Nine Sketches to Interpret Human Maladies

In Jhumpa Lahiri’s nine short stories collection ‘Interpreter of Maladies’, she interprets human maladies, by various characters. The stories in the collection are ‘A Temporary Matter’, ‘When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine’, ‘Interpreter of Maladies’, ‘A Real Durwan’, ‘Sexy’, ‘Mrs. Sen’s’, ‘The Blessed House’, ‘The Treatment of Bibi Haldar’ and ‘The Third and Final Continent’. Jhumpa Lahiri who took the literary world by storm by publication of her short story collection “Interpreter of Maladies” won her the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction 2000. As the blurb says: “Lahiri’s elegant stories tell the lives of Indians in exile, people navigating between the strict traditions they have inherited and the baffling New World they must encounter everyday”. Indeed her range is very wide, in terms of peoples and lands. In this sense, she may be considered an international writer. Jhumpa Lahiri bursts upon the literary scene out of nowhere. The coveted acclaim from the Pulitzer Prize committee spurs rave reviews, many honourable but a few deplorable as well, on Lahiri and her Maladies. The New Yorker upholds her as one of the 20 best writers under the age of 40. New York Times finds in her wonderfully distinctive new voice and a writer of uncommon elegance and poise. Los Angeles Times Book Review praises her for delicate yet assured touch, leaving no room for flubbed notes or forced epiphanies. Her story collection is called by Newsday as a stunning literary debut. Although published for the first time in this collected version, the stories seem to have sprung full – grown, like Athena, from the head of its creator, with all the force and assurance of art. Therefore, the collection is aptly called a timeless treatise.
A Temporary Matter

The first story of the collection ‘A Temporary Matter’ depicts the disturbing early years in the conjugal life of Shoba and Shukumar, born of an Indian parents but settled down in the USA. A young Indian American couple exchange confessions every night as they struggle to cope with a loss of their child at birth and their failing marriage. The story is actually a gender power game in a subtle form, filtered through the clash of two cultural perspectives. The narrator weaves the tale mostly over the husband’s experience. Shukumar, the husband, is a thirty-five-year-old Indian American graduate student in process of living through ideas. He is unfamiliar with the land of his ancestors and has hardly any interest in Indian life and culture. Still stereotypical Indian notions and inhibitions colour his outlook some.

It records the process of restoration of faith after a long dividing doldrum a threat to the otherwise conjugality of unwanted inter-dependency between Shukumar and Shoba. Shukumar with his elusive nature and Shoba with her professional specificity create discord that prevails for a moderate length of time finally devours all unhappiness, leaving fertile bond to revive the long lost hope and reassemble conjugal bliss. Consequently all mental doubts and apprehensions that could their life’s guideposts are unweeded and the aesthetic of good compensates for the temporary loss of happiness.

For some time their life was not so happy as they lost their baby who was born dead. Moreover as Shukumar thought,

How he and Shoba has been experts at avoiding each other in their three bedroom house, spending as much time on separate floors as possible. He
thought of how he no longer looked forward to
weekends…… and how long it had been since she
looked into his eyes and smiled or whispered his
names on those rare occasions they still reached for
each other before sleeping (ATM 4-5).

So the more Shoba stayed out putting in extra hours at work, the more Shukumar wanted
to stay in managing the household matters.

Under such state of affairs, crisis in their married life continued when a
"Temporary Matter" in the form of a notice broke in. It informed them about the five-
day power cut off for one hour. This unexpected announcement provided them a chance
to come closer to each other once again. Unable to think anything in particular about
spending an hour in darkness, Shoba turned nostalgic and said,

I remember during power failures at my grandmother’s
house, we all had to say something. A little poem, A joke,
A fact about the world.” So, she suggested, “let us say
something to each other in the dark. How about telling
each other, something we’ve never told before (12).

Having thus decided, Shumkumar and Shoba started revealing their untold facts
to each other. Shoba told him about the times when they were newly acquainted and
when she happened to steal a look into his address book to see if he had written her
address there. Shukumar in his turn told her about how he had forgotten to tip their
waiter when they went out to dinner for the first time and how the next morning he went
all the way back just to tip the waiter.
Somehow the whole affair had turned into an exchange of confessions—the little ways they had hurt or disappointed each other. The following nights Shukumar told her about how he once ripped out a photo of a woman in one of the fashion magazines and carried it in his books for a week. He revealed to her how he hadn’t lost the sweater vest Shoba bought him for their third wedding anniversary but had exchanged it for cash at Filene’s and that he had got drunk in the middle of the day at a hotel bar.

Confessions of each other’s guilty was not all that the couple did but they also engaged themselves in some amount of love making they had forgotten. Eventually, Shukumar started looking forward to the lights going out so much so that he was really disappointed when he came to know that the fault was repaired one day ahead of schedule.

The process of confession which started in the dark continued even in the light, for they had now developed the courage to face each other and they no more required the veil of darkness. As a result, a startling revelation came from the side of Shoba when she said that she had signed a lease for a separate accommodation which she had been looking for some time. Shukumar was sickened to realize that the game of confession was purposely designed by Shoba only to make her matters easy. He then took his turn and disclosed something he had sworn he would never tell his wife. It was about the sex of their child that Shoba herself had wanted to be a surprise until it was born. The final confession from either side was thus made. Shoba, who had initiated all this burst into tears and Shukumar also joined her.

Shukumar and Shoba who don’t know how to cope with the grief bequeathed by their still born child and the gradual erosion of their intimate togetherness in Boston.
The announcement of hour long power cuts in the evening, though a temporary matter comes to their rescue. They begin to sit together again and communicate with each other during the black outs, share some moments of intimacy exchange confessions and appear to have moved closer to some understanding.

Shukumar and Shoba regard India as the land of their memory of this country. It is but natural for an exile to recollect the native country off and on. Hence Shoba compares the load shedding of America with that of India in the following lines. "It is like India: Sometimes the current disappear for hours at a stretch" (11). Their marriage is failure, the string that had tied their hearts was broken with the death of their child. Shoba and Shukumar begin the game of confessing secrets to one another in the dark the reader proceed from harmless personal details to be harmful ones when Shoba says that she has decided on a separation and has already made arrangements for it.

Shukumar remains engaged in teaching his classes and doing research. In the course of his academic pursuits, Shukumar has to go to Baltimore to attend a conference and meanwhile Shoba gives birth to a dead child. The birth of a dead child disturbs their domestic harmony and Shoba decides finally to separate herself from Shukumar forever. At one point of time the idea of the impermanence of the taste of food is contrasted with the permanence of pain that has come to stay in the lives of Shoba and Shukumar and that has deeply influenced the two of them living under the same roof. He had no memory of eating those meals and yet they were there recorded in her neat proof reader’s hand.

One might note that the pain of the death of Shukumar’s father makes his mother almost whereas Shoba’s mother articulates her pain very calmly by mentioning the
absence of Shukumar during the death of the child: “But you weren’t even there” (9).

Against the permanence of pain, other emotions appear impermanent. One of the ways
the dreaders might discover the permanence of the pain is to notice the way both Shoba
and Shukumar talk to each other. They seem incapable of communicating with each
other without inflicting pain. They speak only to deliberately hurt one another by
narrating events to prove painful to both. Their way of hurting

Each other might be termed sadist for they derive pleasure by inflicting pain. The
story puts their way of communicating with each other in the following manner, which,
as already mentioned proves not particularly pleasurable for either, “Somehow without
saying anything it had turned into this. Into an exchange of confessions the little ways
they had hurt or disappointed each other, and themselves” (18).

Further talks only prove to be more hurting and intense in inflicting pain. After
Shukumar discovers that Shoba has been too ruthless in her decision to stay separately he
too decides to play his trump card in making her unhappy. Shukumar discloses the
secret that he had hidden from her till then. The secret which he had promised to himself
not to let Shoba know is about the birth and subsequent death of their baby, a face to
which only he had access till then and thus had suffered under its burden alone. Mutual
separation, as subsequently becomes clear, remains the only road towards a temporal
relief that both probably discover at the same time, “It sickened Shukumar knowing that
she had spent these past evenings preparing for a life without him. He was relieved and
yet he was sickened”(21).
First he suffers the blow of her revelation and then decides to say something, which could according to him, prove too painful a blow to her. He does this deliberately so that Shoba does really suffer under the burden of this knowledge. This is a piece that also narrates the loss of love between the two that is complete,

Shoba looked at him, now her face controlled with sorrow. He had cheated on a college exam ripped, a picture of a woman out of a magazine. He had returned a sweater and got drunk in the middle of the day instead. There were the things he had told her against his chest in a darkened room in an unknown wing of the hospital. He had held him until nurse knocked and took him away, and he promised to himself that day that he would never tell Shoba, because he still loved her then, and it was the one thing in her life that she had wanted to be a surprise (22).

But surprisingly Shukumar discovers that while making his wife unhappy, he himself ends up being a part of that unhappiness. The crisis in the life of Shoba and Shukumar that simmered in the form of lack of love as faith in their interpersonal relationship and Shoba’s efforts for isolated living came out through confession. But then these confessions proved a bliss in disguise a bliss that cleared their hearts and brought them together once again.

The story ends with the couple weeping together. The thought both for Shoba and Shukumar progresses by association as Shoba associates power cuts with India and
with a particular rice ceremony where the baby cried, Shukumar’s thought proceeds to associate the baby with their dead baby which never cried.

In this story Lahiri exemplifies universal lessons in love and insecurities within relationships. After moving to a new place though career-wise Shobha could Americanize herself, she was a victim to intense nostalgia. An instance from the story is representative of their life. When Shukumar picks up the protted ivy in order to use it as a makeshift candle holder, while the electricity will be turned off, he finds that even though the plant was inches from the tap, the soil was so dry that he had to water it first before the candles would stand straight. Thus, Lahiri subtly evokes the couple’s common state of lack of interest in their shred environment as both have failed to withstand the change. Taken together, the sheer number of these small failures to provide care help to define the depths of Shobha and Shukumarr’s common yet different experience of grief for their lost child as well as their warning care and love for each other.

**When Mr. Pirzada Came To Dine**

Here the narrative voice is that of Lilia, a small girl living happily with her parents in New England. In their sedate family life, a lot of warmth is added when Mr. Pirzada, on a scholarship from Pakistan to USA for some Botanical research, visits them almost every night. Mr. Pirzada has an appealing personality; a lecture in Botany at Dacca University, he has to leave behind his wife of twenty years and seven daughters ranging between six and sixteen with all of their names beginning with the letter A. The story throws light on the cultural difference between an Indian family settled in USA and a Muslim academic who is temporarily there. The only link between Mr. Pirzada and
this Bengali family where he comes for dinner is the common language. For 10 year old Lilia, Mr. Pirzada is only an Indian, till her father informs her that after partition of 1947, Mr. Pirzada is no more an Indian, which in any case is beyond the grasp of innocent Lilia. In fact, it is rather difficult for her to make any sense out of it:

It made no sense to me. Mr. Pirzada and my parents spoke the same language, laughed at the same jokes, looked more or less the same. They ate pickled mangoes with their meals, ate rice every night for supper with their hands. Like my parents, Mr. Pirzada took off his shoes before entering a room, chewed fennel seeds after meals as a digestive, and drank no alcohol, for dessert dipped austere biscuits into successive cups of tea (WMPCD 25).

The tension in the builds up when in 1971, due to turmoil in East Pakistan, there is exodus of millions of refugees for asylum in West Bengal leading to war between Indian and Pakistan and the genesis of Bangladesh. Coming to Lilia’s house becomes critical for Mr. Pirzada since he needs to know the latest development of the war situation by watching the television news at night. He is particularly worried about his family living in Dacca, and his anxiety is shared by the entire family of Lilia. Lilia now has the feeling that Mr. Pirzada has always been smartly dressed as if “in preparation to endure with dignity whatever news assailed him, perhaps even to attend a funeral at a moment’s notice”(31). Lilia also waits for a surprising moment when Mr. Pirzada’s seven daughters would suddenly appear on the television blowing kisses and waving
hands to the father. After the news, there are long discussions between Mr. Pirzada and Lilia’s parents “as if they were a single person, sharing a single meal, a single body and a single silence and a single fear” (41). This story, therefore, is unique in the sense that emphasis is here on fostering a cultural bond despite apparent differences of birth and breeding.

It builds around a little girl’s hopes and fears over grave situations such as the Pakistan Civil War and invasion of Dacca by Pakistani army. She is not interested in her country’s tale of which she has only a vague idea, but only in the fate of Mr. Pirzada who is an Indian man and later no longer considered Indian. It obviously makes no sense to Lilia who finds no cultural gap between Mr. Pirzada and her Indian parents. Mr. Pirzada removes his shoes before entering their house eats the same food, and speaks the same language. It is she who is culturally drifting away, learning American history, American geography, the revolutionary War. Shutting away the book on Pakistan because it did not form a part of her report making Jack-O-Lantern and dressing for Halloween. Yet she feels a oneness with this Pakistani, prays for the well being of his daughters, and misses him as one misses a family member. Lilia’s parents are exiled Indians with a vision of their comfortable life to their child in the USA.

“I would never have to eat rationed food, or obey curfews, or watch riots from my roof-top or hide neighbours in water tanks as she and my father had” (26). Lilia’s mother enumerates the problems her child not have to face: power failure, reading by kerosene lamps, pressure, tutors and constant exams the confusions, the hardships that the Hindus and Muslims had to face during the partition. The drifting, clamouring crowd is contrasted with the luxurious room that nurtures the exiled Indian child with matching flounced, curtains, and white and violet walls. The practical complaints that Lilia’s
parents have are that the supermarket did not stock mustard oil, doctors did not make
house calls and that neighbours never visited them without invitation. Lilia is a keen
observer too, and meticulously records all the details of his routine-hanging his gray and
blue coat on the rack, offering lozenges and truffles to her, setting his pocket watch to
the local time in Dacca and putting it in front of him during the meal.

Lilia is a mixed name having Indian name “Lila” in it but modified to fit in an
American society. For Pirzada, his daughters are not individuals all the seven daughters
have names starting with letter A. Children cannot be treated as distinct individuals or
little men of identity, when they exceed in number. This is why Mr. Pirzada cannot
relate their names to their identity and fails to distinguish them by their names.

Perhaps, the only case of cultural conflict in this story is evident when Lilia is
cought red-handed by her teacher in the library while browsing through the pages of
Asian History, instead of doing a class assignment on American History. Otherwise the
focus is on an overwhelming cultural link between Mr. Pirzada and the Bengal family.
Mr. Pirzada is the most welcomed guest and Lilia always waits for the candy that Mr.
Pirzada brings for her: “I coveted each evening’s treasure as I would a jewel, or a coin
from a buried kingdom” (29). Moreover, all of Lilia’s family feels the absence of Mr.
Pirzada when he returns to his country, now Bangaladesh. For months together, they
eagerly wait for the news of his family, but nothing comes from that end was their
cultural bond so tenuous that it got snapped so easily? No, they finally get a card from
him commemorating the Muslim New Year along with a letter with the happy news that
all of his daughters and his three storey house are safe. He then writes in his letter that
mere “thank you” would be meager to express his feeling of gratitude for all the dinners,
all the love and concern that he received from them. At this point even young Lilia
realizes what it means to miss someone who is so many miles away and understands the agony of Mr. Pirzada when he had missed his wife and daughters for so many months.

In this story, Lahiri attempts to forge her own amalgamated domain rather than respond to her parents' cultural nostalgia. The very important issue in the story is that man can divide the country, state and land surface but not culture. The complications of Indo-Pak diplomacy have given birth to Bangladesh but Indo-Bangal cultural relation is not severed for Mr. Pirzada expresses his happiness over Indian official's announcement unless the world helped to relieve the burden of East Pakistani refugees, India would have to go to war against Pakistan. The story is a turning point in Lahiri's career because for the first time she made her protagonists an Indian- American who lives in New England. The story seems to be a moving account of a family guest, Mr. Pirzada, who has returned to Dacca after his research work and Bangladesh's limping back to parliamentary.

Lahiri captured the longing of immigrants for their people after displacement. With the political commentary, of the then India at the time of partition interwined, she depicts desperation and separation pangs encountered by the migrants. The importance of family ties and relationships is not something which one develops overnight or abandons overnight. It is an inherited value, imbibed through one's cultural moorings, Lila, despite the fact of being so young to understand the differences prevailing among human beings belonging to different cultures, was able to trace out and understand the identical likes and dislikes between her family and Mr. Pirzada, their Indian visitor.

The Indians who have settled abroad feel themselves exiled, as they in their consciousness unable to cut off completely their connection and bond that still bind them
in their emotional crisis. The story ends with Mr. Pirzada’s return to Bangladesh, to live in a free country with his wife and seven daughters. But Lila missed him a lot and it was only then that she knew what it meant to miss someone who was so many miles and hours away, just as he had missed his wife and daughters for so many months.

**Interpreter of Maladies**

It is the most representative and establishes Jhumpa Lahiri as an adept and master story teller. The opening scene is very significant as it throws light on the main theme of the story: man-woman relationship. Here the readers are introduced Mr. and Mrs. Das who are hotly arguing as to who would take Tina, their daughter, to the toilet. It is typical of western culture where husband and wife are equal partners and both are supposed to take care of the children. Very often, it leads to bickering about their respect duties, as in the case of Mr. and Mrs. Das.

The story is about the visit of an Indian-American family, Mr. and Mrs. Das along with their three children daughter Tina and sons Ronny and Bobby. They are in Orissa, visiting Sun temple at Konark. The family is being escorted by the tourist guide, one Mr. Kapasi. The author gives a graphic picture of the touring family. Mr. Das about thirty years of age, was dressed in shorts, sneakers and a T-shirt. The camera slung around his neck, with an impressive telephoto lens and numerous buttons. Similarly there are lively description of Mrs. Das and the Children.

They are all set to reach sun temple which is eighteen miles north of Puri. As their car speeds to the destination, the children are excited as they see monkeys on both sides of the road. The car they were travelling in was not in good condition and they felt uncomfortable. Mrs. Das complained to her husband, isn’t this an air-conditioned car?
Mr. Das however does not pay any heed to it. Soon afterwards, Kapasi stops the car as Mr. Das takes a picture of barefoot man, his head wrapped in a dirty turban, seated on the top of a cart of grain. Mrs. Das meanwhile takes much interest in Mr. Kapasi's profession as an interpreter that he feels quite flattered.

Kapasi had been a devoted scholar of foreign languages and the owner of an impressive collection of dictionaries. He had dreamed of being an interpreter for diplomats and dignitaries, resolving conflicts between people and nations, settling disputes of which he alone could understand both sides. He had started working as an interpreter, in addition to his teaching job, in order to pay the increase medical bills of his family. Mr. Kapasi started reflecting at the situation. He started realizing that Mr. and Mrs. Das was a bad match for each other, as were he and his wife.

That the Das couple is lopsided is clear at the outset itself. Even the taxi driver, Mr. Kapasi, notes their casual attitude towards their children: Mr. and Mrs. Das behaved like an older brother and sister, not parents. It seemed that they were in charge of the children only for the day; it was hard to believe they were regularly responsible for anything other than themselves. In addition, while Mr. Das seems to be more attached to India, Mrs. Das is indifferent in her attitude towards this country. Her hostility arises mostly because of the hot climate here: "I told you to get a car with air-conditioning,' Mrs. Das continued. ‘Why do you do this, Raj, just to save a few stupid rupees. What are you saving us, fifty cents?’(IM 49). In this manner, the mental conflict runs here on two levels – one in the personal relationship of Mr. and Mrs. Das and the other, in the too brief embryonic exchange between Mr. Kapasi and Mrs. Das.
The self-absorbed Mrs. Das stops polishing her nails and removes her sunglasses the moment she hears Mr. Kapasi’s part-time job as an Interpreter of maladies. He explains the symptoms of Gujarati patients to a local doctor who does not know that language. So far, none has taken his professions seriously. His own wife looks down upon this job and when other women ask her, she tells them that he is doctor’s assistant. Mr. Das too is quite unimpressed by Mr. Kapasi’s profession; he rather likes his job of guide since he himself has to bring his students periodically to museum and explain this to them. Only Mrs. Das finds this job of interpreting maladies so romantic; “She did not behave in a romantic way toward her husband, and yet she had used the word to describe him.... Her sudden interest in him, an interest she did not express in either her husband or her children, was mildly intoxicating (53).

Mr. Kapasi, so far living a drab life, suddenly becomes lively and yields to the urge to look back at the rearview mirror to get a complete view of the charming face of Mrs. Das. Subsequently, Mrs. Das, so intrigued by his job of an interpreter, asks many questions related to that and finally concludes that such patients are very dependent on him and hence he is more important for them than the doctor himself. After all, the
Mr. Kapasi had never thought of his job in such complimentary terms. To him it was a thankless occupation. He found nothing noble in interpreting people's maladies, assiduously translating the symptoms of so many swollen bones, countless cramps of bellies and bowels, spots on people's palms that changed color, shape, or size (51).

He begins to read his importance in the eyes of Mrs. Das, further sustained by her invitation to come to the same dining table while having lunch. Not only that, he is invited to be present in the family, snaps, there is rather one photograph of him with Mrs. Das alone. He starts fantasizing his future affair with her. He cherishes romantic ideas when he finds Mrs. Das carefully observing the erotic sculpture of the Sun Temple. When Mrs. Das wants his address from him on a piece of paper, torn from magazine showing a movie hero and heroine passionately embracing each other, he imagines his future date with Mrs. Das. Thus highly encouraged, in addition to glancing at her face he glanced at the strawberry between her breast, and the golden brown hollow in her throat. Later, when he gets a chance to be physically close to her, he is overwhelmed by the smell of a scent on her skin, like a mixture of whiskey and rosewater. In contrast, he becomes aware of the bad smell emanating from his own perspiration.

Mr. Kapasi is pleased that the Das family likes the temple. He feels tempted at the bare legs of Mrs. Das and wonders if she would propose to him. He looks forward to
a happy married life with her in the years to come. Mr. Kapasi does not want their romantic encounter to end so soon, so after the Sun Temple he brings the Das family to the hills of Udayagiri and Khandagiri. As Mrs. Das is too tired to climb the hills, she remains with Mr. Kapasi in the taxi. For Mr. Kapasi, it is a golden chance to enjoy the enchanting proximity of Mrs. Das; for her too, it is a god-sent chance but for a different reason. She suffers from a malady and feels that Mr. Kapasi can interpret the reason behind that. The story reaches its climax when Mrs. Das confides in him that one of her three children, Bobby, is not born of Mr. Das but of a Punjabi friend of her husband during his sojourn at her home. She has been suffering this agony for the last eight years because she has not told the truth to Mr. Das so far. Unknown to such maladies, Mr. Kapasi fails to offer her any satisfying remedy. He rather alienates her by asking her indiscreetly, “Is it really pain you feel, Mrs. Das, or is it guilt?”(66). Mrs. Das glares at this confronting question but her silence proclaims the imminent gab engulfing the two. Ironically, in order to rescue Bobby from the harassment caused by monkeys, and soothe him by her maternal care, Mrs. Das brings out a hairbrush from her straw-bag to comb his hair. But she, inadvertently, throws the address of Mr. Kapasi out, it fluttered away in the wind. No one but Mr. Kapasi noticed. He watched as it rose, carried higher and higher by the breeze, into the trees where the monkeys now sat, solemnly observing the scene below. Mr. Kapasi observed it too, knowing that this was the picture of the Das family he would preserve forever in his mind. Thus, the maladies of hundreds of patients, first fails to diagnose his own malady and then to interpret the painful past of Mrs. Das and offer her an alleviating remedy.

At the end of the story, Mrs. Das is at the junctions. Though she has made a confession, Albatross is still hanging around her neck. The author leaves the ending
open to the readers’ imagination. Would she share the secret with her husband? If yes, how would the husband respond? The story is essentially based on marital discord, but the protagonist is an emancipated woman and is free to make a choice and shape her fortune. The entire story is exposed step by step and the reader holds his breath as the facts are unfolded to him. Jhumpa Lahiri lends fine touches to the details so as to keep the verisimilitude intact. The reader is so absorbed with the characters and the conversations that he just cannot withdraw from the fictional world of Jhumpa Lahiri.

A Real Durwan

In this story ‘A Real Durwan’ an old woman trying to come to terms with her old age and her status as a refugee in India. Nobody knows about her antecedents, except that she is a refugee who was deported to Calcutta after the Partition. She lives and works as an unofficial durwan in a building in Calcutta. Supposedly from a rich and affluent family she harps upon her past affluence in East Pakistan. There is no proof of what she says and none believes her, probably because she tends to contradict herself, exaggerate, embellish and garble the facts. Boori Ma constantly travels back in time and tries to find solace in her past. The generalizations and opinions expressed by the community in ‘A Real Durwan’ have a great effect on how Boori Ma acts and interprets her own identity and class status. Much of her eccentric behavior is excused because of her age.

The generation gap and the fictionalization of a previous lifestyle are underlined in the story. But to be sure it is difficult to surmise that Boori ma is fictionalizing her previous lifestyle. There is no evidence to support her assertions but again there is no evidence either to disclaim or refute it. She should be given the benefit of doubt.
History is full of the horrors of what followed the Partition. The ugly thing that was Partition had pauperized the rich zamindars who had to leave everything to save their lives. The people living in the flat-building could never imagine that a sweeper woman in their building could also be the mistress of a rich family. “What kind of landlord ended up sweeping stairs” (ARD 72), was what Mr. Dalal thought. Mr. Chatterjee’s ambiguous refrain that Boori Ma is the product of changing times, is commonly accepted by the community in the building. But are they able to interpret it correctly? Mr. Chatterjee most probably hints at the turbulent times that Borri Ma had seen the partition and the resulting suffering that she had to go through. The old man is compassionate towards Boori Ma and so he perhaps wants the people to treat her kindly and also keeping her age in mind, humour her. Again, he may also mean that certain benefits of doubt should be given to her because of her status as a refugee in India and because such a drastic change in circumstances was not impossible.

Boori Ma tries to escape from the hardship she is facing by reminiscing about her past life. She does not have a home which she can call her own. In other stories characters like Mrs. Sen, for instance, talk and think about home to which they can return. Separated from her home and family in East Pakistan, displaced in Calcutta through the Partition Boori Ma, has no home but memory whereas the other stories in the collection talk mostly about the US settled Indians attachment with India. But here in this story, Boori Ma’s attachment with something or someplace more eastward than India.

Boori Ma’s predicament is that she remains a refugee even while living in a flat-building. The Dalals promise to give her a new bedding leads to the destruction of her bed and she ends up sleeping on newspapers. It may seem a reflection of the destruction
of her place of abode during the partition and her eventual migration of India. The Dalal’s promise of future comfort also remind us of the Bangladesh Was and the objectives it aspired for freedom, development, prosperity and a comfortable life-for the greater good of the Bengalis. The non-fulfilment of both the promises turns Boori Ma a refugee over and over again. She would sleep at the foot of the staircase from where she had to shift to the roof top when the staircase was being renovated. Later on she takes to roaming in the streets because of the noise and commotion made by the workmen. This leads to her being accused of collaborating with thieves, who stole Mr. Dalal’s wash basin. She is turned out of the building and she ends up again as what she was before being given shelter in the building, that is, a refugee.

This story puts the two phases of life seeped in apparent hostility at opposite poles. Old age emblematic of immense reciprocity, undemanding volunteer and a patient sacrifice stands in opposition to the adulthood which rejects all threats to ego and is self-interested in its motive. It is robust, highly volatile to offences and status conscious. But these two phases give a complete whole to life which undergoes changes as one passes from one period to another. Further, Boori ma, recollecting her past and dead regality, is illustrative of the past that man’s consciousness cannot shun through which it has passes out for another venture into time. Time in its collective form present, past and hopes making the future-reveals an alive psyche that breathes in creativity to construct the mental perception of one’s own existence. Besides, it is also a reflection upon the quality and flux of the form of living to which we individuals have little contribution. Their success lies in our labour but not in our rewards. The juxtaposition of the have and have notes is another image of doubling. Besides, the Boori Ma treasuring the keys to the chest which once upon carried her riches, but no more now, reveals that man
derives much from false hope to overcome the vicissitudes of life. She is very particular about the keys as if its loss would prevent her from opening the chest.

Although it is ridiculous on the superficial level to label Boori Ma as neurotic, yet the sense of pity makes you identify her with her keys. At the climax, she loses her keys which add much to her emotional disorder the unhealthy situation is initiated by her neglect at the chaal. A vaccum creates in her although its physical co-relation did not ever exist. Her keys are her way to the world of imagination. Once the connector is lost, the real and the unreal separate making the lady wretched. Identity is that whereby one feels is the same, in this place, this time as at that time and at that place, past or future it is that by which one is identified.

She does her job of a charwoman and virtually guards the whole building without any payment of course. Boori Ma’s services resemble those of a real durwan and the residents of flats are thankful to her because she patrols activities in alley keeps away suspicious men and summon a rickshaw at a moment’s calling. Sometimes the residents welcome her to their flats and offer her tea. The following limes highlight Boori ma state of exile in a brilliant manner. “Knowing not to sit in 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).

Residents of the apartment finally decided what they needed was a real durwan. So they tossed her bucket and rags, her basket and reed broom down the stairwell. Then they tossed out Boori Ma. She kept telling them all: believe me, believe me. This is another end of the failure of human relationships. The relationship called humane is a failure since it was made. The people expect something more from each other than they
can offer to him or can do for others. Basically, human beings are selfish and they can hardly love beyond the spheres of practicality.

In social context, the Boori Ma again is an image of the unreal whereas her survivors are embodiments of the real. To construct dreams, concrete reality efforts are demanded. Here Boori Ma and the chaal fellows make the whole of the imaginary in process. The condition of Boori Ma becomes miserable when Mr. Dalal, a benevolent resident of the building, goes to Simla for an outing. One day she goes out for a walk and finds a basin fitted on the stairwell missing when she returns to the building. The blame falls on Boori ma and she is thrown out of the house for neglecting her duty. In the beginning of the short story, Boori Ma is introduced as a refugee and at the end of the story the readers can see her again as homeless exile. Perhaps the writer wants to prove here that the geographical displacement is not the only condition for an exile, a person may lose his identity even in his native land in this selfish and materialistic world.

It does not express her sharing of feelings and emotions with a Bangladeshi refugee as temporary matter, rather it expresses her poignant feelings over the suffering Boori Ma undergoes in a fretful present by gloating over a glossy past. She describes Boori Ma’s derision against the residents of the flat and registers her approbation of Boori Ma as the Real Durwan, with maternal love and care, though incapacitated by senility. Boori Ma’s life is a series of losses and misfortunes and her final suffering and second banishment from the means of her livelihood drags her into alienation, deprivation and uncertain future. Lahiri captures the Indian ethos effectively. In this story her character speak Bengali which she thinks is an ‘unwise decision’ but she defends it Bengali is essentially a spoken language for her, because it occupies such an aural presence in her mind.
Lahiri’s Sexy presents the cultural aspects of human sexuality by juxtaposing the relationship of a man and a woman belonging to two different cultures in an extra-marital affair. The story seems to emphasise how modern social life has become sex-centred, in which genuine love and friendship have been largely usurped by sex. The loose sexuality of the Americanized Indian libertine, Dev and Laxmi’s cousin’s husband has been juxtaposed with the tradition-bound domestic sexuality of Laxmi and her cousin. Laxmi’s cousin’s husband’s adultery is beyond the comprehension of both Laxmi and her cousin; the former is infuriated and sharply reacts, “If I were her I’d fly straight to London and shoot them both”(S 97). While the latter spends most of her days in weeping. What could be the cause of husband’s adultery? Is it infatuation towards the blonde or the unfulfilment in domestic sexuality? True answer is indeed difficult to get as we cannot deny the lechery of the husband for he is enamoured of the enchanting body of his blonde mistress. There is a crucial relationship between the body and sex, the former is the stimulant of the latter; physical attraction and sexual stimulation are inextricably linked it is the lack of both these things that leads to the collapse of the marital bond of Laxmi’s cousin. To what extend body is related to sexuality can well be explained by the different sexual encounters of the central character of the story, Miranda, a professional mistress selling her body. When the story opens, Miranda is engaged with the Indian married man, Dev whose love towards the former is more of a sexual exploit than the love of the real sort. She realizes this throughout her conversation with Rohin, the only child of Laxmi’s cousin who reveals the fact as to why his father left his mother, “He sat next to someone he didn’t know, some one sexy and now he loves her instead of my mother”(108). Rohin’s appreciation of Miranda as
‘sexy’ and his definition of the term loving someone you don’t know jolts the very faith of Miranda in Dev. This compels her to flashback her sexual experience with Dev when the latter had whispered her name during love-making, calling her, “You’re Sexy”(107). The flashback contemplation assists her to realize the extend to which she has fallen when an Indian approaches her and enters her whimsically without concern for her predilection.

Miranda’s sexual experience with Dev reveals a hypocritical male response to female sexuality, particularly in Indian context. In an orthodox society like India, marital sexuality is often imposed under traditional values; and the partner when exposed to the liberal sexuality of the West tends to play a dubious role, by pretending loyalty to the married partner, and at the same time committing adultery by indulging in extramarital sexuality. Any decision on the nature of human sexuality is a matter of the values recognized in a society. In any case the conflict between Sex and moral values is explicitly noticeable in the sexual pursuits of Dev and Miranda.

Looking at the sexual experience of Miranda from a different perspective, the readers can trace a mythical dimension in her entire response to Dev’s sexuality. There is a Mira in Miranda Mira who stands for the devotional paramour of LORD Krishna but unfortunately she can only be a paramour, and not the marital partner, and so can be Miranda. There is a vast chasm, between Dev and Miranda; the chasm created by the sense of otherness as suggested by the meaning of sexy “loving someone you don’t know”(107). That is to say, Dev and Miranda do not know each other and their sexual encounters can well be equated with the sexual encounter of animals to gratify their biological need, devoid of any emotional attachment. To speak in other words, they represent the chasm between the East and the West; both appear to be different and
mysterious to each other, and yet, equally attracted. The difference between the East and
the West is not only cultural, but also physical and colour-related, that is the Dark (East)
and Fair (West); these two opposites feel magnetic enticement between them for their
strangeness and otherness leading to their physical union as exemplified by Dev (East-
Dark), and Miranda (West-Fair), but due to the cultural alienation the people witness
hindrance in the attainment of a total sexual assimilation. Hence, culture plays a pivotal
role in the shaping of human sexuality, even as it is biologically determined.

This story begins with a “wife’s worst nightmare” (83). Laxmi’s cousin’s
husband deserts his wife and son for another woman he meets on a flight. The incident
finds a curious parallel in Miranda’s life when Dev, cheating on his wife strikes a
relationship with Miranda. When Dev calls her ‘sexy’ she takes it as a warm
compliment. Her purchase of stockings with seam, a knee-length silk robe and a cocktail
dress with silvery material is a direct reaction to it. She however never gets a chance to
wear them since Dev meets her for a brief span on Sundays and enjoys her only in bed.
She finally wears the dress for the seven year-old Rohin, son of the lady whose husband
has deserted her for a woman he met on the flight leaving a depressed wife and Rohin
sketching aeroplanes in his notebook. It is he who zips up Miranda’s dress and very
inappropriately echoes Dev and calls her sexy. However, that Rohin does not know the
implication. The lexical meaning that he has formed of the word in his dictionary after
his father left him is -loving someone does not know. He makes Miranda realize the
wrong and judge their relationship that actually stands nowhere. Later when Miranda
refuses to meet Dev she is certain that Dev will smoke and join his wife with a lie. She
buys a cup of coffee and sits in front of the Mapparium when the focus shifts beyond
these petty clandestine affairs and moral values to the giant pillars, the massive dome and the sky.

Beside the inappropriate echo, Lahiri strikes another parallel between Dev and Rohin. Dev takes Miranda to the Mapparium where she is face-to-face with the different countries that make up the world; the many countries joining hands and lying side-by-side; Dev and his wife coming from one, Miranda from another. Rohin opens up a similar consciousness by playing a quizzing game with countries and capitals. The story again bears the stamp of meticulous craftsmanship.

It is a highly romantic situation, the use of the word, ‘sexy’ by Dev for Miranda, and for her: it was the first time a man had called her sexy, and when she closed her eyes she could still feel his whisper drifting through her body, under her skin. Incidentally, there are so many firsts in the story; Dev is the first man in her life with moustache, first to bring bouquets for her and first to whisper her name again and again while making love, and she is the first woman for Dev with such long legs. However, when the word “sexy” gets repeated in an unusual situation, revelation dawns upon the mind of Miranda. That innocent child Rohin calls her “sexy” after he sees her in a glamorous silver cocktails dress. When asked to explain what he meant by it, he says, “it means loving someone you don’t know” (107). Then he explains that his father has used the same word for an unfamiliar white girl during his travel in the aeroplane causing the misery of his mother. “She cries, sometimes for hours. Sometimes straight through dinner. Sometimes she cries so hard her eyes puff up like bullfrogs” (104).

Touched by the poignant narration the same expression ‘sexy’ has a somewhat different impact on Miranda: “Miranda felt Rohin’s words under her skin the same way
she’d felt Dev’s. but instead of going hot she felt numb”(107-108). Miranda is haunted by the image of Rohin’s mother desperately shrieking at her husband, “Tell me if she’s sexy”(108). This results in an attitudinal change in Miranda, who now starts making lame excuses to avoid Dev. Determined not to become another home-breaker, one Sunday the ventures out alone but under “the clear blue sky spread over the city”(110), the open sky signifying her freedom from Dev with a clear and heightened perspective on man-woman relationship. In this way, the cultural conflict operates in a different way in this story; Dev, an Indian, acts more westernized than the western Miranda who comes closer to Indian values of compassion and self-sacrifice.

Mrs. Sen’s

Mrs. Sen’s the young old thirty something, is the character who is affected the most by her displacement. With little else to do she takes on Eliot, an eleven year old boy to fill her afternoon hours when her husband is working. Eliot quickly becomes aware of Mrs. Sen’s loneliness, her bewilderment in a strange new culture. Again, Eliot also feels bewildered when he sees the kind of life that the Sen’s live and how Mrs. Sen tries to recreate India in their small apartment. She tries very hard to follow the ways and customs of the United States but she cannot escape the fact that, “Everything is there in India”(MS 113). The thing the misses most is the community feeling that is absent in the US. Love for absolute privacy and silence in the American neighborhood stands in sharp contrast with the community feeling in India. Mrs. Sen is new to the foreign land and her sense of alienation becomes complete when she has to spend the day alone cooped up in the apartment with none of the neighbors coming over for a friendly chat. In India under such circumstances she would have been flooded by visits from the neighbors who would be there to get acquainted with her and also offer their assistance.
in her settling down. Coming from a land where people did not need any excuse to visit one another, she is taken aback by this love for silence and privacy.

Eliot becomes Mrs. Sen’s companion and intimate and ultimately, a witness to her ultimate breakdown. He determines that she lives for the two things that make her happy: letters from home and whole fresh fish from the sea. Mrs. Sen is actually homesick. She longs for home, that is, India and in particular, Calcutta. The place where she lives now is just an apartment for her, a house but not home which she feels is in Calcutta, surrounded by well-wishers and memories. Repeated reference to the home that she had left behind at Calcutta heightens her sense of loneliness. It is only while working in the kitchen, chopping vegetables and cooking for her husband that she comes alive. Though she is far from the sights and sounds of home she can get the ‘smell of home’ in her cooking. Fish is one food item which becomes an obsession with Mrs. Sen. Her existence as also her survival in an alien land tends to revolve around and depend upon this food item.

The narrator of the story is an eleven year old boy who himself is an outsider to the world of Mrs. Sen, alien to the Indian culture that is followed there. It also becomes a kind of enlightening experience for him. He becomes aware very early in life about the existence of a culture which is more vibrant captivating for Mrs. Sen than the culture in which he is growing up. Eliot simply narrates his childhood experiences and observations. He is an impartial narrator who does not take sides and gives a fair view of the lives of the two families, of the Sen and theirs (his mother’s and his). He is surprised to see the lack of display of affection between the Sen couple. The formal way in which the spouses behave towards each other surprises him. It is not that Mrs. Sen does not try to regulate to her new surroundings. She takes driving lessons and tries to attack up
some sort of friendship with Eliot’s mother but the other woman does not seem much motivated. As Mrs. Sen is an outsider in the US, Eliot’s mother also seems to be an outsider to the world that has been deliberately created in the apartment to resemble a home in India. Eliot’s mother behaves as a prospective employer would towards her employees asking questions and noting down the answers in the steno pad, whereas Mrs. Sen tries to befriend her by warmly welcoming her and entertaining her, the best way to make friends is to share your food with them. It can, perhaps, be said that the sense of alienation is heightened in the foreign settlers because of this attitude of the native people who are wary of any contact with what is not of their ‘type’. The pain of uprooting from one’s native land and shifting to an alien culture together with the ‘mind your own business’ kind of attitude that the native people show contribute to the sense of displacement that afflicts the likes of Mrs. Sen. The alien eyes are those of a child curiously looking at Indian things, as Lahiri herself must have done in her childhood. The readers go through Mrs. Sen’s collection of sarees, her golden bangles, braided hair, her bowls and colanders. It particularly strikes Eliot that they do not wear shoes but flip-flops at home, that their dinner table is set without napkins, or silverware. The blade from India is described in detail and compared to the prow of a Viking ship. The comparison that might seem so farfetched to a casual reader is only a natural comparison for Eliot who lives by the sea. Mrs. Sen’s efficiency in chopping vegetables, fish or chicken is brought out at a length for the snooping western reader. In the story, Eliot’s world is contrasted with that of Mrs. Sen’s. while Mrs. Sen takes all the trouble preparing dinner for two, cutting vegetables surrounded by colanders and water bowls, spices and pastes measured and blended, and collections of broth, Eliot’s mother goes without lunch, has bread, cheese and wine in the evening, and orders pizza for dinner. Although the Indian couple do not put their arms around each other’s waists while
posing for a photograph, and Mr. Sen never kisses his wife on returning home, yet India is a place blessed with the warmth of human relationship where the whole neighborhood shares one’s joys and sorrows. Eliot’s home on the other hand is a lonely existence beside the weary sighs of waves. A married couple only waves at them. On Labor’s day when the neighbors gave partly Eliot’s mother remains busy with household chores having one day off from work. She looks up their number and asks them to keep their merry revelry down. While Mrs. Sen parts her hair and applies crushed vermilion religiously comparing it with a wedding ring which will never be lost in the dish water, Eliot’s mother invites a man to dinner who spends the night in her bedroom but whom Eliot never sees again.

Another contrast is brought out in the collecting of mails which reflects how little Eliot’s mother is in contact with her relatives. For Mrs. Sen it is not only a custom to check the mailbox but she strongly reacts to the news she gets from home. She is overjoyed to know that her sister delivered a baby girl or observes a solemn week receiving the news of her grandfather’s death. Eliot’s mother collects mail so infrequently that once their electricity was cut off for three days. Brought up in a close-knit family the Indian lady worries over the mother-son relationship in the western world.

But such an independent existence has certainly boosted up Eliot’s mother’s confidence. She is an expert driver and has no hesitation whatsoever. Mrs. Sen depends on her husband for shopping and marketing. She is scared to drive alone. After the accident she takes shelter under her husband’s name. Nevertheless it is the self-confident woman who looks “too lank and sensible” with her shaved knees and exposed things in Mrs. Sen’s apartment where everything was so carefully covered. The story has an
originality quite its own. The scrupulous and faithful details often extended to the verge of the tedious vividly lights up the most familiar aspects of daily life.

Eliot also listens to Mrs. Sen’s anecdotes, with least understanding of the cultural signification, about the bliss of Indian community life. Whenever there is a wedding in the family, she told Eliot one day, or a large celebration of any kind, my mother sends out word in the evening for all the neighborhood women to bring blades just like this one, and then they sit in an enormous circle on the roof of our building laughing and gossiping and slicing fifty kilos of vegetables through the night. It is impossible to fall asleep those nights, listening to their chatter. Soon, Eliot becomes Mrs. Sen’s alter ego whom she confides her mind to. The young Eliot becomes aware of Mrs. Sen’s claustrophobic existence as she tells him, “Here, in this place where Mr. Sen has brought me, I cannot sometimes sleep in so much silence” (115).

The difference between the two cultures, even their incompatibility, becomes apparent from the ways the two women treat Eliot. Mrs. Sen always waits at the stop to receive Eliot when he comes back from school and provides some foodstuff such as the peeled wedges of an orange or highly salted peanut. This conforms to her cultural code which is usually over-protective of women and children. On the other hand, Eliot’s mother very often leaves Eliot ‘to wrap up the left over’ after dinner. Mrs. Sen’s pining for clamour comes in contrast as Eliot’s mother unhesitatingly calls her neighbor and asks them to keep the noise down. Silence is the natural outcome of the privacy loving lives of the Americans. On the contrary, Indians are heavily dependent on community life where sound is inevitable. Thus Mrs. Sen’s continual reference to sound and silence brings out the extreme contrast of these two life styles.
This story represents doubling by multiplication, for the image of perfect mother is what puts Mrs. Sen and Mrs. Linden into a contrastive slot. Eliot loves Mrs. Sen and the mutual dependency is as real as it exists between a real mother and her son. When Eliot meets with an accident owing to the callousness of Mrs. Sen who is new to the art of driving. Eliot receives minor injuries but Mrs. Sen’s motherly image is shattered for she believes that a mother is a protector and not a damage doer. Mrs. Sen’s resignation from the already held position as a tutor to Eliot is soul-sitting.

The Blessed House

This story is highly ironical because there is constant bickering between Sanjeev and his wife, Twinkle. They have recently moved from Boston to Connecticut where Sanjeev is a high profile professional soon to become the vice-president of his company while he is still thirty three only. Therefore, everything looks smooth in his life except the ever-conflicting mindset of the couple. When Sanjeev chooses to marry Twinkle she has already been abandoned by her American lover. However, Sanjeev has never had his taste of love and easily accepts the matchmaker’s offer for the attractive Twinkle. While Sanjeev is all for Indian food and fondly recollects his student days when he used to go to an Indian restaurant for bellyful of Mughlai chicken with spinach, for Twinkle Indian food is a bother; “she detested chopping garlic, and peeling ginger, and could not operate a blender, and so it was Sanjeev who, on weekends, seasoned mustard oil with cinnamon sticks and cloves in order to produce a proper curry” (TBH 144).

The conflict arises when the couple starts discovering in the new house so many scattered pieces of Christian things left behind by the earlier tenant. While these items – a white porcelain effigy of Christ, a wooden cross key chain, a small plastic dome
containing a miniature nativity scene, a painting of un-bearded Jesus, a plaster Virgin Mary statue are treasured by Twinkle, Sanjeev is vexed to his last bone by these Christian paraphernalia. Each discovery irritates and unnerves Sanjeev and he secretly waits for a chance to throw everything in the garbage. Further, his ire gets aggravated when Twinkle succeeds in motivating the whole of Sanjeev’s friends, who come for the party, to join in her hunt. And later, she emerges a stunning victory with a solid silver bust of Christ, weighing a good thirty pounds, from the attic. Moreover, even Sanjeev cannot burst acknowledge “its undeniable value” and its dignity, solemnity and beauty. Yet because of the widening mental gap between him and his wife, be dislikes even this creation of superb art, he hated it because he knew that Twinkle loved it. This brief quotation is enough to indicate that conflicting claims are at the core of their conjugal life; a house becomes really blessed not by outward decorative pieces but by inner harmony between the inhabitants.

The ghosts from the past constantly emerge in the forms of figures, idols and posters which evoke different responses in Twinkle and Sanjeev. Sanjeev fails to understand Twinkle’s obsession with the religious objects. Twinkle’s bubbling enthusiasm changes the fact of finding certain objects in a new house into a journey of anticipating pleasure which she successfully communicates to her guests, who join her to explore the attic. Sanjeev’s acquiescence gives us the message that one has to make adjustments in order to have a happy marriage.

Twinkle is much westernized, she drinks whiskey, she smokes, is not a great cook and detests Indian dishes for the trouble they involve. Still getting used to his wife’s ways and not knowing whether he really loves her, Sanjeev regrets not having chosen an Indian – born who could keep his house, could sing, sew and cook without
consulting cookbook. At their house warming party while Sanjeev does all that’s necessary, from preparing the food, getting champagne at the cost of burning a rice tray opening the bottles for the guests when they arrive, getting them ice and warming their samosas, Twinkle only volunteers to pick the samosas up because her parlour was on the way and finally with her charm gets away with compliments. The Indian born Sanjeev consoles himself by judging the material conditions of happiness- his wife was pretty, from a high caste and would soon have a master’s degree. It resides on the difficult condition of husband – wife tense relationships. Lahiri has offered a couple which tries to cope up with a new world they have just arrived. Their arranged marriage had not given them adequate time before marriage to understand each other. Therefore, they are now trying to peep into each other’s selves. Sanjeev does not like her behavior and her excessive respect for the statues of Christ and Mother Mary. She wishes to adopt the new culture where she is living and Sanjeev thinks it to be a superfluous act. None of them surrenders. Both stretch the matter as much as they can. The matters are very inconsequential but the tension they build is very wearisome. It often seems that this tender thread may be cut.

Both were emigrants, although Sanjeev had his parents in India and Twinkle in California. Twinkle’s Indian connection was her name that sounded unusual to the ears of Douglas and Nan who came to the new house on the house warming day. The switch board plates in the bedrooms were decorated with scenes from the Bible. Twinkle as the student of literature wanted to treasure those things whereas Sanjeev hated and disapproved of Twinkle’s idea. This made him almost hate Twinkle as Sanjeev, an executive in a firm, has no time to be bothered by such sentiments. To Twinkle, the house was blessed house, to Sanjeev, it was a cursed done. Sanjeev felt that the interest
for attic monuments in his wife was a temporary matter, just a device to come to the limelight as an Indian woman among the Americans. So the poor husband had nothing to do but preserve the massive silver face to his ribs, careful not to let the feather hat slip, and followed her. This couple has a hot debate and quarrel over the Virgin’s statue. She wanted to put it in her study or in the garden but Sanjeev wished to move it to the garage. Just because people should not think them as they are Christian. Instead of making life beautiful, they make it rotten.

This story shows the impact of the blessedness of religion to a proper recipient. Conservative attitude is not rigid adherence and practice or religion. An open mind receives the good no matter it travels down through which agency. Twinkle treasures the image of Christ one after the other from the nooks and corners of the newly occupied house and feels that the house is a blessed one. God is present everywhere and at each approachable place. The nearness of God overwhelms her but Sanjeev is full of annoyance for Jesus is no Hindu deity.

Sanjeev stops Twinkle but she is adamant and compromises on the ground that she would have it in her study. The split in their attitude to the figures of Christ destroys the symphony of the love rejoinders. The omniscient narrator describes the two attitudes in conflict:

He studied the items on the mantel. It puzzled him that each was in its own way so silly. Clearly they lacked a sense of sacredness. He was further puzzled that Twinkle, who normally displayed good taste, was so charmed. These objects meant something to Twinkle, but they meant
nothing to him. They irritated him. We should call the Realtor. Tell him there’s all this nonsense left behind. Tell him to take it away. “Oh, Sanj” Twinkle groaned, please I would feel terrible throwing them away. Obviously they were important to the people who used to live here. It would feel, I don’t know, sacrilegious or something (138).

The Treatment of Bibi Haldar

This story contains complementary characters which again reveal fragmentation by division. Bibi Haldar stands in contrast to Haldar who is robust in health whereas Bibi suffers from an ailment that battled family friends, priests, palmists, spinsters, gem therapists, prophets and fools. Her fits of unconsciousness and shameless delirium annoyed Haldar who expressed his animosity at every available occasion. Whereas Haldar enjoyed conjugal bliss, Bibi Haldar’s demand directly or indirectly for “a man” was overlooked and Bibi was made to suffer in isolation. Whereas Haldar enjoyed and participated in events and entertainment of the world. Bibi was deliberately kept away from it. She was regarded as a bane for business, a liability and a loss. Bibi Haldar represents the fragmentation of a single character and hence is a picture of implicit doubling. At the very outset Bibi Haldar suffers from strange ailment and it defeated all allopathic homeopaths and ayurvedics. No amount of X-rays, probes and injections could cure her. Her illness is described by the omniscient narrator:

The nature of her illness, which struck without warning, confined her world to the unpainted four-story building in which her local family, an elder cousin and his wife, rented
an apartment on the second floor. Liable to fall unconscious and enter, at any moment, into shameless delirium, Bibi could be trusted neither to cross a street board a tram without supervision ....

For her services Bibi received no income but was given meals, provisions, and sufficient meters of cotton at every October holiday to replenish her wardrobe at an inexpensive tailor. At night she slept on a folding camp cot in the cousin’s place downstairs (TTBH 159).

Bibi Haldar is molested by an unidentified culprit and as the result of the assault, she becomes the mother of a son. The identity of the evil doer could not be traced but then she managed to raise the boy and run a business in the storage room to make money for his nurture. This cured Bibi’s prolonged illness. With the blessings of illegitimate motherhood, Bibi Haldar learns the worldly ways of living. She now knows how to cook; how to stitch; how to prepare fire and how to dress gracefully.

No sooner did Bibi Haldar possess what belonged to her own self and was a part of her flesh, life grew meaningful to her. Her illness disappeared all with suddenness and with miraculous results. Her normalcy was restored and she was more or less perfect in her roles of a mother and a business-woman. This gain is explained thus in relationship people become psychologically merged. In many ways it is an extremely pleasurable experience. It represents a letting go of a firmly fixed position of ‘mine’. If one feels secure enough in oneself, then sharing and merger don’t represent loss of self.
They show that developmentally one has achieved a secure sense of selfhood and is able to move into the world of mature relationships.

In this story Jhumpa Lahiri presents a different picture of sex—different from its two objectives of pleasure and procreation. Through the portrayal of a hysterical character, apart from highlighting the atrocious attitude of Indian society, Lahiri seems to emphasise the role of sex in the healing of physical deformity and mental retardation. Although a long period of suffering, humiliation and indifferent attitude of the relatives has emaciated Bibi Haklar physically and mentally, the fire of sexuality burns as intensely in her as in any normal human being: “Each day she unloaded her countless privations upon us, until it became unendurably apparent that Bibi wanted a man” (160) Bibi herself admits, “who takes me to the cinema, the zoo garden, buys me lime soda and cashews? Admit it, are these concerns of mine? I will never be cured, never married” (161). This shows that her cure is related to her marriage, or vice-versa, which is also claimed by her doctor a marriage would cure her.

Consequently, the neighbourhood takes great pains to transform her into a perfect lady and find her a suitable match, which, however, does not materialize. The failure of getting a husband further deteriorates Bibi’s condition that is eventually forsaken by her relatives after the death of their newly-born child, thought to be the impact of Bibi’s illness, and is forced to live an abject life of misery on the top of the roof at the mercy of the flat holders. She is then discovered to have conceived to the great surprise of the occupants. However, this stigma turns out to be a blessing as it cures Bibi and enables her to live a normal life with her fatherless child.
The very name of Bibi is symbolic and can be translated as ‘wife’ she has been a wife without marriage, and so she can have a man but not a husband, an attribute granted by marriage. The narrator herself comments that “Bibi wants a man” this desire for a man in the case of Bibi is the iteration that, despite being a disabled, she is a natural woman and hence needs a natural man free from any social bindings who can gratify her sexual desire; the desire which is whetted by her lasting hysteria. It is said that for a patient of hysteria, sexual intercourse is a panacea, and so it seems in the case of Bibi. To speak in other words, sex in this story is used as purgation which purges Bibi of all her ailments. Sex as clinical purgation and sex as social stigma again raise the conflict between sex and culture, and they need to be distanced if the former is meant to be used clinically. People cannot apply traditional moral values in our assessment of the sexuality of Bibi Haldar, and yet, people cannot shy away from the question of the legitimacy of her child. This complicates any pursuit of distancing sex from culture.

Everyday she expected a man to come and offer his hand to her, it never materialized. She loved to hear from other woman the details of their marriage. She would sigh after seeing their marriage albums. After devouring the details from other women, she would say, “when it happens to me, you will all be present”(160). After futile waiting, she would say, “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” (160–61).

It is an out of the ordinary story of an epileptic woman who wants to be married and is ultimately cured by an unknown seducer at night. Spending the days in the storage room recording the inventory and nights on a folding camp cot she is naïve on practical matters. She wants a man and voices it without pretence. She vents out her
malice on her cousin and his wife when they make no effort to get her married. Here there is no particular identity of the narrative voice. It is a group of neighborhood women. Lahiri here experiments with a narrative voice. The group discusses marital bliss with her, advises her on household matters, treats her to a cob, makes her hair, and later when pregnant and deserted by her cousin helps her to deliver the baby, teaches her how to handle it and even gives her certain necessary things but it shares no direct responsibility. “She was not our responsibility and in our private moments we were thankful for it” (162). Although there is much that is negative in Bibi that might make us despise her but it all makes the character painfully real.

This story is with a native flavor in which an ailing woman finds herself forlorn even among her relatives. Bibi Haldar stays with her cousin in an apartment of a four-storey building and spends her days recording inventory for the cosmetic shop of her cousin in a small room in exchange of her shelter, food and clothes. Her permanent illness confines her world to the four-story building and she lives in isolation confines her world to the four-storey building and she lives in isolation even among her own people.

It shows about that male member of the society is still unable to face a woman with her problems – the problems created by him only. The men in this story have been shown escapist and the woman is the one who can face the pains created by man. Bibi Haldar is a young lady with mediocre looks. Naturally, no man gets attracted towards her. Her guardians leave her back and go away, leaving a few hundreds for her. Bibi’s dream of marrying someone who will love her is broken. She is an undeveloped woman, who had been treated as a patient of some untraceable disease. Finally, it is learnt that she is expecting. She never tells the name of the man whose child she is expectant. With the
help of women of neighborhood, Bibi, runs a shop after begetting the baby boy. It sounds of woman in the society where male appears as an escapist, and female a daring entity. Bibi Haldar is an individual who maintains her individuality against all odds.

The Third and Final Continent

The story is about an Indian immigrant who reminisces about his first few weeks in America thirty years ago. Having studied for four years in London, he makes a short trip to Calcutta for his arranged marriage with Mala. He moves to America only a week after his marriage, to work as a librarian at the M.I.T. His wife has to wait for her visa for six weeks before she can join him in America. On his arrival in Boston, he checks into the local YMCA. The year is 1969, the year of America’s landing on the moon.

It presents the intra-diegetic narrator who puts Mala, his wife, as the segment of completion for his personality value. The character speaker had migrated to England where he settles down permanently and rears a family. He remembers his stay with Mrs. Croft as a tenant and had developed warmth and affection for her. Mrs. Croft is an old lady who lives all alone in a big house, religiously at her small round table in a starched white shirt and a long black skirt. Although she was no sight of beauty with:

Long pallid fingers, with swollen knuckles and tough yellow nails. Age had battered her features so that she almost resembled a man, with sharp, shrunken eyes and prominent creases on either side of her nose. Her lips, chapped and faded, nearly disappeared, and her eyebrows were missing
altogether. Nevertheless she looked fierce (TTFC 178).

Mr. Croft with his miserly speech habits, did not communicate much with the speaker narrator, yet he loved being connected with her and felt as much responsible to her as grown up children take care of their aged parents. When the speaker narrator shifted to another house, he carried Mrs. Croft as figure of eternity in his mind. Although Mala was introduced to Mrs. Croft yet she could not perceive the lady with her virtues even though she had the blessedness of femininity. When Mrs. Croft died, the speaker narrator felt an emotional vaccum as if he had lost someone connected to him in blood.

I came across Mrs. Croft’s obituary. I had not thought of her in several months- by them those six weeks of the summer were already a remote interlude in my past- but when I learned of her death I was stricken, so much so that when Mala looked up from her knitting she found me staring at the wall. The newspaper neglected in my lap, unable to speak. Mrs. Croft’s was the first death I mourned in America, for hers was the first life I had admired; she had left this world at last, ancient and alone, never to return (196).
Mrs. Croft as a universal mother is encompassing in love and transcends cultural polarities. Mrs. Croft’s attachment to the speaker narrator who is an outsider insider is a foster son to Mrs. Croft, whereas the son of the speaker narrator doesn’t exhibit any amount of passionate love although Mala and his son are biologically of the same human structure. The speaker describes this relationship thus:

We have a son who attends Harvard University. Mala no longer drapes the end of her sari over her head, or weeps at night for her parents, but occasionally she weeps for our son. So we drive to Cambridge to visit him, or bring him home for a week end, so that he can eat rice with us with his hands, and speak in Bengali, things we sometimes worry he will no longer do after we die (197).

The speaker narrator and his son are complementary characters with opposing qualities marked out in the story which, according to the canons of Ian Reid, is “sketch”. The speaker is Ulyssesian in spirit who explores the new continent and manages to carve his personal private room for himself whereas his son who studies in Harvard university is discouraged by the feel of a strange world around. He says:

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, a mother who is happy and strong. 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 forever, spent more hours on the moon, I have remained in this new world for nearly thirty years (197-98).

It is the narration of the gradual adjustment of an anonymous male protagonist with an alien society. He is eager to learn and to adjust. The emotional side of his character is also beautifully sketched by Lahiri. He admires his 103-year-old landlady Mrs. Croft for her pride in her country's achievement of sending a man on the moon, and remembers the last days of his mother with agonizing clarity. The story offers a statement of the difficulty and desirability of integrating the deepest needs of self-expression and self-realization with the life one must lead as a social being. Using the flashback technique, Lahiri records his early impressions and delineates them suggestively till they form an individual pattern in which agonies and ecstasies are intricately woven. The story records minute details with precision the details of daily routine, furniture, rooms and people.

It is a biographical sketch of a person who travels through three continents in course of his struggle for existence. The narrator leaves India in order to establish himself in England and he has to move further to America later on for his betterment. The theme of rootlessness pervades the short story. The following lines reflect the fate and struggle of an exile in a brilliant manner: "I lived North London, in Finsbury Park, in a house occupied entirely by penniless Bengali bachelors like myself, at least a dozen and sometimes more, all struggling to educate and establish ourselves abroad" (195).
While the protagonist finally stays in Boston with his landlady, he is not ready to quit his native self in language and culture that he had left in India. When his wife Mala arrives there he talks with her in Bengali by breaking the shell of the acquired self. She tells his wife about his son: “if I can survive on three continents then there is no obstacle he cannot conquer”. The rhythm and tone of Lahiri’s life becomes identical with her protagonist in the story. This is one of the beautiful stories. The happy spiritual journey of both the protagonist and Mala is portrayed intimately from within their mutual adjustment making him amazed that “there was ever a time that we were strangers” (197). With a growing son, they attain contentment and happiness in this story, which is also the final one for them.

The nine stories in the collection offer a wonderful variety of experiences gathered from the cultural clashes rippling outward in many directions. The trauma of dislocation, an acute sense of loneliness and the pangs of estrangement suffered by the millions of exiled Indians who try unsuccessfully to balance themselves between home and abroad are the major maladies Lahiri attempts to interpret. Most of her characters keep hanging in limbo between two identities non-Indian and Indian.

Lahiri is profusely praised for her nine well-knit stories in which she portrays the characters drawn from all over the world that is, from India, U.S.A, U.K and other commonwealth countries in their won situation. These immigrant characters are mostly psychedelic and they struggle for identity and commitment to life in the multicultural milieu of Bengali, Boston and the beyond.
In the analysis made above it becomes evident that the aspiration, perspiration and frustration of an exile from the basic tenet of Lahiri’s collection of short stories entitled ‘Interpreter of Maladies’. In short, the writer has succeeded greatly in presenting the problems and maladies of emigrants with her artistic observation and skill. Thus the story collection makes a masterly attempt to delineate and define various moods. Subtle vicissitudes in human relationships and the world view of the work itself, through a skillful and imaginative optic images which, in their turn, gradually assumes a symbolic tone, thus rendering the version of the work existential and universal.