

**SILENT STRUGGLES: UNDERSTANDING MISPERCEPTION IN
JHUMPA LAHIRI'S *INTERPRETER OF MALADIES***

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Abstract:

Misperception emerges as a central theme in "Interpreter of Maladies", highlighting the psychological aspects of human nature, especially of the Indian Americans who have maladies, loneliness, frustration, identity crises, and cultural conflicts due to migration and displacement. All these human emotions create a sense of misperception among the people of the first and second generations of Indian Americans. The journey of the Das family with Mr. Kapasi, a tour guide, throws light on the complexities of cultural differences, displacement, and identity crisis. Through a detailed analysis, this paper deals with the exploration of misperception among characters and its impact on their psyche with the background of the situations and moments that sharpen the readers' understanding of the characters' emotional life with the broader themes of cultural differences and identity crisis.

Keywords: Misperception, identity crisis, cultural differences, psyche

As the complications of the modern world are increasing, our world of thoughts also remains in the process of changing. Change refreshes us, but sometimes it tortures us. The forced and voluntary migration is one of the modern tendencies adopted by the postcolonial generation. This tendency creates anxiety in all those who break all the ties from their homeland. With the passage of time, this sense of anxiety affects human relationships and develops misperceptions among people, and sometimes this misperception gives rise to guilt, repentance, confusion, misunderstanding, overthinking, frustration, and utter psychological turmoil. Indian women writers who are living in foreign lands have done marvelous work by

bringing laurels to the country through their writings. There are many prominent diasporic writers, including Bharati Mukherjee, Anita Desai, Geeta Metha, Kiran Desai, Meera Sayal, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, and Jhumpa Lahiri, etc., have been worldly acclaimed. These women writers have specifically drawn the readers' attention towards the rootlessness and identity crisis of immigrants. Salman Rushdie says: "Writers in my position, exiles or emigrants, are haunted by some sense of loss; some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt. But if we do look back, we must also do so in the knowledge – which gives rise to profound uncertainties that our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost, that we will in short, create fictions, not action cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind" (131).

Jhumpa Lahiri was born in London, and her parents are Indian Bengali immigrants who moved to America when she was three years old. *Interpreter of Maladies* delineates the stories of South Asian diaspora communities. As a diaspora writer, Jhumpa Lahiri presents her characters' anxiety and struggle for identity honestly and realistically. She "explores human relationships that exist in the complex network of ethnicity, nationality, identity, cultural assimilation, and rejection as well as hybridity in the Bengali community in the United States" (Golipor 54). Published in 1990, this collection of short stories won the Pulitzer Prize for her. On the basis of the story "Interpreter of Maladies" in *Interpreter of Maladies*, this paper deals with the exploration of misperception among characters and its impact on their psyche with the background of the situations and moments that sharpens the readers' understanding of the characters' emotional life with the broader themes of cultural differences and identity crisis.

Interpreter of Maladies is a collection of nine short stories, and the third story of the novel, which is the same name, "Interpreter of Maladies," is a story that has many connotations and interpretations within the lines. It delineates the analysis of the psychological problems of the protagonists who are absolutely uncomfortable with their companions in sharing their emotional issues. Basically, this story evolves around a trip to the Sun Temple in Konark. Mr. Kapasi is the tourist guide of the American Indian family, including the couple Raj and Mina Das and their three children Tina, Ronny, and Bobby. Besides a tourist guide, Mr. Kapasi works as an interpreter for a doctor. He interprets the patients' ailments and maladies to the doctor in order to get them rightly diagnosed so they may be able to get good treatment. But accidentally, Mr. Kapasi catches the wrong signals from Mrs. Das during this trip when she shows her interest in his job as an interpreter of the maladies of the patients. This interest gives rise to misunderstanding and misperception between them as both of them represent different cultural backgrounds. Despite being a

professional interpreter, Mr. Kapasi misinterprets the situation under the influence of his romantic instincts and Mrs. Das' misunderstanding of his role, which leads to mutual disappointment and unfulfilled desires.

The primary misperception in the story comes up through a simple conversation between Mr. Kapasi and Mrs. Das. Mr. Kapasi's fascination with Mrs. Das ignites when she shows an unusual interest in his job as an interpreter. She says his job is "so romantic" (Lahiri 50). For the first time in his life, Mr. Kapasi feels elevated by calling his profession romantic, and this word takes him to the world of romance. He never takes his profession seriously. He "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"(Lahiri 51). But Mrs. Das declares: "So these patients are totally dependent on you...In a way, more dependent on you than the doctor" (Lahiri 51).

As Mr. Kapasi has already been suffering from an emotionless marriage, Mrs. Das' little attention towards Mr. Kapasi makes him emotional and sparks a fantasy of a deeper connection. He interprets her attention towards his job as a scope of potential intimacy. From this point, he begins to compare the feelings of his wife and Mrs. Das: Mr. Kapasi thinks, "If ever she referred to his position, she used the phrase "doctor's assistant," as if the process of interpretation were equal to taking someone's temperature or changing a bedpan. She never asked him about the patients who came to the doctor's office or said that his job was a big responsibility"(Lahiri 53). Mr. Kapasi has been trapped by his own imagination as he goes on thinking about Mrs. Das and the word romantic used by her. He believes, "Her sudden interest in him, an interest she did not express in either her husband or her children, was mildly intoxicating. When Mr. Kapasi thought once again about how she had said "romantic," the feeling of intoxication grew"(Lahiri 53). Mr. Kapasi's perception has gone changed. He moves further from a mere tourist guide to a valued person who is an important entity in the eyes of a beautiful lady. His sentiments are not in his control. When Mr. Das wants to take a snap of Mrs. Das, he requests Mr. Kapasi to come closer to Mrs. Das; he feels her closeness attentively: "He could smell a scent on her skin, like a mixture of whiskey and rosewater. He worried suddenly that she could smell his perspiration, which he knew had collected beneath the synthetic material of his shirt" (Lahiri 55).

With these emotions on Mr. Kapasi's side, all goes well in this journey. Mr. Kapasi feels delighted and excited with Mrs. Das as a lover who finds love for the first time in his life. This side feeling gets its height when Mrs. Das asks Mr. Kapasi for his address so that he can send the photographs, but Mr. Kapasi's fantasy does not give him a chance to think rationally. Mrs. Das gives him a page for writing the address on which he writes his address

carefully and neatly so as to avoid any inconvenience. While writing his address, he gets lost in his imagination about Mrs. Das: "She would write to him, asking about his days interpreting at the doctor's office, and he would respond eloquently, choosing only the most entertaining anecdotes, ones that would make her laugh out loud as she read them in her house in New Jersey. In time, she would reveal the disappointment of her marriage and his. In this way, their friendship would grow and flourish"(Lahiri 55). He is deceived by his own fanciful thoughts and emotions, but what he is supposed to do in such a situation as, to some extent, our thoughts are decided by our cultural heritage and collective unconsciousness.

His loveless married life also misleads him to such an extent that he misunderstands Mrs. Das and her normal behavior and goes on fooling himself. He admires Mrs. Das in his heart by thinking, "Mrs. Das was different. Unlike the other women, who had an interest only in the temple, and kept their noses buried in a guidebook, or their eyes behind the lens of a camera, Mrs. Das had taken an interest in him"(Lahiri 58). On the other hand, Mrs. Das does not have the same romantic angle as Mr. Kapasi, but she considers him to be a confidant person to whom she can reveal her deep-rooted guilt. Actually, she is suffering from psychological uneasiness due to emotional suppression. She is in search of anyone who can be the source of her emotional outlet. Whereas Mr. Kapasi keeps indulging himself in the fictional world of romance, Mrs. Das behaves with a touch of reality when she starts. While talking to Mr. Kapasi, she feels irritated: "For God's sake, stop calling me Mrs. Das. I'm twenty-eight. You probably have children my age." "Not quite" (Lahiri 64). Mr. Kapasi is surprised "to learn that she thought of him as a parent. The feeling he had had towards her, that had made him check his reflection in the rearview mirror as they drove, evaporated a little"(Lahiri 64). He feels uncomfortable with this comment as Mrs. Das blatantly says what she thinks. She communicates all of these in a formal way, but Mr. Kapasi goes on receiving them personally.

Mrs. Das tells Mrs. Kapasi many things about her married life. Although all is well in her social life, she feels suffocated emotionally all the time, and she is in constant search of someone who can help her release her emotional burden. That's why she opens up to Mr. Kapasi. She says: "About my secret, and about how terrible it makes me feel. I feel terrible looking at my children and at Raj, always terrible. I have terrible urges, Mr. Kapasi, to throw things away. One day, I had the urge to throw everything I owned out the window: the television, the children, everything. Don't you think it's unhealthy"(Lahiri 65). She misinterprets Mr. Kapasi's professional role, believing that he can provide psychological comfort rather than merely translating medical symptoms. With this bent of mind, she discloses the long-time secret of her illegitimate child: "Don't you see? For eight years I haven't been able to express this to anybody, not to friends, certainly not to Raj"(Lahiri 65).

After eight years, when her sense of guilt finds a minute gap to flow, it comes out immediately without any delay. She never thinks of Mr. Kapasi and his psychological, emotional, and personal situation, but she observes his receptivity as per his profession as an interpreter of maladies. At this juncture, she unburdens her tiring mind. She confesses with hope, "... I'm tired of feelings so terrible all the time. Eight years, Mr. Kapasi, I've been in pain eight years. I was hoping you could help me feel better and say the right thing (Lahiri 65)." She not only unburdens herself, but she expects Mr. Kapasi to give solace with his valuable advice and remedy, and she urges again and again to Mr. Kapasi: "Suggest some kind of remedy"(Lahiri 65). This critical misunderstanding leads to a moment where Mrs. Das expects empathy and absolution from Mr. Kapasi while he anticipates a romantic advancement. The misalignment of their expectations results in mutual disillusionment when Mr. Kapasi reacts with discomfort and detachment to her confession. It shows that "her confession depressed him, depressed him all the more..."(Lahiri 66). This kind of misperception happens only because of their different cultural backgrounds and different approaches to their situation.

The cultural gap and emotional detachment from Indian heritage can be seen during the trip to the Das family. Children's lack of discipline and parent-children relations highlights their cultural conflicts, and it is observed in the very first line: "At the tea stall Mr. and Mrs. Das bickered about who should take Tina to the toilet. Eventually Mrs. Das relented when Mr. Das pointed out that he had given the girl her bath the night before" (Lahiri 43). This disconnect extends to Mr. and Mrs. Das' marital relations, where communication is superficial, and deeper emotional issues remain unaddressed, and this suppression leads to an identity crisis and frustrated self.

Another layer of misperception emerging from cultural and emotional isolation is marked by Mrs. Das's casual confession to Mr. Kapasi about her extramarital affair and the child from this affair. Her careless revelation about this affair and her expectation of empathy from Mr. Kapasi reveal her incapability to realize the gravity of her actions within the context of traditional Indian values. A person with a certain cultural perspective has certain expectations, interactions, and interpretations, and so do Mr. Kapasi and Mrs. Das. Mr. Kapasi's Indian cultural context and Mrs. Das' American perspective create misperceptions between them, and this cultural divergence changes the whole scenario of their communicational approach. Mr. Kapasi's respectful and emotional approach to relations and professional roles remains absolutely in contrast with Mrs. Das' casual and detached behavior during this trip.

Emotional deprivation within personal relationships creates a vacuum in any individual, and he or she is influenced easily by the people in the surroundings. Mr. Kapasi's loveless marriage leads him to a level of emotional misinformation. His discontented self befools him by misinterpreting Mrs. Das's attention as personal interest. On the other side, Mrs. Das also feels emotionally isolated from Mr. Das by having a sense of guilt. When she interacts with Mr. Kapasi, she instantly surrenders in front of an unknown, mistakenly believing that Mr. Kapasi can offer her faith and the understanding she desires. Sometimes, misperception can also happen through personal fantasies and expectations, making even the simple things complicated. Mr. Kapasi's misinterpretation of Mrs. Das's interest in his job blinds him to the reality of Mrs. Das' emotional conflicts, and Mrs. Das also misinterprets his job as a pacifier to her tortured self. This misperception affects both of them psychologically and creates emotional disillusionment. Mr. Kapasi feels shattered when he realizes Mrs. Das's concern about him as a tool to diminish her guilt, not as a possible lover, and this disillusionment makes him disappointed. Mrs. Das also has a sense of betrayal after Mr. Kapasi's reaction of discomfort and detachment to her confession instead of expressing the empathy and understanding she sought. Being disillusioned and frustrated, they feel highly disturbed with each other.

Jhumpa Lahiri employs the technique of symbolism to highlight the theme of misperception and isolation. Mr. Kapasi's job as an interpreter is symbolic. As an interpreter, he interprets patients' maladies to a doctor, but he fails to interpret the emotional maladies. On the other side, Mrs. Das has her own way of dealing with the situation. As Bahareh Bahmanpour says: "Female characters of Lahiri's fiction negotiate their new unstable identities through their own different means and their own individual voice" (49). At last, Mrs. Das feels capable of coming out of this temporary phase of guilt, and she asks her family members to "wait for me" (Lahiri 67). Now, she shows positive gestures to Mr. Das for his request to take a "picture of the five of us" (Lahiri 67). Her attitude of carelessness towards her children changes instantly when she observes Bobby. She says, Poor Bobby...Come here a second. Let Mommy fix your hair" (Lahiri 68). Escobar Sevilla comments: "Mrs. Das's awkwardness fades away when she notices that Bobby is being attacked by the monkeys and urges Mr. Kapasi to help him" (Lahiri 109). Again, her role as a mother dominates her sense of trauma with the glimpse of her son. This dramatic shift also becomes the symbol of a bridge to fill the gap in human relationships.

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