

Deconstructive Features of Culture and Natural Instinct in Jhumpa Lahiri's Short Stories "Interpreter of Maladies" and "Sexy": A Criticism of the Values of Life

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Abstract

Jhumpa Lahiri in her collection of short stories, "The Interpreter of Maladies", has accentuated on the multifarious level of complexities that ooze along the repository of feelings and emotions of an individual, in a subterranean manner. Two short stories of the book, namely "The Interpreter of Maladies" and "Sexy" unveil the lack of contentment, frustrations and craving for a harmoniously reciprocal relationship amongst the protagonists, who through their life struggle, sometimes prioritizes the culture with its prevalent ideals, while on the other hand instinctively let their individualities float on the intrinsic urge to follow the passionate longing for a natural instincts. Derrida's deconstruction deals with the tactics of decentering as well as subverting the privileged term in favour of the prominence of the marginalized one, and thereby promoting a free play of dominance of both the central and repressed ideas and meanings without having a hierarchy. Now, in both the above mentioned stories, conforming to the features of deconstruction the prime characters show their allegiance to the dominant cultural ethics, notions, values, ideas, customs and behaviour, but an instinctive, repressed personal yearning for the affinity with a more compatible and considerate partner, which remains subterranean in their psyche and constantly strives to possess the centre of their instrumental impetuses of life.

Keywords: Deconstruction, Culture, Nature, Centre, Impulse, Marginal, Yearning, Instinct

Introduction

It is very interesting that while Jhumpa Lahiri narrates the story of individual crisis and craving for contentment in "Interpreter of Maladies" and "Sexy", a duel for dominance between culture and individuality lurks behind, which consequently leads to the free rein of ascendancy in a 'nonhierarchal' manner. Obviously, the reference to Jacques Derrida's concept of Deconstruction

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comes to the front as an analytical factor to elucidate this complicated conflict. Jim Powell in his “Derrida for Beginners” mentions that “deconstruction often involves a way of reading that concerns itself with decentering—with unmasking the problematic nature of all centers”. Now this notion of ‘decentering’ immediately brings to the forefront the two related ideas of central and marginal, which as a whole refers to the predominance of some of the concepts, ideologies, values and beliefs over others that are repressed strategically to promote the former.

Derrida with his epoch-making concept of deconstruction, unsettles this apparently complacent structure of centre, by accentuating the striving of the marginalized to reach out the prominence and the resultant contest between the marginalized and the central, which ultimately leads to the free play of predominance between the two. However, in the section of “The Writing Lesson” of his book *Tristes Tropiques (Sad Tropics)*, Lévi-Strauss exhibits his disgust and abhorrence for the concept of culture, as he considers it to be ‘corrupting’ and ‘perverse’ in relation to the innocence of benign nature by referring to the harmful effects of writing on the ‘primitive naturalness’ of the Nambikwara, a tribe of Brazil. But Derrida by deconstructing the said text of Lévi-Strauss highlights the innate essence of inequality and deprivation in the natural codes and customs of the tribe, and thus accentuates the myth of purity in nature and corruption in culture.

Now, this concept of culture with all its rules and regulations seem to dominate the identity of an individual, who exerts its potentials in every possible manner to conform to this culture-constructed identity; even if it means the stifling repression of his instinctive impulses. But this throttling subjugation of instinct by the norms of civilization and culture, does not always become victorious, as this repressed impulses battles to capture the centre of controlling constitution of psyche and turns out to be the ruling factor of the individuals, though this reaching out to the central position, does not certify its prolonged possession of dominance, as both the influences of culture and individual instincts engage themselves in the free play of pre-eminence.

In “Interpreter of Maladies”, Mr. Kapasi, at the very outset of his career, as the story reveals, was engrossed in learning various Western languages as his aim was to be an interpreter ‘for diplomats and dignitaries’, resolving lack of communication in sorting out serious affairs between nations, but acquiescing in the settlement of his parents in compliance with the domestic culture of Indians, he proves himself to be an adherent of the norms imposed upon by the society and readily enters into a ‘bad match’, which frustrates his arduously earned knowledge in foreign languages, and gradually turn him into a family man, who is solely engaged in earning both ends meet by utilising his still retained knowledge in English for his occupation as a tour guide and as an interpreter in a clinic to translate the various ailment of the patients for the benefit of the doctor. Now, this subservience to

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the regulations of culture confront an utter contest when he met Mrs. Das, whose cordial interactions and profusion of compliments regarding the 'big responsibility' of his duty as the interpreter of maladies, erupts in him a profound liking for the foreigner and an instant comparison with the 'little regard' on the part of his wife, for his profoundly important role as the interpreter of the specific agonies of the patients. But this instinctive yearning for an intimacy with Mrs. Das involuntarily evaporates, when she confides in him about Bobby, who is the outcome of her illicit relationship with Mr. Das's friend, as the norms and regulations take hold of Mr. Kapasi's psyche and he involuntarily considers Mina as a fallen woman, who breaches the ethics and principles of a male dominated culture, and in this way it implies the deconstructive features of culture and individual instinctive impulses in the story, "Interpreter of Maladies".

On the other hand, in "Sexy" Miranda prioritizes her inherent impulses for Dev, disregarding the ethics of culture, which does not recommend any kind of entanglement with a married man, as it will be a strangulation of values so far as the infliction of injustices on that married man's spouse and children are concerned. She begins to relish her relationship with Dev, until Robin, an innocent nephew of her friend, describes her as 'sexy'- a term which, tickled an immense pleasure in her, as Dev addressed her so in previous time, because she realized her alluring appeal to the male dominated culture at that time, and it creates a relishing sensation. Now, while she feels a gleeful gratification for being sexy in the patriarchal culture, Miranda is compelled to self-assess herself and her individuality, when Robin categorizes her so because in his naïve judgement 'loving someone you don't know' is the definition of being 'sexy'. Here, it is the natural innocence of Robin that stimulates Miranda to concentrate on her importance as an individual in her relationship with Dev, and consequently her individual consciousness comes to the fore by the marginalization of the society oriented meaning of the word 'sexy' and prioritizing the innocent child's version of the meaning of the word. But she does not trivializes the meaning of the word from the male point of view altogether, but let the two meanings play freely in her mind so that she can have a better understanding of her significance in the clandestine partner's life.

Deconstruction and its Features in the Short Stories

Derrida in his paper 'Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences' at a Johns Hopkins University symposium in 1966, introduces the concept of 'deconstruction' and unsettles the Western world of philosophy into doubt. While commenting on the fundamentals of deconstruction, Jim Powell observes: "According to Derrida, all Western thought is based on the idea of a center—an origin, a Truth, an Ideal Form, a Fixed Point, an Immovable Mover, an Essence, a God, a Presence, which is usually capitalized, and guarantees all meaning." (page-21)

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Every culture has its own central ideology, ethics, values, ideals, tenets and beliefs, and in its attempt to centralize something, it represses or 'marginalizes' others. And it is this centralization and consequent repression that begets 'binary opposites', which strive to achieve the dominant central position. And here, in this paper the binary opposites are 'culture' and 'individuality', each of which always tries to arrest the centre and thus freeze the free play between themselves. But deconstruction emphasizes that if any of the binary opposites secures the center, almost immediately the other becomes marginalized and its perspectives are throttled. Now, deconstruction is 'a tactic of decentering', which enables us to realize at first the 'centrality of the central term' and its subsequent subversion so that the repressed term can secure its ascendancy over the former central term temporarily, and ultimately the struggle for hierarchy of this binary opposites, is surrendered to the 'free play' of dominance. It must be mentioned here that in the context of "Interpreter of Maladies" and "Sexy", the binary opposition of culture and individuality has reduced both to take the position of 'central' and 'marginalized' position, depending on the context.

The Relevant Reference to Lévi-Strauss

Derrida in his "Of Grammatology" (1976) has famously mentions that 'there is nothing outside the text', which refers to the resemblance of everything in life to a text, and hence like a text every aspect of life is a play of differences and subject to the idea of deconstruction. Now French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss argues in favour of nature and criticizes culture, as he thinks everything natural is fraught with innocence and purity, while culture refers to the 'corrupting' and 'perverse' modification of that pure natural impulses. Now, Derrida proves that even this field of anthropological discussion can be deconstructed, as these ideas of purity in nature and corruption in culture bear in themselves intrinsic differences that constitute a binary opposition between 'nature' and 'culture' and call forth the focus of deconstruction.

Now, Raman Seldon in his "A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory" discusses about Derrida's argument regarding 'logocentrism', which refers to the favour of speech over writing in Western philosophy, and how quite naturally 'logos' or the spoken word becomes central or natural and writing is marginalized: "A spoken word emitted from a living body appears to be closer to an originating thought than a written word" (page-174).

And therefore, Lévi-Strauss considers speech to be pure and writing is a mode of corruption of that natural speech. He even tries to establish this argument in the chapter, "The Writing Lesson", of his book *Tristes Tropiques*, which depicts his visit among the Nambikwara tribe of Brazil, whom Lévi-Strauss considers to be a perfect example of purity of nature, as their naturalness has not been corrupted by civilization till then. And as Jim Powell mentions: "Lévi-Strauss feels guilty—like a

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voyeur, an alien 'civilized' man who can only corrupt the pure communal innocence of this primitive culture which knows no writing—only speaking” (Derrida for Beginners/page-58).

Now, when Strauss is inscribing his findings in his notebook, some members of the tribe begin to imitate him, and gradually the leader of the Nambikwara starts to misuse this power of writing as a means to hoodwink his fellow members for the allocation of more food in his favour. And thus, Lévi-Strauss ventures to substantiate the corrupting influence of writing which is an emblem of culture, upon primitive purity of the tribe. But quite interestingly, Derrida picks up the point and mentions how the Nambikwara was already corrupted by their own rules, which allow the leader to possess whatever he wants, and how hitherto their lives was influenced by “various taboos, myths, codes and customs which are, in effect, a form of marking, of 'writing' without an alphabet”(Derrida for Beginners/page-59). Thus, Derrida is successful in pointing out how the seemingly pure life of the Brazilian tribe is 'corrupted' by the variants of writing and by culture in turn; how their lives are governed by differences and how occasionally the natural speech seizes the centre of the life of the Nambikwara by thrusting the writing or culture as marginalized and vice-versa. Now, so far as “Interpreter of Maladies” and “Sexy” of Jhumpa Lahiri are concerned, similar capturing of centre and the subsequent free play between culture and natural individuality definitely ensue, depending on occasions.

The Elements of Deconstruction in “Interpreter of Maladies” and “Sexy”

In “Interpreter of Maladies”, Mr. Kapasi is presented as driver cum tour guide of the Das family, who has come to visit India from New Jersey, America. From the very outset of the story, Mrs. Das is seen to exhibit a strange nonchalance towards her children and to argue with her husband over even the indispensable paternal duties, which indicates a significant hiatus in relationships between them. Mr. Das on the other hand seems to manifest his absorption with surface reality, as he is seen always to be engrossed with his camera. Now, Mr. Kapasi maintains an adequate distance from the guests, as is expected from a proper guide. Now, Mr. Kapasi exerted the vigorous energy of his youth in learning various foreign languages, as he cherished an aspiration to secure the significant job of an interpreter, who has to perform an important role in making the delegates of different nations realize the profoundly grave matters of state by disentangling the impediments of languages through his interpretation: “He had dreamed of being an interpreter for diplomats and dignitaries, resolving conflicts between people and nations, settling disputes of which he alone could understand both sides” (Interpreter of Maladies/page-52).

But his compliance with his parents' settlement regarding his marriage, unsettles his ambition of becoming an interpreter for diplomats as he readily surrenders to the norms of Indian culture and

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let it dominate the center by repressing his individual impetuses. However, to compete with the daily expenses, he was compelled to accept the opportunity of a job as an interpreter in a doctor's clinic, where his duty is to explain the details of the afflictions of Gujarati patients to the doctor, who does not have any knowledge in that language. Now, his wife does not have any respect or regard for the grave encumbrance he has to undertake as an interpreter in elucidating the complexities of maladies of the patients in 'doctor's office', because she considers her husband as "doctor's assistant", who perform such insignificant duties as 'taking someone's temperature, or changing a bedpan', and here lies the gulf between their intimacy.

During his conversation with the Das family, he refers to this part time job as an interpreter, which creates immense interest in Mrs. Das, who is so much thrilled with the novelty of his job that she classifies it at first as 'interesting' and then as 'romantic'—the word which casts an immense impact on his mind. Later when she eulogizes the 'big responsibility' with which Mr. Kapasi has encumbered himself, as he is the sole person to be accountable in explaining the intricacies of the diseases of the patients to the doctor. This profusion of appreciation creates a marked difference even in his own judgement about acknowledging the importance of his job as an interpreter, as he was apathetic hitherto about the significance of his occupation: "Mr. Kapasi had never thought of his job in such complimentary terms. To him it was a thankless occupation." (Interpreter of Maladies/page-51)

Now suddenly he begins to realize the assiduous indefatigability, with which he maintains the authenticity about the various specifics of multiple kind of diseases during his translation, and an instantaneous feeling of indebtedness engulfs him regarding Mrs. Das, whose gestures he now begins to scrutinize by glancing at the mirror of his taxi. Gradually this gratitude transforms into a liking for Mina, and Mr. Kapasi begins to compare her spousal hiatus to his own incompatible marriage with an inconsiderate wife. When Mrs. Das asks for his address so that she can send copies of pictures as memento from America, he is so convulsed with emotional attachment that in spite of writing the details of his residence on a piece of paper with utmost care, he becomes overwhelmed with palpitating confusion whether he had spelled them flawlessly. The more Mina behaves like a stranger to her family, the deeper chance of probability Mr. Kapasi inculcate within himself, regarding her affinity with him. Thus, the natural instinct for blissful rapport that was gambled during his consent for untimely marriage, conforming to the culture and hitherto left as marginalized, now comes to the front and becomes central, because he now ignores the curbing restraints of his culture, which strictly disapproves any feeling of propinquity of a married man for another married woman. Further, if he had prioritized his inner impetuses during his bachelor life, he would definitely have protested against

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the foolhardiness of his sudden marriage and the consequent encumbrance, when he was sparkling with scintillating potentials to shine in life at that time.

But this preference for natural instincts over cultural constraints immediately dissolves and he once again surrenders to the rigid norms of a patriarchy, when Mina confides in him the long-suppressed secret about Bobby, who is the outcome of her illicit relationship with a Punjabi friend. Now, being a male member of patriarchal culture, Mr. Kapasi feels agitated as he can never digest the illegitimate entanglement of a woman and the consequent birth of a bastard child, though hitherto when the chance to be involved with that same woman is lurking around him, he relishes the tangy romanticism of that situation: “Mr. Kapasi nodded. He felt suddenly parched, and his forehead was warm and slightly numb from the balm” (Interpreter of Maladies/page-62).

The onslaught on the probability of his romantic affinity with Mina becomes fatal when she mildly chastises Mr. Kapasi for addressing him as Mrs. Das, because he may be so old as to have children of her age. The circle becomes complete and once again his instinctive impulses are marginalized, giving access to the culture to procure central position: “The feeling he had had toward her, that made him check his reflection in the rear view mirror as they drove, evaporated a little.” (Interpreter of Maladies/page-65)

That he has surrendered to the culture of male dominated society and let it possess the center, becomes palpable when he categorizes Mina's pain of ‘feeling so terrible’ for suppressing the truth about Bobby, as ‘guilt’, which is the expected contrition from a woman, who breaches the ethics of male culture. His alienation from any kind of attachment regarding Mrs. Das proves itself, when he does not instinctively rushes to the aid of Bobby, who accidentally becomes surrounded by monkeys, and Mina has to scream for Mr. Kapasi’s assistance in rescuing the child: “Mr. Kapasi,’ Mrs. Das shrieked, noticing him standing to one side. ‘Do something, for God's sake, do something!’” (Interpreter of Maladies/page-68).

Had Mr. Kapasi allowed his natural instinct for blissful affinity to remain at the centre, he could never have sustained that nonchalant attitude at the time of dire necessity of Bobby, the offspring of his endeared Mrs. Das. In this way the duel between culture and natural impulses to secure the centre goes on throughout the storyline of “Interpreter of Maladies”, and their refusal to freeze the free play in possessing the hierarchy, substantiates the deconstructive elements in the short story.

In “Sexy” similar kind of contest between culture and natural individuality ensues, as Miranda gets involved in amorous attachment with married Dev, refuting the norms of culture and upholding her desire for romantic involvement. The feature of deconstruction in this story revolves

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around the difference of meanings of the prime word “sexy”. Whereas the male dominated culture applies the word to denote the tantalizing sensuousness of a person, an innocent child with his naïve point of view, surmises its meaning to be 'loving someone you don't know', and it is this impeccable interpretation of the word that unsettles the power structure, by marginalizing the hitherto central meaning, i.e., the patriarchal version of the definition of the word, and by securing its hold in the centre.

Miranda gets romantically entangled with a married man namely Dev, without caring for the norms of society and its culture, and rebelling against the harsh feelings that are progenerated when the fidelity and innocence of Dev's wife and children are taken into consideration respectively. Now, through her gradual indulgence in this relationship Miranda exhibits her reluctance to surrender to the constraining norms of the society and there by marginalizes culture by prioritizing her natural instincts for love. She feels exulted in her relationship with Dev and seems to be flushed with contentment, when one day during their visit to the Mapparium at the Christian Science center, he classifies her, in a hushed tone, as sexy. Though the word is uttered in whisper, she appears to be gratified with the sensuality of the term, as the luscious effect of it permeates through every pore of her body. It will be very interesting to note that as Miranda is so much gladdened by this event, it proves her relishing acceptance of the patriarchal culture that uses the word 'sexy' to denote the alluring carnality of a person, and in doing so, she seems to prioritize the culture and let the center be dominated by its methods and notions, whose restraints she has disregarded only just now in maintaining her liaison with Dev. Hence, the binary opposition of culture and natural instinct is seen to be engaged in a non-hierarchical free power play for securing the central position in anon-freezing manner.

Amusingly, an innocent child named Robin, destabilizes once more this game of seizing the center, when he presents his inadvertently guileless description of the word 'sexy' as 'loving someone you don't know'. Miranda gets stupefied at this new perspective of looking at things and events of life. She was well aware of the agitations that were going on between the child's parents, as his father also gets entangled in a liaison with a so called 'sexy' girl, whom he had encountered accidentally. Now Miranda visualises the arguments between Robin's parents, and his mother's laments about the irrationality of his father's involvement with a total stranger only for her seductiveness, while Robin misconstrues the flow of this heated quarrel, and deduces to the conclusion: “That's what my father did,” Robin continued. “He sat beside someone he didn't know, someone sexy, and now he loves her instead of my mother” (Sexy/page-108).

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Now, though in both situations Miranda 'felt...under her skin' (Sexy/page-107), the utter difference between these two denotations of the word 'sexy', so far as their perspectives are concerned, creates a massive upheaval in Miranda's psyche. While Dev's whispering comment "You're sexy" engulfs her with a tangy voluptuousness, Robin's version of the word makes her 'numb', as she becomes agonizingly self-conscious about her sheer unfamiliarity with Dev, when they met for the first time and wonders whether that strangeness still lurks in their relationship. She gets puzzled with the thought whether in reality Dev's whispering 'sexy' can be replaced by Robin's version of the word and whether they are not unfamiliar in actuality. Now this numbness not only brings doubt regarding Dev's intensity about their relationship, into the front, it incites Miranda's natural inquisitiveness about her self—self identity, self respectability etc. Accordingly, one can distinctly realize that while the commanding position of male dominated culture, which has hitherto grabbed the center through Miranda's contented acceptance of the patriarchal version of the meaning of the word, is subverted and nature, in the form of instinctive inquest regarding individuality, secures the center, the two entirely different meanings of the word 'sexy', are engaged in a free struggle to possess the hierarchy, conforming to the features of deconstruction.

Conclusion

Thus, from the above discussion it has become evident that the idea of deconstruction is present in every sphere of life, as is promulgated by Jacques Derrida in his "Of Grammatology", and likewise in *Interpreter of Maladies* and "Sexy" the deconstructive features in the form of power struggle between culture and natural instinct becomes palpable, as the prime characters confront various struggles of life in multifarious level.

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