

SOCIAL MALADIES IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S SHORT STORIES

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Abstract: Jhumpa Lahiri's short stories present a subtle yet powerful exploration of social maladies that shape the lives of individuals caught between cultures, generations, and emotional worlds. This paper examines how Lahiri represents social maladies such as alienation, cultural dislocation, marital breakdown, loneliness, identity crisis, gendered silence, and the erosion of communication within immigrant and non-immigrant communities. Focusing primarily on selected stories from *Interpreter of Maladies* and *Unaccustomed Earth*, the study argues that Lahiri's characters suffer less from dramatic social conflicts and more from quiet, internalized forms of pain produced by everyday social structures. Lahiri foregrounds the quiet suffering that emerges from everyday experiences shaped by migration, generational gaps, and fractured communication. Her characters often inhabit liminal spaces where cultural expectations clash with personal desires, resulting in emotional estrangement and a persistent sense of unbelonging. The study examines how domestic spaces, marriage, family relationships, and social norms become sites of psychological tension, particularly for women and second-generation immigrants. Through restrained narrative techniques and understated symbolism, Lahiri exposes the invisible social pressures that erode intimacy and self-identity. This paper argues that Lahiri's depiction of social maladies lies in her ability to reveal how ordinary social structures silently produce inner turmoil, making her short stories a compelling commentary on modern diasporic and non-diasporic life.

Keywords: Jhumpa Lahiri, social maladies, alienation, diaspora, identity, short stories

Jhumpa Lahiri has emerged as one of the most significant voices in contemporary English literature, particularly known for her sensitive portrayal of immigrant life and interpersonal relationships. Her short stories do not rely on overt social protest or dramatic conflict; instead, they expose the subtle social maladies that permeate everyday existence. These maladies—emotional isolation, cultural displacement, fractured family relationships, and silent suffering—are deeply embedded in social structures and personal interactions. Lahiri's characters often appear materially secure and socially respectable, yet they experience profound inner emptiness and disconnection.

The term "social maladies" in Lahiri's fiction refers to the quiet but persistent problems generated by social expectations, cultural transitions, and emotional repression. Unlike traditional social novels that foreground poverty, class struggle, or political oppression, Lahiri focuses on middle-class individuals whose suffering is psychological and relational rather than economic. This makes her exploration of social maladies especially relevant to modern society, where emotional alienation often remains invisible.

This paper aims to analyze how social maladies operate in Lahiri's short stories, with particular attention to themes of alienation, identity crisis, marital discord, generational conflict, and gendered silence. By examining selected stories such as "A Temporary Matter," "Interpreter of Maladies," "Mrs. Sen's," "Sexy," and stories from *Unaccustomed Earth*, the study demonstrates how Lahiri transforms ordinary experiences into profound social commentary. Through understated narration, symbolic details, and restrained emotional expression, Lahiri exposes the fragility of human relationships in modern society. The paper employs a close textual and thematic analysis to demonstrate how social maladies operate at both personal and communal levels, affecting marriage, family bonds, and self-identity. It also highlights Lahiri's portrayal of women and second-generation immigrants as particularly vulnerable to these maladies, while simultaneously showing their resilience. By situating Lahiri's work within the broader framework of diasporic and contemporary social fiction, this paper reveals how her short stories function as social documents that reflect modern anxieties without moralizing. Ultimately, the study

contends that Lahiri's fiction offers a compassionate critique of social maladies by emphasizing emotional realism and the silent suffering of ordinary lives, making her work deeply relevant to contemporary global society.

Alienation and Emotional Isolation

One of the most prominent social maladies in Lahiri's short stories is alienation. Her characters frequently experience a deep sense of emotional isolation, even within intimate relationships. In "A Temporary Matter," Shoba and Shukumar live together as husband and wife, yet they are emotionally estranged. Their shared grief over the death of their child remains unspoken, creating a wall of silence between them. This emotional alienation is not caused by a single event but by an inability to communicate within socially defined marital roles.

Similarly, in "Interpreter of Maladies," Mr. and Mrs. Das exemplify emotional detachment within a family unit. Mrs. Das's confession of her infidelity highlights her loneliness and desire to be understood, while her husband remains largely indifferent. The family's dysfunction reflects a broader social malady in which appearances of normalcy mask emotional emptiness. Lahiri suggests that modern social life often prioritizes routine and surface harmony over genuine emotional connection.

Isolation and alienation experienced by the main characters, presenting them as outsiders who are perceived by others as being diseased. The characters encounter severe alienation due to a lack of personal possession, value and success. The bare and blatant truth of the Indian caste system as well as the power of materialism is strongly shown in these two stories as a main motive of isolation/loneliness. To a lesser extent, in the stories 'Mrs. Sen's' and 'When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine', loneliness of a different kind is what emotionally isolates the main characters. The theme of displacement significantly portrays Lahiri's prose toward interpreting Indian American customs and traditions, such as food, clothing, language and history. Whilst it unites the characters in a different world (America), it serves as a reminder to what is lost and has been left behind, and therefore, creates loneliness.

From an observer narration, whether it be from the eyes of a ten-year-old girl, Lilia, or a third-person view of durwan, Boori Ma, Lahiri does not easily reveal the thoughts and feelings of the excluded characters, but rather, compares their day-to-day experiences and circumstances to the ordinary lives of others. This engages the reader to "interpret" what Lahiri's stories are attempting to illustrate, making us aware of the loneliness people experience as they go about their ordinary lives. 'When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine' is a significant story regarding the displacement of culture, family, lifestyle, customs and traditions. Mr. Pirzada's displacement, through the eyes of 10-year-old girl, Lilia, is very mysterious and hard for the reader to interpret, as his thoughts and feelings are kept private. It is evident that Lilia perceives Mr. Pirzada as feeling emotionally separated from his past life. "Our meals, our actions, were only a shadow... a lagging ghost of where Mr Pirzada really belonged." Lahiri makes use of this sense of belonging to convey to readers that even though Mr Pirzada seems grateful for his opportunity to study botany and work in America, he is "lost" and alienated from his origins. Lilia slowly recognizes Mr. Pirzada's loneliness and, in turn, becomes accustomed to her own "lost" culture. Furthermore, Lilia suddenly learns of her own sense of loss and displacement, due to her American upbringing and education, "We learned American history... This year, and every year...". She becomes inquisitive about Mr Pirzada and toward the issue of partition between India and East Pakistan, secretly searching the school library for information. Lilia realises what it means to miss someone so close when Mr Pirzada returns to Dacca. She understands the agony of loneliness he felt toward his lost family. Lahiri's use of a young narrator is significantly important in portraying the relationship between—the characters, as well as looking at Indian culture from the perspective of a child, seen in 'Mrs Sen's'. 'Boori Ma, sweeper of the stairwell'. The lifestyle of Boori Ma, in 'A Real Durwan', is of very poor condition. Lahiri conveys most of Boori Ma's hardships in the first few paragraphs, such as her inability to sleep, her appearance, her age (64 yrs-old), but mainly her past: her deportation to Calcutta. This conveys the impression of loss and how it can inevitably lead to loneliness.

The impact of others' actions toward the isolation and loneliness of the main characters is also evident in the story 'The Treatment of Bibi Haldar'. Lahiri's compilation of short stories, Interpreter of Maladies, makes readers aware of the importance of culture, customs and traditions to Indian people. The

characters experience a loss of identity in their lives, leading to a sense of loneliness, displacement and isolation. Lahiri's own knowledge of Indian history and nature is of great significance in regard to the stories. Lahiri effectively conveys the loneliness Indian people encounter in their ordinary lives.

Alienation is also evident in immigrant experiences. Characters who relocate to a new country frequently find themselves caught between cultures, belonging fully to neither. This in-between state produces a persistent sense of loneliness that shapes their identities and relationships.

Cultural Dislocation and Identity Crisis

Cultural dislocation is another major social malady in Lahiri's short stories, particularly in the context of diaspora. Immigrant characters struggle to reconcile their inherited cultural values with the realities of their adopted societies. This struggle often results in identity crises, especially among second-generation immigrants.

In "Mrs. Sen's," the protagonist experiences intense homesickness and cultural isolation after moving to the United States. Her inability to drive symbolizes her lack of mobility and agency in the new society. The cutting of vegetables, the smell of Indian food, and memories of home become coping mechanisms against cultural alienation. Mrs. Sen's suffering highlights how migration, while socially celebrated as progress, can produce deep emotional wounds.

Second-generation characters, on the other hand, experience identity conflict differently. They are often more comfortable with the host culture but feel disconnected from their parents' traditions. This generational gap creates misunderstanding and emotional distance within families, as seen in several stories from *Unaccustomed Earth*.

Marital Discord and Breakdown of Relationships

Marital discord is a recurring social malady in Lahiri's fiction. Her stories frequently depict marriages that are stable on the surface but emotionally fragile underneath. These relationships are shaped by unspoken expectations, gender roles, and suppressed emotions.

In "Sexy," the theme of infidelity reveals the emotional dissatisfaction present within marriage. The story examines desire, loneliness, and moral ambiguity without judgment. Lahiri portrays relationships as complex social institutions that can fail quietly, without dramatic confrontation.

Lahiri's depiction of marital breakdown challenges traditional notions of marriage as a source of fulfillment. Instead, marriage becomes a site where social pressures and emotional repression intensify personal suffering.

Gendered Silence and Female Suffering

Women in Lahiri's short stories are particularly affected by social maladies. Many female characters endure emotional neglect, cultural confinement, and gendered expectations that limit self-expression. Their suffering is often internalized and expressed through silence rather than rebellion.

Mrs. Sen, Mrs. Das, and Shoba represent different forms of female vulnerability shaped by social roles. While these women do not always articulate their pain openly, Lahiri's narrative technique allows readers to perceive the depth of their emotional struggles. At the same time, Lahiri avoids portraying women solely as victims; she grants them moments of agency, reflection, and quiet resistance.

Generational Conflict and Family Disintegration

Generational conflict is another significant social malady in Lahiri's stories. Immigrant parents and their children often struggle to understand each other due to cultural and experiential differences. Parents cling to traditions as a means of preserving identity, while children seek independence and assimilation.

In *Unaccustomed Earth*, Lahiri explores the emotional distance between parents and adult children, revealing how love can exist alongside misunderstanding. These conflicts contribute to the gradual disintegration of family bonds, not through overt hostility but through emotional neglect and silence.

Narrative Technique and Social Critique

Lahiri's narrative style plays a crucial role in conveying social maladies. Her use of simple language, limited symbolism, and understated emotion mirrors the quiet nature of the problems she

depicts. Rather than offering solutions, Lahiri presents social realities with empathy and restraint, allowing readers to engage critically with the underlying issues.

Her stories function as social critiques precisely because they avoid sensationalism. By focusing on ordinary lives, Lahiri emphasizes that social maladies are not exceptional but deeply embedded in everyday existence.

Conclusion

Jhumpa Lahiri's short stories provide a nuanced exploration of social maladies that define modern life. Through themes of alienation, cultural dislocation, marital discord, gendered silence, and generational conflict, Lahiri reveals the emotional costs of social structures and cultural transitions. Her characters' suffering is quiet, internal, and deeply human, making her fiction both intimate and socially significant.

Roots, origin, family bonds induce expatriate, immigrant non-resident Indians to return again and again to the point from where they move away. This emotional and spiritual bond gives form to Jhumpa Lahiri's stories and about such a state of expatriate existence, the following words of Aamer Hussin seem to be the most appropriate: "it implies neither a forced eviction from one's motherland, nor a deliberate rejection; there are no connotations of permanent or obligatory leave taking. There is, instead a tremendous inherent privilege in the term, a mobility of mind if not always of matter, to which we as writers should lay claim: a doubling instead of a split." Jhumpa Lahiri, as a fictional creator, occupies this privileged space in between two countries, two continents, two cultures, and this multiplicity of perspectives, a truly multi-national existence and a multi-cultural experience makes her one of the foremost spokespersons of the multitude of minute yet consequential incidents that constitute contemporary life.

By portraying ordinary individuals facing invisible struggles, Lahiri transforms personal narratives into broader social commentary. Her work invites readers to recognize the silent maladies that shape relationships and identities in contemporary society. Ultimately, Lahiri's short stories stand as compassionate literary documents that illuminate the complexities of human connection in a changing world.

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