



The Revival of the Hybrid: Exploring Jhumpa Lahiri's Interpreter of *Maladies* as a Short Story Cycle

KEYWORDS

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ABSTRACT *Interlinked short stories or The Short Story Cycle has witnessed a revival in the modern era. The Short Story Cycle, which lies in between the novel and the short story, shares characteristics of both these genres. Jhumpa Lahiri's collection of nine short stories can be seen as a Short Story Cycle. These stories depict the lives of mainly Bengali Indian immigrants and their struggle to cope in an alien world.*

Every culture shines through the prism of its share of stories or narratives. These stories have been woven into the fabric of human consciousness through the thread of myriad generations in the form of legends, romances, folktales and fables. These tales or stories provided the narrative framework through which the members of a culture perpetuated their own values. The short story is believed to have originated in the oral traditions of storytelling. Brief narratives such as the anecdote, the fable, the short romances, the sketch and the tale have contributed to the development of the short story form. The independent short story is loosely described as a prose narrative, which is shorter than a novel. Due to the emphasis on brevity, the plot and characters of independent short stories are not as well developed as the novel. The narrative too is brief and more concise. The short story cycle, which may be regarded as a modern version of the short story shares characteristics of both the novel as well as the short story. Not much research has been done in this area. The short story cycle is a collection of independent yet interrelated short stories. Certain shared characteristics such as common characters, symbols, plots and thematic concerns distinguish a short story cycle from a collection of short stories.

The novel, unlike the short story, is able to develop a character or a theme in great detail. The short story faces several constraints in its attempt to do so. But since the stories in a short story cycle are linked together on the basis of either theme, setting or characters, the author is able to evolve and develop them. A strong thematic and structural relationship between the stories distinguishes a short story cycle from a collection or anthology of short stories. The modern short story cycle is being reinvented in a new cultural context. 'Aesop's Fables', 'The Arabian Nights', 'The Jataka Tales' and 'The Panchatantra' are examples of narratives that have contributed to the milieu of the modern short story. Although the short story has been with us from the time of the first 'tales', it was only as recently as the nineteenth century that it was given the status of an independent literary genre. The earliest masters of the short story include stalwarts such as Chaucer whose genius is best expressed in short stories. The short story cycle was born out of the need to create new narratives, an alternative to the canon. New writers are redefining the form. The short story has been a preferred form of expression of many twentieth century writers such as Franz Kafka, Anton Chekhov, Nikolay Gogol, Vladimir Nabokov, Ernest Hemingway and Katherine Mansfield. Short stories are also rep-

resentative of the cultural milieu they originate in. Russian short stories portray tragic themes, whereas American stories are more optimistic and African stories narrate tales of struggle and survival. So, short stories are culture specific. 'Interpreter Of *Maladies*' is also culture specific. Although not openly autobiographical, it relates to its authors confrontations with an alien world.

So why this reinvention or renewed interest in this otherwise neglected area of study? The modern world epitomises a lack of time, a lack of attention span. The short story cycle provides an alternate to a long drawn novel. In short stories, the narrative is extremely compact. Through this medium, the writer can be brief, yet develop his or her theme.

In 'The Interpreter Of *Maladies*', Jhumpa Lahiri chooses to speak about the immigrant experience, more specifically that of the American Indians and their struggle in an alien world. Whereas a novel would have 'a' story to tell, through the nine short stories, that make up the cycle, she gives us nine stories of the immigrant condition. Thus, giving the reader many experiences in one. And though she repeats themes, her characters are restricted to their respective stories and do not meander in and out of the stories as the characters in *Tales From Firozsha Baag*. Therefore the reader is offered a choice of characters and experiences he or she can identify with.

Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*, at first glance, appears simply as a collection of separate and independent stories featuring a diverse group of unrelated characters with no common locale and no uniform narrative style. However, on a closer reading, these stories, reveal common patterns and motifs that serve to unite the seemingly disparate stories. There are common threads that subtly bind these stories and the characters that inhabit these stories together. Unlike independent short stories, the nine stories that form the collection *Interpreter of Maladies*, can be seen as belonging to the genre of the short story cycle.

Noelle Brada-Williams, in her article, 'Reading Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* as a Short Story Cycle' says that-"Reading the text as a short story cycle and not just a collection reveals Lahiri's careful balancing of a range of representations and her intricate use of pattern and motif. By reading the stories as a cycle, readers not only receive the additional layers of meaning produced by the dialogue between stories but a more diverse and nuanced interpretation of members of the South Asian diaspora."

Depicting the lives of mainly Bengali Indian immigrants and their struggle to cope in an alien world, these stories voice the tension between the inherited culture and the acquired culture and the daily struggles of a large galaxy of characters who are trying to cope with the breakdown of relationships, the breakdown of communication. The sense of alienation and isolation the characters experience, the constant struggle between home and 'exile', recurrent themes in diasporic literature, are all brought to the fore through metaphors of home, exile, distance, neglect and unhappy marriages. The cyclical nature of the collection is apparent in the first and the last story of this nine story cycle. The first story 'A Temporary Matter' and the last story 'The Third and Final Continent' share common themes. 'A Temporary Matter' is a story of the death of a child and the breakdown of relationships. Shobha and Shukumar share secrets and in the process begin a communication which their strained relationship desperately needs. Whereas, 'The Third And Final Continent' shows survival of both the child and the marriage. Although the protagonists are different in these two stories, common themes bind the two stories and also emphasise the cyclical nature of the short story collection. Similarly, the fourth short story 'A Real Durwan' and the eighth 'The Treatment of Bibi Halder' are also connected. They portray opposite facets of the community. Boori Ma is ostracised and abandoned by her community, whereas after the birth of her child, Bibi Halder is finally 'cured'.

Jhumpa Lahiri intentionally leaves her characters ambiguous, she allows her readers to decide the fate of the characters. Michael Chabon, while commenting on John Updike's *Too Far to Go* says that "the interest lies in what has happened in the interstices." Many of Jhumpa Lahiri's protagonists are unable to settle in America, yet, she eulogises the journey, the struggle undertaken by them. Susan Garland Mann notes that "because cycles consist of discreet, self-sufficient stories, they are especially well suited to handle certain subjects, including the sense of isolation or fragmentation or indeterminacy that many twentieth-century characters experience."

In 'The Third and Final Continent' the last story of *Interpreter of Maladies*, the narrator says, describing what he says to his son, "Whenever he is discouraged, I tell him that if I can survive on three continents, then there is no obstacle he cannot conquer. While the astronauts, heroes forever, spent mere hours on the moon, I have remained in this new world for nearly thirty years." (197) In the sixth short story 'Mrs Sen's', Eliot begins to understand that when Mrs Sen refers to 'home', she means India. In the second short story 'When Mr Pirzada Came to Dine', the metaphor of home once again dominates the narrative. As a reminder of home, Mr Pirzada has set his pocket watch according to the local time in Dacca.

The short story has reappeared as a popular form of writing. Many contemporary writers are choosing this medium. Alice Ann Munro, the recipient of the 2013 Nobel prize in Literature is regarded as a 'master of the contemporary short story'. Alice Munro has expressed the popularity of this genre in the following words, "I no longer feel attracted to the well made novel. I want to write the story that will zero in and give you intense, but not connected moments of experience. I guess that's the way I see life. People remake themselves bit by bit and do things they don't understand. The novel has to have a coherence which I don't see anymore in the lives around me."

Thus the popularity of the short story cycle can be attributed to the very nature of its form-its 'hybridity'-partly a collection of stories and partly a novel, making it an extremely versatile medium. The short story cycle is itself representative of cultural hybridity because it is a hybrid form of writing. It is specially suitable for expressing what Rocio Davis calls the 'between-worlds' position of the 'migrant' writer. So, in the modern world of the divided consciousness, the hybrid forms of writing like the short story cycles are the best representatives of the hybridity of cultures in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

In general, the short story cycle provides greater freedom to the writer. And since the types of shorter prose which constitute the short story cycles are so varied, it is a more flexible medium. The author does not have to maintain a facade of unity which a novelist needs to in order to produce a coherent piece of literature. The cycle becomes an extended narrative to accommodate and put into play a heterogeneity of experiences. The short story cycle also represents the ability to say more in less words. It tests the skills of the writer, without testing the patience of the reader. A greater responsibility rests on the reader to find meaning in unsaid words, more than the said words. The multiplicity of meaning and experiences allows for multiple voices, many more than a novel can accommodate. This type of writing also produces an entire range of emotions in the reader which may surprise the author. Short stories inspire greater creativity. The novel defines everything. Whereas the Short story leaves a lot undefined, leaves so much to your interpretation. There is also more room for the use of experimental techniques. Each story of the cycle can also represent a different philosophy. Such multiplicity will only lead to chaos in a novel. Unlike novels, short stories, in both collections and cycles, are more open ended. Anton Chekhov, the famous Russian practitioner of the short story propagated this. He said that the short story must represent a 'slice of life' and that it should not have a beginning or an end, but must be left for the reader to interpret. This suited the modern writer, as the resistance to closure is characteristic of postmodern writing. Susan Ash says that the modern short story cycle reflects 'the post-modern sense of disarray, multiplicity and fragmentation.'

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