indistinct issue, one that fades in and out in meaning with the light shined on it. Through the characters, the reader is allowed to view the issue of dilemmas expressed, from multiple angles which helps to have a thorough comprehension through many perceptions of the unknown.
The portrayal of characters has been enumerated in this chapter. Apart from human characters, Lahiri’s use of the objects, beliefs, institutions, etc., in a deft and well planned manner has been exposed so as to bring out the finer points of the narrative explicitly. The personality traits of the characters has thus been brought out through a thorough analysis of the situations also.