

Usage of Literary Techniques (Structure, Symbols, Style, Language): A Metaphorical Analysis of Jhumpha Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*

Meenu Kumari

M.A, M. Phil

Dept. of English & Foreign Languages

Maharshi Dayanand University

Rohtak

Abstract

The *Interpreter of Maladies*, internal structure determines the significance of both its technical and artistic elements, such as themes, symbols and images. The introduction must immediately draw the reader in and pique their interest by establishing the emotional tone of the narrative, setting the scene, creating the atmosphere and locating the characters in a specific time and place. One of the most prominent features of Lahiri's stories is her short, tooth- point opening sentences, which immediately introduce information that is crucial to the rest of the narrative. The gorgeousness of her writing style lies in the skill with which she juxtaposes images and memories from life in Calcutta with life in Boston.

Keywords: Structure, Symbol, Images

INTRODUCTION

The short story's internal structure determines the significance of both its technical and artistic elements, such as themes, symbols and images. The introduction must immediately draw the reader in and pique their interest in establishing the emotional tone of the narrative, setting the scene, creating the atmosphere and locating the characters in a specific time and place. One of the most prominent features of Lahiri's stories is her short, tooth- point opening sentences, which immediately introduce information that is crucial to the rest of the narrative. Take the opening to "A Temporary Matter", for example – 'The notice informed them that it was a temporary matter' (Lahiri, *Interpreter of Maladies* 1). While this immediately prompts the question of what this 'temporary matter is – in this case, the electricity being

cut off – it also clues us into the wider issue of the estrangement that exists between the married couple Shoba and Shukumar. The body of the story is where the plot of the story unfolds. Short stories require an organising principle; for example, all of Lahiri's characters are Indian, or of Indian extraction, and thus share similar concerns and values. Many of Lahiri's plot lines seem trivial, such as the story "This Blessed House", about Twinkle's preoccupation with the Christian artifacts left behind by their house's previous owners – an interest which her husband Sanjeev finds annoying. More important, though, is the way that the discovery of each relic sheds new light on the marriage of these seemingly incompatible characters. A deft development of character and plot is central to the short story, and is focused on the conflict around which the story is based. This conflict could be between characters, between characters and their society, or within the psyche of the main character. "Mrs Sen's", for example, concerns an Indian woman who is unable to assimilate into her adopted country, in contrast to her more socially adept husband. Her friendship with an American boy becomes an opportunity for each to experience the other's alternative culture.

The modern short story is often concerned with making an emotional impact. Writers like Lahiri, do not always observe the traditional elements of narrative fiction, such as the inclusion of an introduction, rising action, a climax, falling action and an ending that ties the work together. Her work often features subtle endings that are left open to interpretation, such as that of "A Temporary Matter", which has two possible resolutions. A short story should be able to be read in a single sitting. This gives the piece unity by focusing on one isolated incident in the life of a character, or on one character's relationship with another or others. An atmosphere is created in which the characters live and function and this, in turn, evokes an emotional response from the reader. The action is an important element of the short story. Something must happen, no matter how small. There must also be a narrative of some kind. However, this narrative is not generally as rigidly structured as a novel would be. Successful short stories usually contain several particular features. Unlike the longer novel form, they must contain an idea that can be worked through within a restricted word limit. Although this does not allow for the creation of an extended psychological study of a character, let alone a number of characters, it is surprising how much information can be conveyed to readers about a character by using deft short phrases instead of extended description.

Titles are important in any text, but Lahiri's carefully-chosen titles often provide clues as to the stories' content, as well as important information about character; they can also lead directly to the substance of the narrative. The title "Sexy", for example, keys into a character's fundamental misunderstanding of the precise meaning of this word, while "A Temporary Matter" refers to the event that sets the central plot in motion.

Lahiri's precise and spare prose is stripped of any florid phrases, and the adjectives and adverbs provide specific details rather than merely embellishing her writing. She has said that "I just want to get it *less* – get it plainer. When I rework things I try to get it as simple as I can" (Chotiner). While the language in this short story collection is functional, it still creates a sense of beauty and wholeness. For most of her stories, Lahiri has chosen a third-person omniscient narrative structure. In this way, she can present her characters from an outsider's point of view. For "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine" and the closing story, however, the first-person narrative voice lends immediacy to the poignancy of the speakers' experiences.

Lahiri builds her characters around the immigrant experience and the cultural divide between America and India. At the same time she paints, with sympathy and understanding, indelible characters who experience the pain and suffering of ordinary people. In the title story, "*Interpreter of Maladies*", Mr Kapasi is a character who signifies the deep divide between the culture of American-born Indians and that of Indians living in India. As the Das family's tourist guide, he is constantly bemused by the fact that these people "looked Indian but dressed as foreigners did" (Lahiri, IOM 43–44). To him, they each seem completely self-absorbed: far more like siblings than parents and children. The couple also appears to be emotionally unaffected by the reality of India, particularly the grim conditions under which many are forced to live. Mr Das stops to take a photo "of a barefoot man, his head wrapped in a dirty turban" (Lahiri, IOM 49) – treating him as if he is there merely to add local colour to his travels, rather than as a human being in his own right. Mrs Das is completely indifferent to the whole tourist experience, only becoming interested when Mr Kapasi begins to tell her about his other line of work. Mr Kapasi's main occupation is as a language interpreter for a doctor. Mrs Das views the dependence of the

patients on him as romantic and is suddenly interested in Kapasi as a man, rather than just as a dispensable Indian guide. She unexpectedly provides Kapasi with a different view of himself as someone worthwhile, whereas he is only considered a lowly worker in his everyday life. Kapasi sees his occupation as 'thankless', whereas Mr and Mrs Das see him as bearing a great responsibility. For him the job was a sign of his failings, as it underlined his lost dream of becoming an indispensable interpreter to diplomats. The Kapasi's job is simply the means by which he sustains his family and, notably, has recently become an insight text article on *Interpreter of Maladies* symbol of his wife's reproach for his inability to save his son from dying: "she resented the other lives he helped. . . to save" (Lahiri, IOM 53). He begins to see that human behaviour is the same in all cultures. Mr and Mrs Das are no more suited to each other than he and his wife are. He recognises the signs of a dysfunctional marriage—the bickering, the indifference, the protracted silences – and is flattered by Mrs Das' attention. While in conversation with Mrs Das, Kapasi begins to see her as a sexual being on his own level, rather than simply a tourist; he is charmed when she includes him in their picnic. Her offer to send him some photographs encourages him to anticipate some extension of their relationship: "she would write to him... and he would respond eloquently" (Lahiri, IOM 55). For him, there was a sense of promise "that all of life's mistakes made sense in the end" (Lahiri, IOM 56). His hopes are fuelled further when Mrs Das displays her interest in the sensuality of the carved figures at Konarak temple.

The climax results from the convergence of the separate elements in the story, and the ending generally comes from the falling action after the climax. Lahiri's endings are highly varied: they can often be abrupt, can be either positive or negative, and are often tangential or ambiguous. "The Treatment of Bibi Haldar", for example, ends with a sense of the mystical because the main character has a baby without ever, to our knowledge, having any association with the opposite sex even though she desires marriage above all things. Equally magically, the pregnancy cures her of epilepsy. Lahiri's endings do not necessarily round off the story neatly. Instead, they encourage us to contemplate the ordinary lives of others and, by doing so, provide us with a possible moment of insight or revelation about our own lives.

Works Cited

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