

Christina Lee

Mrs. Brayko

AP Literature

November 23, 2018

The Exploration of Love and Family in the Interpreter of Maladies

The *Interpreter of Maladies* by Jhumpa Lahiri analyzes different facets of marriage and relationships. Lahiri herself was raised in Rhode Island, and her identity reflects in her Indian-American characters. Weaving in her Bengali background, she creates a narrative of the Das and Kapasi family with drastically different backgrounds, but similar personal issues in order to create a parallel between the two by peppering anecdotes throughout the story. Lahiri explores the universal struggles inherent in marriage and family supported by the use of dialogue, symbolism, and third person limited to Mr. Kapasi.

In the entire duration of the story, the main theme is about barriers in a broken marriage. In both the Das and Kapasi family, both couples have disconnected marriages. Even though they come from dissimilar backgrounds, they both struggle with their **relationships**. Through a third person limited perspective, Mr. Kapasi's describes his marriage, "...the bickering, the indifference, the protracted silences." It is made clear that his relationship to his wife is distant. It even occurred to him that "...he had never seen his own wife fully naked." This demonstrates the lackluster romance between the two. The root between their failed marriage is attributed to the lack of understanding between the two and their morals. Mr. Kapasi's wife is unable to comprehend why he would change his occupation to one that reminds her of their deceased son. Meanwhile, Mr. Kapasi merely views his occupation as an opportunity to provide for his family. Ultimately resulting to him having to "...enjoy the evening newspaper and a cup of tea that his wife would serve him in

silence” Thus, when Mrs. Das calls Mr. Kapasi’s job “romantic” and “a big responsibility”, he is unable to comprehend a person could think so highly of his occupation. His relationship is so fragile that from a simple compliment, Mr. Kapasi becomes infatuated with her. Mr. Kapasi’s relationship to his wife is symbolised by his job, interpreter of maladies. It broke his marriage apart because of its tragic reminder of their son and is the barrier between their happiness. However, it can also represent the barriers present throughout the story. Mr. Kapasi is the middle man between the doctor and patient and continues to do so for the reader and the protagonist, Mrs. Das.

Meanwhile, the Das couple is equipped with different issues but still results in a failed marriage. The nature of the Das couple is translated through what Mr. Kapasi observes and hears. For example, “Why do you do this, Raj, just to save a few stupid rupees. What are you saving us, fifty cents?” This dialogue enables the readers to get a glimpse of their marriage, specifically the lack of chemistry between the two. Later on she even reveals to Mr. Kapasi that she married too young and is the seed to their lack of intimacy. Their relationship is symbolised by the sunglasses that Mrs. Das wears. It keeps her aloof from her family and only takes them off after she starts talking to Mr. Kapasi. With the burden of children falling all on her, she never communicates her feelings of frustration. Instead, she cages herself in their apartment and has an affair. Furthermore, the keystone to their failure is Mrs. Das’s narcissism; she believes that everyone else is to blame but her. For instance, “As a result of spending all her time in college with Raj, she continued, she did not make many close friends.” In this case, she blames her isolation on her husband because she was unable to maintain close friendships.

Despite the focus on the Kapasi and Das couples, they are not the only broken relationships. Lahiri presents the struggle to have a close relationship within a family. In fact,

the Das children, Bobby, Ronny, and Tina, have a detached bond to their parents. It is made clear through the way that they talk to each other, ““Where’s Mina?” Mr. Das asked.” In this scene where Mr. Das is talking to Tina, it is odd that he refer to Mrs. Das as mom or mother - a practice almost unheard of in most families. It is a testimony to how much their relationship resembles a sibling bond rather than a parental one. The broken family dynamic can be symbolised through the nail varnish that Mrs. Das applies in the car. When Tina asks her mother for some nail varnish too, Mrs. Das retorts “Leave me alone.” While Tina makes an effort to have a bond with Mrs. Das, she makes it very clear that she has no desire to do so. The parallelism between the Kapasi and Das family highlights the struggles shown through the relationships in the Das family. Mr. Kapasi undertook his current job solely for his children to be raised in a more privileged environment. He prioritised his children over his wife’s desires, which ultimately drove an inconsolable wedge. However, the bond between Mr. Kapasi and his children are fairly strong. The fact that he is willing to go through personal strife for his family is admirable. It highlights the selfishness of Mrs. Das by pointing everything that she is not willing to do for her own children, such as sharing her rice crackers and nail varnish.

Overall, the *Interpreter of Maladies* is, in fact, not a unique story. Lahiri depicts a common problem among many marriages whose couples were not mature enough for this life long commitment or for other personal issues. Thus, breeding broken marriages and relationships. It opens the readers up to a universal issue by humanising every aspect of it through the parallelism of the Kapasi and Das family. Her use of symbolism, dialogue, and third person limited perspective enable the audience to examine specific aspects of a relationship such as trust, communication, and intimacy. While she does not diagnose what is

needed to treat a broken relationship, she initiates a discussion the symptoms of an unhappy family.

Work Cited

Lahiri, Jhumpa. "Interpreter of Maladies"Fourth Estate, 2014. [PDF Document]. Retrieved from HKIS Schoology site:

<https://iblit2013.files.wordpress.com/2013/08/lahiri-interpreter-of-maladies-full-text.pdf>