

**Distance between Partners as a Direct Consequence of State of Flux they are in, in Jhumpa**

**Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies***

*Sexy* and *This Blessed House* from Jhumpa Lahiri's collection, *Interpreter of Maladies* deal with distance – cultural distance, geographical distance and distance or differences in outlook and taste. Lahiri creates a set of characters allow her to show that distance of any sort tends to complicate relationships, and it is only by recognizing it for what it is and allowing it to exist that relationships can be successful. Attempting to combat the factors that cause this distance only proves to characters that it fundamentally has to exist and cannot be combated so they are wasting their efforts and compromising themselves in vain. Thus Lahiri argues the existence of distance between partners in her stories. She eventually attributes the existence of this difference to the state of flux they are in.

In *Sexy* Miranda and Dev are separated by a cultural distance. She reveals how at first she thought “Bengali...was a religion”, and how she cannot even find India on a map till Dev shows her (Lahiri 84). Before her tryst with Dev at the cosmetics store, Miranda is clueless about India. Thus Dev's tales of India, “how he would come home from school and drink mango juice served to him on a tray, and then play cricket by a lake” reinforce Dev's exoticness in Miranda and cause her to find him interesting (Lahiri 94). She finds herself almost drawn to a new culture, a new way of living by Dev, and begins pursuing Indian culture independent of him: She would occupy her free time in Indian restaurants, ordering Indian dishes, and attempting to memorize the Indian phrases on the menu. She even went so far as to write her name in the Bengali alphabet that she found in the “Teach Yourself series” of a bookstore (Lahiri 96-97).

Similarly, there is a great distance between Dev and Miranda in terms of age. Miranda is only twenty-two and limited in sexual experience – “[she'd had three lovers]” (Lahiri 94). Dev is

a married man who “[works] in an investment bank” suggesting that he must be much older (Lahiri 88). She has never interacted with someone so mature before: “Unlike the boys she dated in college... Dev was the first always to pay for things, and hold doors open, and... bring her flowers” (Lahiri 89). She longs to be exposed to his refined tastes, and gladly buys him the exotic European dishes he enjoyed most like “pickled herring... and tortes of pesto and mascarpone cheese” (Lahiri 93). She is drawn to a whole manner of cultural pursuits with Dev, “he [takes] her to the Symphony Hall, the Mapparium at the Christian Science centre” and so on (Lahiri 90). She is not used to the level of maturity that Dev treats her with.

Yet, things soon start to go awry. When visiting an Indian grocery store Miranda eyes the Hot Mix, but when the shopkeeper sees her non-Indian features he warns her it is “too spicy for [her]” (Lahiri 99). Dev’s wife returns from India and so they cannot spend time together in the city’s cultural hubs any longer. She realizes she will no longer get to wear her silver dress with Dev in restaurants, “they would [only] meet in her apartment” (Lahiri 105). She speaks to Dev on the phone asking him if he remembers what he told her in the Mapparium – only to hear a bustling family scene (““We have guests”” Dev says (Lahiri 98)) in the background and realize he doesn’t remember – his words carried less meaning for him than they had for her. Pondering over Rohin’s definition of the word “sexy” – “loving someone you don’t know” Miranda realizes with gloom that she is simply “sexy” to Dev – he doesn’t really know her and she doesn’t really know him – their relationship is far more superficial than she had originally thought (Lahiri 107). The incident with the shopkeeper shows Miranda that though superficially, she may feel very Indian by eating Indian food and writing her name in Bengali, in reality she is fundamentally very distant from Indian culture. Similarly, when accompanying Dev on his many cultural

pursuits she realizes she is only a substitute to Dev's wife when she is away. As Miranda realizes these things Lahiri depicts her as distraught and moved to break off her affair with Dev.

Yet, what Lahiri is really saying is that this was the nature of their relationship all along. Miranda had been drawn to Dev precisely because of the distance between them. Miranda would be foolish to think she could combat that distance so easily. Lahiri is indicating that Miranda doesn't realize that there was never a state in which there wasn't distance between them, and if lack of distance is what Miranda was seeking, her tryst with Dev never made sense in the first place. Reducing the cultural and experiential distance to Dev is not a task that can be achieved by simply hanging a poster of water lilies in her room or eating Indian food. Miranda was under the mistaken impression that she was getting closer to Dev through such acts, when in reality she wasn't. By depicting Miranda as heartbroken that she has not been able to combat the distance between them, Lahiri asks that if she felt such simple acts as these were in vain, could she ever really combat *all* the distance between them? Lahiri thinks not.

Instead, Lahiri argues, Miranda should have seen the affair for the "sexy" one that it was. She should, like Dev have allowed distance to exist between them and not bothered to get to "know" Dev, because she never really could anyway. Dev, recognized this. To him, Miranda was a "sexy" mistress, one with whom there would always be a distance. But since for him their relationship was based on that distance, he made no efforts to combat it – no efforts to pretend to still take her out once his wife was back. Therefore, he ends up more satisfied with their relationship, because he saw it for what it was and didn't attempt to combat the insurmountable distance between them. Dev is an older more experienced character. Lahiri is suggesting that the ability to ignore distance - and as a direct consequence, be more satisfied with one's relationships - is something learnt with age. In fact, we see Dev's recognition of the distance to his own wife

too. When she is travelling – when there is a geographical distance between them, instead of trying to combat it, which he knows is futile, he temporarily replaces his wife's place in his life.

In *This Blessed House* distances abound between Sanjeev and Twinkle. They are educated in completely different disciplines, Sanjeev an engineer from MIT, Twinkle “completing her master's thesis at Stanford, a study of an Irish poet whom Sanjeev had never heard of.” (Lahiri 145). Sanjeev found one of Twinkle's favorite films, “extremely depressing” while Twinkle hollers at Sanjeev that his precious Mahler's Fifth Symphony puts her “to sleep” (Lahiri 147, 140). Sanjeev is more down to earth, more concerned with getting the house done while Twinkle is more free-spirited and happy to take things as they come. When one afternoon Sanjeev comes home to find Twinkle reading in bed, to himself he is appalled that she can nonchalantly lie in bed when she could “unpack some boxes... or sweep the attic” (Lahiri 141). Twinkle on the other hand is satisfied with “being bored” as a good enough reason to retire to bed in the middle of the day (Lahiri 141). They do not see eye to eye on whether to keep and where to display all the Christian ornaments or “menagerie” as Sanjeev calls them (Lahiri 139). Twinkle is enchanted by them while to Sanjeev they represent Christianity, something he feels it is his duty as a Hindu not to represent in his home. Twinkle cannot understand why he cares so much what other people think.

These distances between Twinkle and Sanjeev's tastes and outlooks dominate the first days of their marriage. From what we are told about their courtship – that they only met four months ago, that they both were looking to settle down, Twinkle because “she was twenty-seven and recently abandoned”, Sanjeev because he “was lonely, with an excessively generous income for a single man”, that they first only talked on the phone and gradually began visiting one another, and that Twinkle inspired Sanjeev to save the cigarette ash from the cigarettes she

smoked while they were together – it seems that their marriage is the first time they try and combat the geographical distance between one another (Lahiri 143). Clearly, the time when they weren't always disagreeing and Sanjeev's only romantic actions were during their courtship – when they lived apart. Lahiri portrays their courtship as the strongest stage in their relationship – one dominated by the geographical distance between them. Now living together, attempting to combat this geographical distance brings hardship with it. Lahiri suggests that their union was stronger when they didn't attempt to combat this distance.

When they finally do begin living together, Lahiri shows how slowly Sanjeev begins giving in to Twinkle. After resolving to throw away the statue of the Virgin Mary, he is defeated in confrontation and agrees to a compromise of leaving it in the lawn when Twinkle starts crying. Sanjeev begins doubting that the relationship will ever work out unless the differences between their tastes and outlooks are resolved. He begins allowing “compromises” like these favor Twinkle, allowing his house to gradually fill up with ornaments he detests. During the party, Twinkle charms her guests into searching for more Christian items and when she finally finds one – a thirty pound, intricately carved silver bust of Jesus – it is Sanjeev who carries it to the mantel to display it despite the fact that “he hated it” (Lahiri 156). Thus, Sanjeev takes it upon himself to resolve the distance between him and his wife.

Yet, Lahiri reveals that the character of Sanjeev is but another one who mistakenly tried to combat distance rather than acknowledging it for what it is. Sanjeev talks of “pangs of anticipation” forming for Twinkle for the first time since they got married, and so it may appear to him that he has taken the right action in trying to combat this distance (Lahiri 156). However, the last words of the story are “[Sanjeev] followed [Twinkle]”. Lahiri suggests that by trying to bridge the distance between them, all Sanjeev has accomplished is to compromise his own

values. He now has to live in a house amidst items he despises, condone habits about Twinkle that irk him and only sparingly indulge in those of his own interests that don't "put her to sleep". It cannot be said that they now have a successful marriage, because Sanjeev has had to completely change who he is – so the marriage is detrimental to him. And the other way around, it would have been detrimental to Twinkle.

Thus Lahiri presents distance between partners as irreversibly intertwined with each partner's own character. To combat distance then, is to combat character. Each of these characters are distant from other characters because of what defines them. They are defined by the particular state of flux or identity crisis their life is in. Miranda is searching for her own identity – as a young college graduate as well as a foreigner to Boston (in fact she reveals she has moved here, just so she can be a foreigner), she is in the midst of a lot of changes in her life. Thus, she is distant from Dev and at the same time drawn to him, for that distance may represent a path for her to take to resolve the flux in her life. Similarly Dev feels no distance to Miranda because of the lack of flux in his life. He is mature enough to know himself and secure - with a wife and good job. Perhaps through Dev, Lahiri suggests that with age flux gradually begins to dwindle, and with age partners may have less distance between them. Twinkle and Sanjeev are distant because they are both assimilate to their new lives in different ways. Sanjeev feels "be[ing] a good little Hindu" and not behaving in any eccentric way is the best way to transition to this new neighborhood (Lahiri 137). Twinkle is attempting to find her own in a new house, in a new city, in a new relationship. She is attempting to acclimate herself to new surroundings without losing her old free-spirit, her old identity. That is why Twinkle cannot understand why Sanjeev cares what other people think and Sanjeev "feels the need to state the obvious to Twinkle" (Lahiri 139). Finally Lahiri presents Doug and Nora, guests at the housewarming party

as the only couple which seems to be completely without distance. They are both “tall and blond” and “nod together” (Lahiri 151). Yet from Lahiri’s account it is clear that the flux of identity and the challenges of new marriage do not face these characters. These characters are Lahiri’s way of showing the connection between flux in individuals and distance in relationships.

Therefore Lahiri creates a set of characters to explain why people should accept distance in relationships. It is a natural consequence of the flux people’s lives are in, and till that flux subsides, the distance cannot. There is no point attempting to combat distance, because as in the case of Miranda and Sanjeev we see how futile that is: Miranda hasn’t been able to combat any distance, and Sanjeev can only combat distance by throwing away his values. When distance exists, Lahiri says, allow it to.

### Works Cited

1. Lahiri, Jhumpa. *Interpreter of Maladies*. Houghton Mifflin Company. New York. 1999.  
Print.
2. I browsed <http://www.gradesaver.com/interpreter-of-maladies/study-guide>, but do not  
cite it.