

ENGLISH: TEXT RESPONSE

Interpreter of Maladies: In Jhumpa Lahiri's short stories, social and cultural differences can lead to both misunderstandings and enlightenment between her characters. Do you agree with this statement?

The different ways in which Lahiri's characters see the world; be it from their social or cultural differences, often breed misunderstanding between them. Whilst one can argue that reaching such a crossroads in thought can often lead to enlightenment in a positive sense, however, this is not always the case. Such is the story Mrs Sen, who's only revelation is that she cannot possibly live in such an apathetic new world. Yet it is more common between Lahiri's characters that true insight and introspection is felt. In the story Sexy the character of Miranda through her upbringing and experiences in America, was ignorant of Dev and his background. It is through a relationship with him that she comes to terms with her childhood prejudice towards Indians and to garner a newfound empathy for people across the globe. Moreover, This Blessed House chronicles the adventures of Twinkle and Sanjeev – both as diametrically opposed as can be. It is Sanjeev who, through these differences, learns that being himself may not be a bad thing. Finally, in the Treatment of Bibi Haldar, gender roles are challenged as Bibi, who has a low standing in the community, rises up from being marginalised to being a successful business women. Her peers misunderstood her condition (a basic metaphor to be taken as our primordial need to fit in) and were subsequently enlightened by her ability to rise up against the odds – an action which understandably, challenges their preconceptions on what a woman can achieve in society.

We all hold certain views on the world, perceptions which can often be challenged by new people we meet. Miranda embodied the view of her community growing up, a view which held that the Dixits were outsiders; that their house and mere presence “detracted from the neighbourhood's charm”. This fear of change from the norm, of the new people on the block, was cemented when she, as a young child, misunderstood the significance of the frightening goddess Kali. Understandably without being brought up in the Hindu way of life, she was scared and conditioned thereafter to feel prejudiced towards them; like other superstitions around at the time, she even “held her breath” as she walked past their house as she would when passing a cemetery. Her lack of understanding of their culture, borne out of their inherent cultural differences, led her to perceive and generalise all Indians to be that way – to have odd customs and worship exotic, pagan gods.

We understand that these views are carried with her till adulthood and are only challenged when meeting Dev; when they first met she thought that being a “Bengali” meant he followed some kind of religion. Yet bonding with this individual she comes to realise and be “ashamed” of her past beliefs and takes a serious interest in his culture. She even goes so far as learning how to write her name in Bengali, and, in flash of enlightenment, “realised with a shock that somewhere in the world, [that scribble] meant something.” Her misunderstanding of Dev's cultural background prompted her to challenge her preconceptions – and in the end, come away as a better person.

Similar observations can be made of the relationship between Twinkle and Sanjeev in the story This Blessed House. Their differences are magnified by the Christian symbols which begin appearing around their house. In a social sense, Sanjeev is obsessed with his image – he detests when “Twinkle wears high heels” and worries for what people will think about having the Christian statues around the house, after all, he is a “good little Hindu”; the irony being he is what he says he is when it suits him. These self-contradictions are Lahiri's way of humanising her character; let's face it, we all hold double standards to some degree. Twinkle on the other hand is presented as a spontaneous, free spirit in stark contrast to Sanjeev's temperament. She takes the symbols almost as an Easter Egg hunt - her name coupled with this attitude seemingly infuriate the ‘adult’ Sanjeev, who feels that his wife has yet to “shed her childlike endearment”. Her nature eludes his

understanding, how she can see the “hidden wonders” in the world when he can’t aggravates him and suggests that he has a superiority complex, an aspect of his character supported by his obsession with his social image.

Yet despite this, at the conclusion of the story, we observe Sanjeev acquiescing to Twinkle. Her vivacious attitude to life has impressed everyone at Sanjeev’s party – he was reduced to a mere waiter; a periphery figure. Because of their differences, he comes to the realisation that being himself, and not what he thinks society wants him to be, is the way to live his life. “He follow[s]” Twinkle’s example as the story ends, and we as readers get the sense that his misunderstanding of Twinkle has led to enlightenment within himself.

In contrast, Mrs Sen finds herself living in a world of “silence”. The American way of life for this migrant is “too much” and accordingly she “barricades” herself behind mountains of food as a way of connecting back with her homeland. She cannot understand and assimilate into her new way of life – the metaphor of her car crash reinforces this notion; that she cannot grasp this new skill reflects on her inability to assimilate as, in India, she had a “driver”. In short, her social and cultural differences lead her to “shut the door” on her world. This experience enlightens her to the harsh reality of America, and how different it is to her culture. Furthermore, it underscores their respective problems of isolation; especially in the case of Elliot in the end as he looks out to the depressingly “grey waves receding from the shore”, mirroring Mrs Sen earlier on in this story as she gazed out into the waves; gazed out away from this life, and spotted a sari; a symbol of a past life that she won’t be able to enter again.

However, it is far more common in these stories for characters and communities to be enlightened through misunderstanding. **The Treatment of Bibi Haldar** illustrates how a community sees a person to be one thing, when in reality, she is so much more. Due to a malady which no one can interpret she lives a sheltered life; an existence which leaves her socially inept to attend to what is considered to be ‘woman’s’ matters; she “speaks backward, can’t light a stove or tell the difference between fennel and cumin seed!” As this story is told from the community perspective (the subtle “we” informs the reader of this) we have the sense that whilst they try to help her, walk with her and even encourage dialogue with possible suitors, they cannot fully appreciate her situation – that is, their care for her only extends so far. The metaphor of her condition is clear to the reader however – it is a psychosomatic illness, a manifestation of her human need to fit in. This is reinforced as to the best of the community’s knowledge, “she had been cured” when she became a fully functioning member of her world; after bearing a child and running her uncle’s business her ailment disappeared. Whilst it’s not stated in obvious terms, this is enlightening to Indian society as she is challenging the gender roles which have seen, traditionally, men being the breadwinners. Bibi, through the community misunderstanding her, has shown herself to be an inspiring member within her town; an enlightening figure which shows that tradition needn’t be sacrosanct.

Through a variety of characters, Lahiri shows that their differences can often open up pathways to enlightenment between them. Be it through understanding another’s culture through love for Miranda or the differences between Twinkle and Sanjeev, the overriding message in these stories is that a channel of communication is paramount to successful relationships, and whilst misunderstandings will occur for a variety of reasons, these can often open doors to new horizons.