

ジュンパ・ラヒリの短編小説集「停電の夜に」に見られる 「秘密の打ち明け」という心理

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ジュンパ・ラヒリは、1967年にロンドンに生まれた米国在住の女性作家。両親ともインドのカルカッタ出身のベンガル人である。1999年、Interpreter of Maladies 「病気の通訳」がO・ヘンリー賞を受賞。同作収録の短編集「停電の夜に」でPEN/ヘミングウェイ賞、ニュー Yorker 新人賞ほかを独占し、鮮烈なデビューを飾った。2004年には、新人作家としてはきわめて異例ながら文学最優秀賞、ピューリッツァー賞まで受賞し、一躍全米の注目を集めた。その後、2003年に長編小説The Name Sake 「その名にちなんで」を発表し、2006年に映画化された。2009年には新作の短編集Unaccustomed Earth 「見知らぬ場所」が出版された。

本論文は、ジュンパ・ラヒリのデビュー作「停電の夜に」を中心に論ずる。この短編集は9つの物語からなり、その中で、最も注目すべきなのは、一番目の短編“A Temporary Matter”「停電の夜に」と三番目の短編“Interpreter of Maladies”「病気の通訳」に共通している「秘密の打ち明け」という特徴である。この論文は、二つの短篇に焦点を当て、作家はどのように「秘密の打ち明け」という技法を活用して、鋭くかつ緻密な観察力で倦怠期の夫婦の深層心理を抉り出したのか、また、繊細な心理描写から予想される結末を鮮やかに裏切るような展開を構成したのか、ということを明らかにする試みである。

第一章は、インド系二世同士の結婚の行く末をテーマにした、第一話「停電の夜に」を中心に分析する。初めての子どもを死産した夫婦が、あまりの悲しみのせいでだんだん遠ざかっていく。そんな折りに、一週間の停電で毎晩1時間の間、

夫婦が暗闇の中で共に過ごさなければならなくなる。インド式の「隠し事を打ち明けあう」というゲームが妻から提案され、ロウソクの灯りのもとで若夫婦が秘密を告白するというゲームが始まる。この一章は、作家がサスペンス的な場面設定で、どのように人間の心理を観察していくか、また夫婦の隙間が埋まるかもしれないという読者の期待と予想を巧みに裏切りながら、どのようにあっけない幕切れを用意するかを究明する。

第二章は、インドに観光旅行に来たインド系アメリカ人の一家と彼らの案内をする観光タクシー運転手にまつわる第三話、「病気の通訳」に焦点を当てる。倦怠期の夫婦をタクシー運転手（兼医者）の通訳が案内するうちに、客である若妻の魅力に惹かれた運転手が、自分の結婚生活への不満からだんだん妄想を募らせる一方で、若妻は、年上の運転手にある期待を託しなくなってくる。異国で妻がなぜか夫への内緒事を運転手に打ち明け、心の中に何年も隠していた痛みを発散しようとする。この一章は、心の悩みを抱える男と女のすれちがう感情や考え方を作家がどのような表現で捉えているのか、そして知らない人に秘密を告白する心理とは何なのかを分析する。

最後は、二つの物語に共通している「秘密の打ち明け」の二つの特徴を比較し、フロイドの心理的な理論を参考に、人間の複雑な心理がどのようにして予想外の皮肉な結末へと物語を導くのか、ということをもとめる。夫婦や家族など親しい関係の中に存在する亀裂を、緻密な観察力とみずみずしい感性と端麗な文章で表現し、インド移民だけではなく、どの家庭にもありうる話をありのままに描いたことが、ジュンパ・ラヒリの作品の最大の魅力の一つである。

Depicting Life as It Is

“Secret-Revealing” in Jhumpa Lahiri’s *Interpreter of Maladies*

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I. Introduction

Interpreter of Maladies is a debut collection of nine short stories written by Indian American woman writer Jhumpa Lahiri, which won the 2000 Pulitzer Prize for fiction, the Hemingway Foundation/ Pen Award, and many other awards. The stories relate the experiences of both first and second generation Indian immigrants, who are caught between the culture they have inherited and the “New World” they live in. From her fine descriptions of common people’s daily life, including cooking, travelling, and deterioration of marriage, the readers can feel her deep love for her Indian roots, and her sharp observation of human behavior and psychology.

Portraying Indian culture and heritage, Lahiri explores the themes of emotional struggles of love, communication barriers, incompatible relationships, the East-West cultural distinctions, isolation and dislocation by focusing on men and women in their 30’s. She translates between the ancient traditions of her ancestors and the sometimes baffling prospects of the New World. Traveling from India to America and back again, Lahiri charts the emotional voyages of characters seeking love beyond the barriers of nations, cultures, religions, and generations. Imbued with the sensual details of both Indians and Americans, she also speaks with universal eloquence and compassion to everyone who has ever felt like a foreigner.¹

As the food metaphor serves as an important part of Indian identity, secrecy is also a recurrent theme in this collection of short stories. Two typical examples are significantly presented in the opening story, “A Temporary Matter”, and the title story, “Interpreter of Maladies”. In the former story, an electrical cutoff due to repairs by the utility company affords the couple an opportunity to disclose their never-revealed thoughts about one another. Lahiri’s narrative method creates an ongoing sense of secrecy by which readers are told how or what characters think about each other. The secrets eventually result in their splitting up as a couple. In the latter story, “Interpreter of Maladies”, the revelation of secrets between a young female traveler and a middle-aged male taxi tour guide, is so unique and extraordinary that it makes the story develop far beyond the reader’s expectation. Mr. Kapasi’s fantasies, hopes, and aspirations for Mrs. Das are dashed when she tells him she is as old as his children might be. The confession of maladies presents the painstaking details of married life, which penetrates readers’ hearts deeply. Lahiri exhibits great sensitivity and nuance in her depictions of partnership and conflicts all too often experienced by not only Indian immigrants but second generation Asian-Americans as well.

In order to see how this secret telling functions, and results in both stories, this paper

aims to trace how Jhumpa Lahiri makes effective use of secret metaphor to exhibit young couples' delicate psychology in dealing with their "marriage maladies". By applying a bit of Freudian psychological theory, Chapter II focuses on secret-telling game between a young couple to see their behavior and conflicts in "A Temporary Matter". Chapter III analyzes the secret-revealing psychology from a woman to an unknown taxi guide in "Interpreter of Maladies". Chapter IV makes a comparison between the two stories' ironic endings, to discuss how Lahiri depicts "marriage maladies" not as a simple issue of Indian-American ethnicity, but a universal theme in any family. Finally, the conclusion summarizes that Jhumpa Lahiri's appeal to thousands of readers is accomplished through her depiction of life as it is, by charting the emotional journeys of her characters in seeking love beyond the barriers of Indian tradition and American culture and making her characters an integral part of the social fabric of the United States.

II. Psychological Release by Secret Revealing in Darkness

According to Freud, "We must presume rather that the psychical trauma—or more precisely the memory of the trauma—acts like a foreign body which long after its entry must continue to be regarded as an agent that is still at work."² Furthermore, he emphasized that "each individual hysterical symptom immediately and permanently disappeared when we had succeeded in bringing clearly to light the memory of the event by which it was provoked and in arousing its accompanying affect, and when the patient had described that event in the greatest possible detail and had put the affect into words."³ The revealing of secrets in Lahiri's two short stories clearly shows its functions as a psychological release for her protagonists, especially the wives' psychical trauma of pains and losses which they suffered long alone. In addition, their hysterical symptoms gradually disappear as they bring their pain into light, into detailed words.

"*A Temporary Matter*," the first story in this collection, captures a pivotal moment in a young Indian American couple's relatively short but eventful marriage. Their marriage has not been particularly intimate since their first child was stillborn six months before, and they have been mechanically going about their separate routines, relating to each other only in the most superficial way. Lahiri examines how a tragic loss can lead to indifference and a breakdown in communication between two people who once loved each other. The author's use of confession and irony in various forms makes the transition even more poignant, for it underscores an element of suspense as it brings about the story's finale.

The story opens with Shoba, a thirty-three-year-old wife, arriving home at the end of a workday. Her husband, Shukumar, a graduate student two years her senior, is cooking dinner. Shoba reads him a notice mailed from the electric company stating that their electricity will be turned off from 8 p.m. to 9 p.m. for five consecutive days so that a line can be repaired after a heavy snowstorm in March.

The story takes place six months after the stillbirth of their first child, and the two are still overwhelmed by grief. Shukumar has withdrawn from the world and seldom leaves the house. He stays in bed half the day, unable to summon the energy and concentration to make progress on his dissertation. Instead, he spends most of his time reading novels and cooking dinner. Shoba, on the other hand, stays away from the house as much as she can,

and leaves early each morning for her proofreading job in a publishing company in Boston. After work, she goes to the gym, and also takes on extra projects for work that she does at home during the evenings and weekends. She used to be an attentive housekeeper and enthusiastic cook, but the house seems to remind her of the loss and she has "treated the house like a hotel." (6)

Lahiri's narration helps us perceive that the baby symbolizes this couple's relationship. Shoba's pregnancy enhances their relationship and they look forward to becoming parents together. When the baby dies, their relationship begins to deteriorate and they become isolated from each other. Both husband and wife are depressed, and neither is willing to acknowledge that their marriage has lost something vital, something more than just romance.

Darkness as an element of suspense: When the couple's relationship has deteriorated, Lahiri skillfully arranges the story by setting up a situation in which the emotionally distant couple must interact more closely. Resulting from the scheduled 8 to 9 p.m. electricity cut by the utility company, Shoba and Shukumar, deprived of their usual distractions, must turn to each other for companionship. Thus the power outage adds an element of suspense as it draws the couple's indifferences sharply into focus and highlights their estrangement.

Shoba and Shukumar have been eating dinner separately, she in front of the television set, he in front of the computer. But on that night, they will eat together in the dark. It is Shoba's idea to begin a truth-telling game, because it reminds her of the game she used to play as a child during power failures on her visits to her grandmother's house in India. Wishing to break the awkward silence, Shoba suggests they begin the "exchange of confessions," and gradually, over the course of four nights, while they sit for an hour in the dark, they reveal things about themselves that trace the deepest grains of their relationship. It is ironic that they never thought to make such personal revelations until the lights went out, the idea of a married couple divulging their deepest secrets to each other adds an air of mystery to the darkness that surrounds them and heightens the suspense of what will actually be revealed. Let's see how they disclose their secrets.

The first night, Shoba tells Shukumar that early in their relationship she peeked into his address book to see if she was in it. Shukumar reveals that on their first date he forgot to tip the waiter, so he returned to the restaurant the next day and left money for him. (13) On the next day, after eating together by candlelight again, Shoba suggests that they sit outside, since it is warm. Shoba confesses that when Shukumar's mother came to visit them, she lied about having to work late; instead she actually went out for a martini with a male friend. Shukumar tells her that he cheated on an exam many years earlier, because his father had died a few months before and that he was unprepared for the exam. Shoba takes his hand, and they go inside. (16)

The third night, Shukumar discloses that he hadn't really lost the sweater she gave him for their third wedding anniversary "but had exchanged it for cash at Filene's, and that he had gotten drunk alone in the middle of the day at a hotel bar" (18). Shoba tells Shukumar that at a social gathering with his superiors from the university, she purposely did not tell him that he had a bit of food on his chin as he chatted with the department chairman. In the dark, in this manner, they begin to feel their way back to the intimacy they once shared

in their three-year-old marriage:

Something happened when the house was dark. They were able to talk to each other again. The third night after supper they'd sat together on the sofa, and once it was dark he began kissing her awkwardly on her forehead and her face, and though it was dark he closed his eyes, and knew that she did, too. The fourth night, they walked carefully upstairs, to bed, feeling together for the final step with their feet before landing, and making love with a desperation they had forgotten. She wept without sound, and whispered his name, and traced his eyebrows with her finger in the dark. (19-20)

On the fifth day, a notice from the electric company informs them that repairs have been completed early, so there will be no cutoff that night. Shukumar is disappointed, but Shoba seems confirming and tells him that she has something to tell him and wants him to see her face with lights on. She announces that she has signed a lease on an apartment for herself and needs time to herself.

Shukumar realizes that this revelation has been her planned ending for the game all along. He is relieved and yet he is sickened. This was what she'd been trying to tell him for the past four evenings." (21) Deeply hurt, Shukumar decides to tell Shoba one thing he had vowed to himself that he would never tell her. Knowing that he is almost certainly causing Shoba immense sorrow, Shukumar declares that, "Our baby was a boy...." (22), and goes on to describe his appearance in detail, including that the baby's hands were closed into fists the way Shoba's are when she sleeps. The two sit at the table together, and each of them cries because of what the other has revealed.

Darkness as an ironic promotion: From the above summary of their secret-telling game, firstly, we can perceive the darkness functioning not only as an element of suspense, but symbolically as an ironic promotion for communication between this young couple whose relationship has deteriorated. It is ironic that they never thought to make such personal revelations until the lights went out, the idea of a married couple divulging their deepest secrets to each other adds an air of mystery to the darkness that surrounds them and heightens the suspense of what will actually be revealed.

Lahiri enhances the story's ironic quality by creating a situation whereby her characters, isolated in darkness yet sustained by the customs of their native land, must confront each other with the truth. Upon hearing his wife's idea, Shukumar observes that Shoba "hadn't appeared so determined in months," unaware of the real purpose behind her suggestion. An air of suspense enhances the story further as Shukumar reluctantly agrees to play the game even though he does not have a childhood story about India to share. "What didn't they know about each other"? he thinks, foreshadowing the story's conclusion.

Although the utility company assures the residents of the neighborhood that the inconvenience is only "a temporary matter," the blackout has a transforming effect on the neighborhood and its residents. Despite the cold, neighbors chat with one another as they stroll up and down the street carrying flashlights. The darkness and cold, fresh air not only instill a restless feeling while enforcing a sense of community, but also forces a change in Shukumar and Shoba's routine—from voluntary separation to forced interaction, and turns their indifferent relationship into a new situation. During the week, when they must deal with a one-hour power outage each evening, the grief and alienation come out in detail.

What proves ironic is that until the lights go out, in the common living situation, Shoba and Shukumar occupy separate floors of the house, masquerading as a couple. The two live separate lives, yet they pretend to participate in a marriage. When Shoba finally stops in to greet him at night, Shukumar tries to look busy. "Don't work too hard," says Shoba ironically, aware, perhaps, that the dissertation is not progressing smoothly. Shukumar seeks to escape his wife's attention by moving his office to the nursery, a place Shoba avoids. "It was the one time in the day she sought him out, and yet he'd come to dread it. He knew it was something she forced herself to do." (7) But when the light is out, they as other people in the neighborhood are forced to interact closely. The darkness serving the function of enabling people's communication is so symbolic and ironic.

Secondly, from their game, we can see at first the revelations are harmless and insignificant. They involve minor intrusions of privacy or lapses in thought, white lies told in brief moments of selfishness, or desperate, unconscious attempts to preserve one's sense of dignity. With each night that passes, the truths that Shoba and Shukumar exchange become bolder and more honest as the couple struggles to relate and communicate. "Somehow, without saying anything, it had turned into this, into an exchange of confessions." (18)

As the nightly game progresses, Shukumar contemplates what he should say to his wife. He seems happy to at last be relieved of the secrets that have burdened him for so long. Moreover, the thought of what Shoba will say next excites him, creating a sense of anticipation which the reader shares. Each revelation appears to bring them closer together (though, as the story's ironic conclusion demonstrates, any hope of a reunion is beyond reach). "Something happened when the house was dark," relates the narrator. "They were able to talk to each other again." (19) This improved communication between Shoba and Shukumar inspires displays of affection long absent from their marriage. She is kind and patient with him, holding his hand in hers to show understanding, whereas he takes even more pride in planning and preparing the meals they now enjoy by candlelight. On the third night, Shoba and Shukumar kiss awkwardly on the sofa like a couple exploring each other's bodies for the first time. On the fourth night, they climb the stairs to bed and make love "with a desperation they had forgotten." (19) apparently having forgiven each other for their acts of neglect and selfishness.

But, on the morning of the fifth night, they receive a notice from the utility company stating that the repairs have been completed early, signaling an end to their apparently rekindled romance. "I suppose this is the end of our game," Shukumar says when he sees Shoba reading the notice. The period of harmony and affection that Shoba and Shukumar have experienced is, like the power outage that brought it about, "a temporary matter," the calm before the storm—the one that heralds the end of their marriage. Together, they have played a game in which they have pretended to want the same things when neither one of them has had the courage to state the obvious: their marriage is over. Moreover, the loss of their child has proved insurmountable, for neither spouse is willing to suffer that kind of pain and sorrow again. "Only he didn't want her to be pregnant again," the narrator says as Shukumar anxiously awaits Shoba's final declaration. "He didn't want to have to pretend to be happy." (21)

When Shoba tells Shukumar that she has signed a lease for an apartment on Beacon Hill, he understands immediately that the confessions they've made recently have served

as a preamble for a far more disingenuous revelation. Shoba has not made her confessions in an attempt to restore their relationship but to prepare herself for a transition to a more independent life. Lahiri uses suspense to heighten the irony of the scene as the reader anticipates Shukumar's reaction. It sickened Shukumar, knowing that she had spent these past evenings preparing for a life without him. He was relieved and yet he was sickened. This was what she'd been trying to tell him for the past four evenings. This was the point of her game.(21)

The irony of their situation is painfully clear to see. The "little ways" in which they have disappointed each other have become for Shukumar acts of betrayal, leading to Shoba's final act of betrayal. But Shoba, in making her latest revelation, has unwittingly brought about a reversal power to wound—which Shoba thinks is hers exclusively. As though the game were continuing, Shukumar counters Shoba's announcement with one of his own that proves devastating in the end: his holding of the baby at the hospital surprises and hurts Shoba a great deal. Therefore, their secret telling at last becomes an interaction of hurting each other.

In short, after six-month suffering from their loss of baby, this young couple at last get out of their indifference by "a temporary matter" of blackout. They seem to get released from their psychical trauma by secret-revealing; but on the other hand, they actually become sick to each other by betraying and hurting between each other. Their memory of the trauma, as Freud said, "acts like a foreign body which long after its entry must continue to be regarded as an agent that is still at work."¹ Even though they have brought clearly to light the memory of their loss and misunderstanding into words, their deteriorated marital relationship still couldn't be recovered

III. Psychological Release by Secret Revelation to an Unknown Taxi Guide

"*Interpreter of Maladies*", the third story, also the title story of this book, shares a similarity with "A Temporary Matter", which has an important section of confession as well. But unlike the setting of "A Temporary Matter" in Boston, America, the narrative is set completely in a young couple's parents' homeland, India. In the story, Mr. Kapasi, guides an American family of five through the India of their ancestors and hears an astonishing confession. An American traveler's secret, which has been kept for eight years by the wife Mina, is revealed to Mr. Kapasi, an Indian tour guide and taxi driver in a day tour.

Just as Freud stated, "Hysterics suffer mainly from reminiscences. The release of emotion connected with these causes was called "abreaction", and really what was happening in the cases described by Freud was that an abreaction of long-buried, significant emotional material was being induced through the release of some barrier which existed in normal consciousness, but dissolved at least temporarily in hypnosis."² The young wife, Mina's painful secret is long-buried in her heart and is always in the state of evaporation. Let's see how her secret is developed and released in the following analysis.

Unhappy marital lives: The story begins on a Saturday in mid-July. Mr. Kapasi is driving the Das family from their hotel to the Sun Temple at Konarak, India. He is assigned to pick up foreign tourists because he speaks English. The Das' have two boys, Ronny and Bobby, and a daughter Tina, at three. The parents are under thirty and look Indian but dress like

foreigners. Like the other Western tourists, Mr. Das has prepared for this trip by consulting a tour book published in the United States. He explains that he and his wife were born and raised in America but are visiting their parents who have retired in India. The children and parents are thought by Mr. Kapasi, to act like siblings, because at the first rest stop Mr. and Mrs. Das are arguing about whose turn it is to take their daughter to the toilet. Mrs. Das complains the car is not air-conditioned, and asks if Mr. Das saves fifty cents because of that. He tells her to quit complaining and it's not so hot. Later he tells Kapasi to stop so he can take another picture while Mrs. Das looks away at the sky. Their arguments and indifference to each other make Kapasi feel the husband and wife are no longer in love,

Mr. Kapasi, the protagonist of the story, also has an unhappy marriage. His first son died of typhoid fever at the age of seven in a doctor's clinic where he now works as an interpreter; he continues on with the doctor to pay their bills for more children and a new house. So he has two jobs; the weekend tour guide, and as an interpreter of maladies on weekdays for the doctor and his patients whose language (Gujarati) he speaks. His wife has never been interested in his job, for it reminds her of their lost son. "She never asked him about his patients who came to the doctor's office, or said that his job was a big responsibility." (53) He compares the Das marriage to his own and thinks how his marriage and the Das couple's seem similar. They both seem unhappily married and both have children to raise. He wonders if the Das' are a bad match also. When Mrs. Das says his interpreting job seems romantic because patients are more dependent on Mr. Kapasi than the doctor, Kapasi is exhilarated by her comment about his romantic job, for he always thinks it's a failure not to be an interpreter for diplomats and dignitaries, resolving conflicts between people and nations, settling disputes of which he alone could understand both sides" (52). His aspirations for his linguistic ability had been higher, for had dreamed himself a global soul. When Mina exhibits interest in his work and calls it romantic, Mr.kapasi is intoxicated by her attention and stirred to imagine an intimate relationship between them.

Kapasi's perceived romance begins in the car on the way from there to the next stop. Every gesture, word and act of Mina's fascinates him. Their eyes meet in the rearview mirror. She calls his job romantic, offers him gum and asks him to tell her more about his job. At the lunch stop, while taking photos, she asks him to sit closer to her and for his address. He expects pleasurable the letters he will receive from her that over time would begin to hold her deepest secrets: "She would write to him, asking him 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 he his. In this way, their friendship would grow and flourish" (55). Kapasi also imagines that in the letters he will explain things about India and she about America. "In his own way this correspondence would fulfill his dream, of serving as an interpreter between nations" (59).

When they arrive at The Sun Temple, which has walking paths, statues and friezes depicting naked couples making love and topless female musicians, Kapasi describes in detail the statue of Surya to Mina, and begins his delusion and believes an affair with Mina Das will make him happy and is what she wants as well. Later he extends the tour by a side trip to the hills of Udayagiri to spend more time with her. Mr. Kapasi fantasizes what

he will say to Mrs. Das and that he might take her hand. After their arrival, she says her legs are tired and won't get out of the car. Mr. Das and children start up the hill. When Mr. Kapasi says he will join them to explain the caves, Mrs. Das asks him to stay and gets into the front seat with him. Mr. Kapasi is excited by an opportunity to be alone with her. Unexpectedly, she begins to reveal her secret to him.

An astonishing confession: Different from the secret-telling in the blackout house in "A Temporary Matter", the primary setting of "Interpreter of Maladies" is in Kapasi's car on a tour from the hotel to the Sun Temple in India. Lahiri arranges such a special environment so as to let her characters reveal their deep maladies to someone close. In fact, Mina's interest in his interpretive skills has a much narrower application. She wishes a remedy for her malaise of spirit.

When staying alone with Mr. Kapasi, Mina reveals to him that Raj is not the biological father of their son, Bobby, and that he is ignorant of her betrayal. Mina explains they were young when they married and still in college. They had Ronny and she stayed at home to take care of the baby so she saw few friends and felt bored with her life. Raj didn't mind because he enjoyed coming home to play with the baby. Once he invited a friend from England who was doing a job interview in Boston to stay with them. Mina Das had casual sex with him and conceived Bobby the afternoon he left. So she developed a malady in the form of her son because of this illicit relationship with her husband's friend. Raj doesn't even suspect her secret. When Mr. Kapasi refers to her as Mrs. Das, she says he should not call her Mrs. She is twenty-eight and he probably has children her age. Kapasi is crestfallen that she thinks he is as old as her parent. After divulging this startling secret, and not getting an answer from Kapasi, she shouts at him: "I told you because of your talents..... I'm tired of feeling 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: say the right thing. Suggest some kind of remedy." (65) She is in pain and hopes Mr. Kapasi knows what to say to relieve her so she can feel better.

Mina's secret depresses Mr. Kapasi that she would look to him to "interpret her common, trivial little secret" (66). He asks her if it is pain or guilt that she feels. With that sharp analysis, he destroys forever any chance of a friendship, real or imagined, with Mina. She gets very angry and glares at him to say something insulting, then gets out of the car to walk up the hill to join her husband and children. At the sight of their son, Bobby, surrounded by monkeys pulling at him and hitting him with a stick, Mrs Das feels for the first time guilty and sorry for not taking care of him. When she holds Bobby and pulls out her brush to fix his hair, she pulls from her purse the slip of paper with Mr. Kapasi's address, which flies out and flutters away on the breeze into the trees with the monkeys. Kapasi's crush for Mina is so over in a few minutes.

Misinterpretation of maladies: Many characters in the stories have maladies that need interpretation. Often a malady is really guilt in another form. Mina Das carries guilt from her affair with Raj's friend. She does not know why she feels bad. She hopes Mr. Kapasi will have a remedy.

But Kapasi has problems enough of his own: in addition to his regular job working as an interpreter for a doctor who does not speak his patients' language, he also drives tourists

to local sites of interest. During the course of the afternoon, Mr. Kapasi becomes enamored of Mrs. Das and then becomes her unwilling confidant when she reads too much into his profession. So after Mina's confession and request for help, he can only point out that her bad feelings may be guilt. He believes his marriage and that of the Das' are similarly unhappy. He hopes she will cure his malady of an unhappy marriage with an affair. They look to each other for a remedy for their marital maladies, but finally his fantasies are dashed when she says he probably has children her age. On the other hand, Mrs. Das tells Mr. Kapasi her secret about Bobby to find a remedy. She is angry when he suggests it is guilt she feels. The telling alone might ease her guilt. There is no suggestion she wants Raj Das or Bobby to know. She runs back to them in an obvious attempt to reconcile after confessing to Kapasi. Telling of either secret to their spouse can only be hurtful.

Mina's confession of her long-kept secret to a tour guide, whom she gets to know for just a few hours, shows her instinct for recognizing a mature man. She seeks eagerly not only a remedy from the talented Mr. Kapasi, but also safety in a homeland where no one knows her details. Of course, Mr. Kapasi has no cure for what pains Mrs. Das--or himself. Both Mrs. Das and Mr. Kapasi feel disappointed with each other. Referring again of Freud's theory at the beginning of Chapter II, "each individual hysterical symptom immediately and permanently disappeared when we had succeeded in bringing clearly to light the memory ...and when the patient had described that event in the greatest possible detail and had put the affect into words." No matter how unsatisfied and angry Mina feels with Kapasi's answers to her request, she seems get rid of her hysterical symptom to Bobby's illicit birth, and shows more maternal love to her children after revealing her long buried painful secret..

The revealing of secrets in Lahiri's two short stories clearly shows its functions as a psychological release for her protagonists, especially the wives' psychical trauma of pains and losses which they suffered long alone. In addition, their hysterical symptoms gradually disappear as they bring their pain into light, into detailed words. Lahiri's subtle, bittersweet ending is characteristic of the collection as a whole. Events of the tour symbolize the continuing misinterpretation that the unhappily married Das and Kapasi couples experience.

IV. A Comparison of Ironic Endings between the Two Stories

Comparing the secret-telling in these two stories, it is obvious that Lahiri makes a very unique setting for her characters to reveal their maladies: one is held in darkness by a young couple in their marital deterioration; the other in a day-tour taxi from a young wife to an unknown middle-aged driver-guide for remedy, and both result in an unhappy ending.

1) In "A Temporary Matter", the temporary power outage creates the restricted setting for Shoba and Shukumar to restore their communication with each other. Their house has no lights for one hour each night. The darkness requires they use candlelight to eat dinner together. Shoba uses the darkened surroundings to initiate telling each other their secrets. The grief of losing their baby leads Shukumar and Shoba to a severe alienation. They do not even attempt to comfort or support each other. Each withdraws from the relationship, and they endure their grief as if they were two strangers living in a boardinghouse.

Through the game of revealing secrets that Shoba and Shukumar play, readers learn that deception has been a theme in their relationship. They have lied to each other, and

the lies have been selfish ones—told not to spare the other's feelings but to allow the person telling the lie to escape some discomfort or sacrifice. To avoid having dinner with Shukumar's mother, Shoba lied and said she had to work late. Shukumar told Shoba that he lost a sweater she had given him, when in reality he returned the sweater to a pawnshop and used the money to get drunk.

As the story unfolds, Lahiri provides readers with two conflicting sets of clues as to how it might end. Each evening Shoba and Shukumar seem to draw closer to each other both emotionally and physically. As they share long withheld secrets, they hold hands, kiss, and finally make love. It seems as if ghosts that have haunted their marriage are being exorcised. At the same time, the game that appears to be drawing them together also reveals a past filled with deception. Things have not always been as they seemed between these two people. In addition, readers learn early in the story that Shoba has always been one to plan ahead and that she keeps a separate bank account. Readers are left to wonder whether the pattern of deception will be broken or intensified.

The balance seems to shift decisively in favor of a happy ending when, on the fifth evening, the narrator declares, "They had survived a difficult time." Shoba's silence that evening has been interpreted as the calm after a storm. But that interpretation is as misleading as Shoba's behavior has been. Readers, like Shukumar, have been given mixed signals and only learn at the end which set of clues was reliable.

People who suffer the loss of a loved one often go through a period of not wanting to go on living themselves. They may feel unable to make the effort required to go about daily life. Sadness may drown out all positive emotions.⁶ This seems to be true for this couple, and especially of Shukumar. Though the death of their child has been difficult for Shoba to accept, there is also an undercurrent of resentment, as expressed by her mother that the loss would have been somewhat easier to bear, had Shukumar been at the hospital for the delivery. Shoba believes that she has experienced her loss alone. Moreover, she seeks consolation in the thought that the baby's gender has remained unknown, therefore preventing her from forming too deep an attachment to her dead child. Shoba declined the doctor's offer to know the child's sex. "In a way she almost took pride in her decision, for it enabled her to seek refuge in a mystery," says the narrator. But now Lahiri adds a twist, making the revelation that, "He knew that Shoba "assumed it was a mystery for him, too"(21). Ironically, now it is Shukumar who has the power to wound.

Thus the stage is set for Shukumar's final, heartbreaking revelation. "There was something he'd sworn he would never tell her, and for six months he had done his best to block it from his mind"(22), reports the narrator, yet the present circumstances weaken Shukumar's resolve to the breaking point. Contrary to what Shoba and her mother believe, Shukumar arrived at the hospital shortly after the baby was born, only to find his wife asleep, and was then taken to see their child with the hope that "holding the baby might help him with the process of grieving"(22). That day Shukumar "promised himself . . . that he would never tell Shoba, because he still loved her then, and it was the one thing in her life that she had wanted to be a surprise"(22). Shoba's decision to move out makes her husband realize that their marriage is, indeed, loveless. There is nothing left to bind him to his promise. Shoba, who is "the type to prepare for surprises, good and bad," finds herself

unprepared for the biggest surprise of all.

When Shukumar describes to Shoba how he had held their son, his tiny fingers "curled shut" like hers while she sleeps, he sees his wife's face "contorted with sorrow," for, though she has initiated their separation, she fully comprehends the loss that has engulfed them. Without a word, she turns out the lights and sits down at the table, where Shukumar joins her. "They wept together," says the narrator, "for the things they now knew." It is so tenderly written that by the end, we feel sorrow for both Shoba and Shukumar, for what they shared and lost, "for the things they now knew"(22).

This last poignant scene, suddenly tender and yet filled with an abandonment marked by despair, has been rendered so artfully by Lahiri that we are led up to an ironic conclusion helplessly. She creates in us a profound empathy by delineating the emotional predicament of her characters and developing a sense of suspense about what will happen to their marriage. This great surprise provides us a complicated feeling for this young couple: they suffered a lot but they should have a good life, had they talked more and supported each other. But this ironic ending also leaves us with two possibilities: they may separate as by Shoba's plan, or they may get reconciliation for they realize so many things they have lost.

2) "*Interpreter of Maladies*". at 27 pages the longest in the collection, is a multi-layered story which offers a complex treatment of imaginative affair and disappointments of interpretation. The troubled marital lives of Mrs. Das and Mr. Kapasi are mixed in this story which not only give us a full picture of these two protagonists' psychological situation, but mislead us to imagine their possible rosy future as well.

At the crisis point of the story, when the two of them are in the car alone, Mina confesses to Mr. Kapasi that one of their two boys was clandestinely fathered by her husband's Punjabi-Indian friend during a brief visit. This is the malady which she hopes Mr. Kapasi will provide a remedy for. Mina's secret depresses Mr. Kapasi, so he asks the reason why she has told him this. Mina replies that she told him her secret because of his talent. When Kapasi keeps silent, Mina urges him by saying it's his job as an interpreter to say the right thing to help her feel better, and suggest some kind of remedy. However, "Mr. Kapasi felt insulted that Mrs. Das should ask him to interpret her common, trivial little secret." Still he thinks it was his duty to assist her, so he gets to the heart of the matter by asking: "Is it really pain you feel, Mrs. Das, or is it guilt"(66)? This is all the interpreter of maladies can come up with. After all, Kapasi is only a translator of native languages. Mrs. Das is so disappointed and angry that she glares at Mr. Kapasi without saying anything and gets out of his taxi.

In the closing paragraph, Mr. Kapasi observes the little paper on which he had so carefully written his address slip out of Mina's handbag. "No one but Mr. Kapasi noticed. He watched as it rose, carried higher and higher by the breeze, into the trees where the monkeys now sat, solemnly observing the scene below. Mr. Kapasi observed it too, knowing that this was the picture of the Das family he would preserve forever in his mind."(69) This ironic ending suggests that Mr. Kapasi's dream of having an affair with Mina comes to an end, while Mrs. Das's request to get a remedy for her malady from a talented man also results in vain. Mina goes back to reunite with her family after her confession to Mr. Kapasi without any remedy, and resumes her motherhood by holding a frightened Bobby after an

attack by monkeys.

From the above comparison, we can see that “A Temporary Matter” is a deftly constructed and deeply layered story about the gradual erosion of meaningful interaction between two people once in love. On the other hand, “Interpreter of Maladies” offers a complex treatment of the allures and disappointments of interpretation. Mina expects that Mr. Kapasi will be able to minister to her spirit, while Mr. Kapasi assumes that Mina will enhance the limited quality of his life. Each misreads the other. Just as Rajini indicated, “South Asian American literature, too, is large with paradoxes...The story’s closing lines warn us against romanticized reading and ungrounded imaginings. They suggest that a proper ironic perspective is key to sound understanding.”⁶ When we read, we have to resist quick conclusions and convenient interpretations, but to pay attention to the multiple histories and contexts.

V. Conclusion

As a whole, Lahiri’s two stories inform us of her respect for Indian culture, and represent to us her masterful touch in describing the marital maladies by making her characters reveal secrets. The stories together, no matter whether in Boston, U.S.A or Konarak, India, are narrations of loneliness and discontent, notwithstanding the efforts of everyone involved to live fulfilling lives. Troubled marriages are identified by bickering, protracted silence, and indifference. Being a good psychologist and a deft writer, Lahiri focuses on the loneliness and identity crisis through revealing secrets that second generation Indian American and expatriates can feel. However, her eloquent rendering through basic, somewhat day-to-day situations hits on notes that are common to many of us, whether it be isolation in the family or a young couple’s indifference toward each other or a young adult meeting an interpreter of maladies in travel.

“A Temporary Matter” is perhaps the most moving story of the nine tales in Lahiri’s collection, which “is a deftly constructed and deeply layered story about the erosion of meaningful interaction between two people who were once in love. Nothing in the narrative marks their experience as specifically South Asian American—what happens to them has little to do with their upbringing. This could be a story about any young, educated, middle-class and urbanized couple.”⁷ It is so tenderly written that by the end, we feel sorrow for both Shoba and Shukumar, for what they shared and lost, “for the things they now knew.” While “Interpreter of Maladies” is so fascinatingly depicted that in the closing section, we fall into sympathy for Mrs. Das and Mr. Kapasi, for what they hoped and disappeared, for the remedies they did not find to their marital maladies. Lahiri’s usage of confession, or secret-telling in both stories delivers her message to us that people in the suffering in their daily lives tend to reveal their secrets, or sometimes maladies to someone in some hope of feeling better. They look for love across gender, beyond border, and over marriages. By confession, we readers can perceive the characters’ minds, feel their attitudes toward changes, and imagine the final conclusion. It also serves well enough to supply the sad surprising end, which makes us feel shocked and greatly sorry, and sometimes want to cry with the characters.

Maladies accurately diagnosed and misinterpreted, matters temporary and life-

changing, relationships in flux and unshakeable, unexpected blessings and sudden calamities, and the powers of survival—these are among the themes of Jhumpa Lahiri's extraordinary book. The narrator of the last story, "The Third and Final Continent," comments: There are times I am bewildered by each mile I have traveled, each meal I have eaten, each person I have known, each room in which I have slept (198). In that single line Jhumpa Lahiri sums up a universal experience, one that applies to all who have grown up, left home, fallen in or out of love, and, above all, experienced what it means to be a foreigner, even within one's own family.

In the last words of the collection's last story, "As ordinary as it all appears, there are times when it is beyond my imagination" (198), Lahiri's gift is to invest the ordinary with an emotion that makes us feel we're seeing it anew. Besides, Lahiri displays a steadfast curiosity about human behavior and a healthy respect for its mystery. Shrewd but not judgmental, she has the grace to make us feel close even to foolishness and timidity and naiveté and the wit to make actions logical without being predictable. She has the ability of erasing boundaries between character and audience, and the power to make us share the characters' tragedies. That's maybe one of the reasons she is widely accepted by American society and so highly evaluated by Pulitzer Prize.

Notes

1. Reviewed by C. J. S. Wallia. *IndiaStar.com*
2. David Stafford-Clark, *What Freud Really Said*. NY: Schodken Books, 1965 (33)
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid. p34
5. Wong, Sau-ling Cynthia. *Reading Asian American Literature: From Necessity to Extravagance*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993. (168)
6. Srikanth Rajini. *The World Next Door: South Asian American Literature and the Idea of America*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press. 2004. (246)
7. Ibid. p147

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