

## ENGLISH: TEXT RESPONSE

**Interpreter of Maladies: For Mrs Sen, “Everything is there” (that is, in India.) What instances are there in these stories of exile and estrangement, both emotionally and culturally?**

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Isolation from others, be it through cultural barriers or miscommunication, is an integral part of Lahiri’s prose. The exile and estrangement felt by her characters in her collection of short stories, **The Interpreter of Maladies**, is a direct result of their inability to adapt and communicate with others; choosing to hide behind secrets and compounding their issues or clinging onto the past. This is clearly reflected in stories such as **A Temporary Matter** and **Mrs Sen’s**; the former relating a crumbling marriage to its secrets and the latter dealing with the exile of a woman from her society – homesick and drowning in her new life.

Alienation however doesn’t have to be from a culture, but from each other. In **A Temporary Matter**, Lahiri invites us to observe a couple who have grown apart, presumably from the tragic loss of their child. Shukumar, the husband, is “mediocre” students who, along with his wife Shoba, have become “experts at avoiding each other”. Waking up in the afternoon his cup of coffee is drunk with an empty mug next to him, drawing attention to his wife’s absence. When the lights go out he doesn’t look forward to their meal, rather than seeing this as a positive, he sees it as a forced action – that they would “have” to eat together. It is his unmotivated and tired personality that is of no help to him in mending his relationship. There is no vitality left. Lahiri reminds her readers of this with constant flashbacks to older times – when they used to have “hundreds” of people to entertain; a time when Shoba used to cook and they were “more eager to make love than eat.” Now they “never went anywhere” and had no friends to entertain. By Shoba “barricading” herself behind files to proofread and Shukumar selectively studying in the nursery, a place which he knows Shoba tires her best to avoid, it can be understood that their relationship is merely a curtsey. After the lights go out, secrets are revealed reaching the crescendo that ends with Shukumar, in spite, revealing the sex of their stillborn child. In short, these secrets show a relationship which has been dotted with dishonesty, a relationship which at the conclusion of the story, Lahiri suggests cannot be sustained as they “wept for the things they now knew”.

Similarly, the story **The Interpreter of Maladies** deals with the effect of hiding secrets from one another and the emotional turmoil this causes. Mrs Das has lived with the secret of having an illegitimate son for a number of years – a secret that she feels can be unveiled to Mr Kapasi because of his profession. The misunderstanding of his role leads her to tell him everything – the fake marriage, her “loss of love for life” as well as her family and feeling of isolation, of exile and estrangement from her friends. Her strange urges to throw things out of her house, everything she owns, is a feeling interestingly shared with Shoba from **A Temporary Matter**. Both in response to grief want to enact their feelings on the external world, to harm something else so that it will, in some way or another, feel the same anguish they are. Tormented by the secret, Mrs Das grew distant from her family and “everyone she knew”; with no one to turn to, she thought, in desperation, that Mr Kapasi could help.

Mrs Das’ alienation from friends and family is one which is shared by Mrs Sen, though not in the same way. In the story of her namesake, **Mrs Sens’**, she is presented to Lahiri’s readers as a migrant coming to terms with a new life in America. Customs to her are an integral part of keeping ties with the homeland – she applies vermilion powder to her hair and cooks feverishly every day – “barricading” herself behind the mountains of vegetables. In blocking herself from the outside world she lives in the past – recounting the times to Elliot, the American boy which she is babysitting, when all the Indian wives would “sit in a circle on the top of a building and cook till sunrise”. These routines are the only way she can keep a lid on her sanity. In a sign of utmost desperation she asks Elliot if she screamed out to her apathetic new world, would anyone respond? In line with American values, he responds, “they would probably call the police”. Through the metaphor of the car, it is

clear to her readers that Lahiri is making a comment on Mrs Sen's assimilation. Her crash reveals her inability to learn to adapt to a new country – to learn to drive, to become an American, is in itself “too much [for] her”. Culturally she is isolated and cannot function in the new world which she finds herself in.

In contrast, the unnamed protagonist from **The Third and Final Continent** finds that living the American way of life is tough, but is at the end, ultimately rewarding. Immediately from the title we are afforded a sense of a journey – that this man, (who is unnamed as he is representing the generalised migrant experience), has been to many continents and has reached the end of his quest. Food again is a way which he remembers his homeland – “eating egg curry with his hands” typifies the Indian way of life. The fact that the place he was staying in authoritatively commands “cooking is strictly forbidden” is a way for Lahiri to remind us of the cultural differences between America and India – and how the need to assimilate for these Bengali migrants is important if they are ever to stand on their own two feet in this brave new world.

Mrs Croft in the same story is not exiled because of her culture but because of her age. She doesn't go out of her house to live in the present, rather, lives in the past – a world filled with chaperones and no place for mini-skirts. Her apparent amazement with the “man on the moon” reflects her reality and age – she is so far removed from the norm, that she is exiled from her own country. Yet it is her words which allow our unnamed protagonist to feel as if, finally, he is fitting in. Intended to be taken in both a metaphorical and literal sense, the dog which bites an arbitrary Indian woman drives home the message that reality bites; that saris and the Indian culture aren't necessarily wanted nor needed here. In spite of this, he chooses to bring Mala, his new wife, to show to Mrs Croft. In an incredibly tense moment, she describes her as a “proper lady”. It is from this moment on that the “distance between [Mala and him] lessened” as they began to embrace life in America. This story of exile and estrangement in culture is thus only a temporary matter; given it's the last story in her collection, one can further surmise that this is the overwhelming message Lahiri is communicating – that whilst life can be challenging, while it can seem to Mrs Sen almost “too much [to bear]” or Mr Kapasi a failed existence, it is a worthwhile and uplifting experience that anyone from any background can enjoy, irrespective of where they end up.