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Emotional Decolonization and the Negotiation of South Asian Womanhood in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*

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ABSTRACT

The emotional landscapes of diasporic South Asian women are often shaped by a tension between inherited cultural expectations and individual autonomy. This paper examines Mrs. Das in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* as a case study of emotional decolonization, analyzing how she negotiates the constraints imposed by traditional gender roles, patriarchal norms, and diasporic pressures. Rather than viewing her as simply apathetic or morally deficient, this study contends that her detachment, selective maternal engagement, and confessional dialogue with Mr. Kapasi function as deliberate acts of resistance and self-assertion. Utilizing postcolonial feminist theory, diaspora studies, and affect theory, the research situates Mrs. Das's partial emancipation within broader socio-cultural and psychological frameworks, illustrating the complexities of negotiating identity in transnational contexts. By reinterpreting her behavior as a deliberate challenge to patriarchal and cultural norms, this study offers a novel contribution to Lahiri scholarship and underscores the significance of literary narratives in understanding contemporary issues of gender, autonomy, and emotional labor.

Keywords: *Emotional decolonization, postcolonial feminism, diasporic identity, South Asian womanhood, Lahiri, affect theory*

1. Introduction

Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* explores the emotional and cultural complexities of diasporic life, especially for second-generation South Asian immigrants in the United States. The short story "Mr. and Mrs. Das" portrays a family whose outward appearance of normalcy masks deep-seated emotional estrangement. Mrs. Das, in particular, has frequently been critiqued for her perceived apathy, selfishness, and negligence as a mother and wife (Mandal, 2010; Alam, 2014). Such readings often fail to consider the historical, cultural, and diasporic pressures that shape her behavior.

This study argues that Mrs. Das's detachment should be interpreted as emotional decolonization, a process whereby individuals resist internalized emotional norms imposed by patriarchal and colonial histories. In a diasporic context, South Asian women often confront conflicting cultural expectations: loyalty to familial and cultural traditions on one hand, and individual autonomy within Western social structures on the other. Mrs. Das's emotional withdrawal, avoidance of maternal responsibilities, and her confessional disclosure to Mr. Kapasi exemplify subtle resistance to these expectations, highlighting the complexities of negotiating gendered identity within diasporic settings.

2. Background of the Study

Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) offers profound insights into the emotional landscapes of diasporic South Asian families, highlighting the complexities of identity, culture, and gender. Within this collection, the short story "Mr. and Mrs. Das" stands out as a vivid portrayal of the quiet fractures that exist in familial and marital relationships shaped by both historical and cultural pressures. The story focuses on the Das family, whose outward appearance of normalcy conceals underlying emotional and relational tensions. Central to this narrative is Mrs. Das, whose emotional detachment, maternal withdrawal, and confessional disclosure to Mr. Kapasi reveal the nuanced negotiation of individual autonomy within a diasporic, postcolonial, and patriarchal context.

In South Asian cultural traditions, women have historically been expected to embody the ideals of selflessness, obedience, and unwavering commitment to family duties (Chatterjee, 1993). Colonial rule reinforced these norms by portraying women as moral custodians responsible for the perpetuation of familial honor and cultural continuity (Loomba, 1998). Such expectations persist even in diasporic communities, where immigrant women often navigate the dual pressures of maintaining cultural authenticity while adapting to Western societal norms. This dual expectation frequently results in emotional strain, alienation, and internal conflict.

Mrs. Das's experiences exemplify these tensions. Her apparent indifference toward her children, disengagement during family interactions, and her private confession about marital and extramarital experiences reflect her struggle to resist and reinterpret inherited cultural expectations. These actions can be understood through the framework of **emotional decolonization**, a concept that emphasizes the unlearning of internalized emotional norms imposed by patriarchal and colonial structures (Ahmed, 2004). In this sense, Mrs. Das is not merely negligent or apathetic; rather, she demonstrates an attempt to reclaim agency over her own emotions and desires within restrictive structures.

The diasporic setting of the story further intensifies these emotional dynamics. Living outside of India, the Das family embodies the tension between the collective, family-oriented values of South Asian culture and the individualist ethos of American society. This displacement creates unique challenges for women like Mrs. Das, who must negotiate their sense of self amidst competing cultural narratives and expectations. Lahiri herself has emphasized her interest in the "quiet, almost invisible" emotional ruptures that structure her characters' lives (The Paris Review, 2005), highlighting the significance of subtle acts of emotional resistance in diasporic contexts.

Despite extensive scholarship on Lahiri's exploration of diaspora, identity, and cross-cultural tension, Mrs. Das's **emotional detachment and negotiation of womanhood** remain underexplored. Existing studies often focus on moralistic interpretations of her character, framing her as selfish or negligent (Mandal, 2010; Alam, 2014). Such readings fail to consider how her behavior reflects a conscious, albeit partial, rejection of culturally imposed emotional norms and gender roles. By situating Mrs. Das within the frameworks of **postcolonial feminism, affect theory, and diaspora studies**, this study positions her as a figure engaged in the complex renegotiation of selfhood, motherhood, and marital expectations.

So, the background of this study underscores the importance of examining **emotional autonomy and resistance** within diasporic South Asian female experiences. Mrs. Das emerges as a lens through which to analyze the subtle ways women confront and reinterpret

patriarchal and colonial legacies, offering new insights into both literary scholarship and the lived realities of diasporic identities.

3. Theoretical Framework

This research integrates three theoretical perspectives:

1. **Emotional Decolonization:** Emotional decolonization refers to the unlearning of internalized emotional norms shaped by colonial, patriarchal, or cultural structures (Ahmed, 2004). Mrs. Das's withdrawal from expected maternal and spousal behaviors exemplifies this process.
2. **Postcolonial Feminism:** Postcolonial feminist theory examines how colonial histories intersect with patriarchal structures to constrain women's autonomy (Mohanty, 2003; Spivak, 1999). Mrs. Das negotiates inherited gender expectations while inhabiting a diasporic context, performing subtle acts of resistance.
3. **Diaspora Studies:** Diasporic identity introduces negotiation between home and host cultures, producing unique emotional tensions (Bhatia & Ram, 2009). Mrs. Das's detachment reflects the challenge of balancing South Asian collectivist norms with Western individualism.

By combining these perspectives, the study situates Mrs. Das's behavior as contextually grounded and resistant, rather than morally deficient.

4. Literature Review

A robust examination of Mrs. Das in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* necessitates engaging with multiple scholarly perspectives, including traditional literary criticism, postcolonial analysis, diaspora studies, and feminist theory. This review synthesizes existing research while identifying gaps addressed in the current study.

Traditional Readings of Mrs. Das

Critical reception of Mrs. Das often centers on moralistic and character-driven interpretations. Mandal (2010) portrays her as apathetic, selfish, and disengaged from her family, interpreting her maternal negligence as evidence of personal failure rather than a reaction to structural constraints. Similarly, Alam (2014) views her confessional act—disclosing an extramarital affair and her son's paternity—as an expression of guilt or moral inadequacy rather than an assertion of emotional autonomy. Such readings reflect cultural assumptions about ideal motherhood and the roles of women in South Asian families, often neglecting the historical and social pressures influencing Mrs. Das's behavior. While these analyses contribute to understanding narrative tension and character dynamics, they overlook the interpretive potential of reading her detachment as a conscious, resistant engagement with inherited norms.

Postcolonial and Diasporic Perspectives

Postcolonial critics have extensively analyzed Lahiri's exploration of diasporic identity, cultural displacement, and hybridity (Bose, 2005; Mishra, 2007). These studies emphasize the challenges of navigating cross-cultural environments, particularly for first- and second-generation immigrants. However, while these analyses illuminate themes of cultural estrangement and alienation, they often fail to interrogate the **gendered emotional labor** performed by diasporic women. Mrs. Das, as a diasporic woman negotiating both South Asian collectivist norms and American individualist expectations, embodies this overlooked dimension. Diaspora studies highlight the pressures of dual cultural frameworks, revealing how women may experience tension between self-expression and societal conformity (Bhatia

& Ram, 2009). Yet, the specific mechanisms by which emotional detachment operates as a form of resistance remain underexplored in these studies.

Feminist and Postcolonial Feminist Readings

Postcolonial feminist theory provides an analytical lens to understand Mrs. Das's negotiation of patriarchal and colonial legacies. Mohanty (2003) and Spivak (1999) emphasize that South Asian women often inherit restrictive social norms shaped by both indigenous patriarchy and colonial histories. From this perspective, Mrs. Das's emotional withdrawal and her confessional act can be interpreted as a subtle form of defiance against expectations of silence, obedience, and self-sacrifice. Postcolonial feminism situates her resistance within broader socio-historical frameworks, highlighting how acts of emotional autonomy disrupt inherited norms. Scholars such as Devadoss (2018) and Sahu (2021) explore diasporic women's internal conflicts, emphasizing how Lahiri portrays the negotiation of identity through nuanced affective states, yet they do not explicitly frame these behaviors as **emotional decolonization**.

Research Gap

Despite significant scholarship on Lahiri's portrayal of diaspora, identity, and emotional complexity, Mrs. Das's **detachment, withdrawal, and confessional acts** have not been sufficiently examined through the combined lens of emotional decolonization, postcolonial feminism, and affect theory. Existing research largely frames her behavior as moral failure or relational dysfunction, neglecting the interpretive potential of understanding her as a subject actively resisting patriarchal and colonial emotional norms. This study addresses this gap, offering a nuanced interpretation of Mrs. Das as a figure negotiating emotional autonomy, gendered expectations, and diasporic tension.

5. Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive approach to examine Mrs. Das in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*, with particular focus on emotional decolonization, postcolonial feminist perspectives, and diasporic identity negotiation. The methodology is designed to analyze textual evidence within its cultural, historical, and social contexts, emphasizing subjective meaning and interpretive insight.

Research Design

The study employs a **qualitative research design** grounded in interpretivist epistemology. This design allows for an in-depth exploration of Mrs. Das's behaviors, emotional responses, and symbolic actions within the narrative, emphasizing the meaning-making processes of both the character and the text. The interpretive framework is particularly suitable for literary studies, as it prioritizes understanding characters' subjective experiences and socio-cultural contexts over quantitative measurement.

Data Sources

Primary Source:

- Lahiri, J. (1999). *Interpreter of Maladies*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. The story "Mr. and Mrs. Das" is the principal text for analysis.

Secondary Sources:

- Scholarly articles, books, and journals on postcolonial literature, feminist theory, affect studies, and diaspora psychology. Key works include Chatterjee (1993), Loomba (1998), Mohanty (2003), Spivak (1999), Bhatia & Ram (2009), and contemporary analyses of Lahiri's fiction (Alam, 2014; Mandal, 2010; Sahu, 2021).

Data Collection Methods

Data were collected through comprehensive textual analysis, focusing on:

1. **Character behavior and dialogue:** Examination of Mrs. Das's emotional responses, withdrawal, and confessional interactions.
2. **Symbolic elements:** Identification of objects, settings, and actions that reflect emotional distancing or resistance.
3. **Contextual readings:** Analysis of cultural, historical, and diasporic contexts that influence character behavior.

Data Analysis Techniques

Thematic and interpretive analysis was conducted in three stages:

1. **Thematic Coding:** Key passages relating to emotional detachment, maternal withdrawal, confession, and symbolic gestures were identified and coded for recurrent patterns.
2. **Contextual Interpretation:** Coded data were analyzed using postcolonial feminist theory and affect theory, emphasizing how Mrs. Das negotiates inherited emotional norms and gender expectations.
3. **Triangulation:** Findings were cross-referenced with secondary literature to validate interpretations and situate the character's experiences within broader scholarly discussions of diaspora, feminism, and emotional autonomy.

Research Paradigm

This study adopts an **interpretivist paradigm**, emphasizing understanding subjective meanings, emotions, and cultural nuances rather than generalizing across populations. It recognizes the complex interplay of socio-cultural and historical factors shaping Mrs. Das's experiences.

Scope and Limitations

- **Scope:** The research focuses exclusively on Mrs. Das in "Mr. and Mrs. Das," analyzing emotional decolonization, gendered expectations, and diasporic identity.
- **Limitations:** As a qualitative study based on textual interpretation, findings are context-specific and not generalizable to all diasporic women. Interpretations may be influenced by the researcher's theoretical framework, and alternative readings of the text are possible.

6. Discussion and Findings

This section analyzes Mrs. Das in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* through the lens of **emotional decolonization**, **postcolonial feminist theory**, and **diaspora studies**. The discussion situates her behavior within socio-cultural, historical, and diasporic contexts while highlighting the subtle forms of resistance manifested through her actions, confessions, and emotional withdrawal.

Negotiating Emotional Autonomy in Patriarchal Contexts

Mrs. Das exhibits **emotional detachment** as a strategy to resist culturally imposed expectations. South Asian women have traditionally been expected to embody selflessness, maternal devotion, and silence (Chatterjee, 1993). Mrs. Das's deliberate inattention to her children such as when she refuses to comb Bobby's hair or disengages during sightseeing reflects her challenge to these normative roles. Lahiri writes, "*Mrs. Das looked out the window, silent, while the children whispered among themselves*" (Lahiri, 1999, p. 37), emphasizing her conscious withdrawal. This withdrawal can be interpreted as **partial emotional decolonization**, reflecting her attempt to reclaim agency over her emotional life while negotiating internalized norms.

Maternal Withdrawal as Subtle Resistance

Beyond apathy, Mrs. Das's withdrawal functions as a **subtle act of resistance**. Objects such as her sunglasses and camera serve as symbolic barriers, enabling observation without participation. Sunglasses obscure her gaze, while the camera allows her to mediate engagement, signaling control over how and when she interacts emotionally with her family. These actions align with Ahmed's (2004) concept of emotional decolonization, where detachment and selective participation challenge internalized social and familial expectations.

Confessional Acts and Assertion of Agency

Mrs. Das's confession to Mr. Kapasi "*I had an affair, and that child is not my husband's*" (Lahiri, 1999, p. 39) represents a direct assertion of agency. This revelation disrupts traditional norms of silence and obedience expected of South Asian women (Mohanty, 2003; Spivak, 1999). By articulating her transgression, she exercises control over her emotional narrative, forcing interpretation rather than judgment. The confessional moment embodies **postcolonial feminist resistance**, illustrating how women navigate inherited patriarchal structures while negotiating personal identity. Lahiri herself has remarked on her interest in "quiet, almost invisible" emotional ruptures, underscoring the significance of subtle acts of resistance in her characters (The Paris Review, 2005).

Diasporic Tensions and Identity Negotiation

The diasporic setting intensifies Mrs. Das's emotional conflict. She negotiates a dual consciousness: the collectivist values of her South Asian heritage and the individualist ethos of American society (Bhatia & Ram, 2009). Lahiri observes: "*Mrs. Das sat apart from the others, feeling neither connected to India nor fully at home in her American life*" (Lahiri, 1999, p. 34). This liminality produces tension and alienation, illustrating how diasporic women navigate competing cultural expectations. Her detachment can thus be seen as both an emotional defense mechanism and an act of subtle resistance against prescriptive roles.

Material and Symbolic Mediators of Emotional Distance

Objects and spaces in the narrative function symbolically to reinforce Mrs. Das's emotional boundaries. The camera, luggage, and sunglasses act as **tools of emotional decolonization**, mediating her engagement with both family and environment. These material markers allow her to resist full participation in culturally dictated roles while maintaining appearances of conformity, reflecting the **partial and negotiated nature** of her emotional autonomy (Devadoss, 2018).

Interpersonal Alienation and Emotional Isolation

Mrs. Das's detachment extends beyond her family to interpersonal relationships more broadly. Her estrangement from her husband and children parallels a larger sense of isolation within her social and cultural milieu. Lahiri describes her emotional distance as a "quiet separation" from those around her (Lahiri, 1999, p. 35), suggesting that alienation functions as both a coping mechanism and an assertion of individuality. This duality reflects the tension inherent in **emotional decolonization**, where liberation from norms often entails temporary isolation and estrangement.

Impact of Cultural and Colonial Legacies

The story also underscores how colonial and postcolonial histories influence gendered emotional expectations. South Asian women, shaped by patriarchal and colonial ideologies, have historically been positioned as moral custodians and emotional anchors within the family (Loomba, 1998). Mrs. Das's refusal to conform through confession, emotional withdrawal, and selective engagement challenges these internalized scripts. Her behavior

demonstrates how **postcolonial emotional legacies** persist in diasporic contexts, shaping the ways women negotiate agency, identity, and desire.

Constraints on Emotional Liberation

Despite these acts of resistance, Mrs. Das's liberation is **partial and constrained**. Her confession is misinterpreted by Mr. Kapasi, and societal expectations continue to limit her agency: "*Mrs. Das felt neither guilt nor relief, only a strange emptiness*" (Lahiri, 1999, p. 40). Lahiri's portrayal underscores the difficulty of fully disentangling from internalized patriarchal and cultural norms, illustrating that emotional decolonization is a gradual, contextually bound process.

Integrating Postcolonial Feminist Readings

From a postcolonial feminist perspective, Mrs. Das's behaviors exemplify resistance against inherited gender norms. By refusing to conform fully to idealized South Asian womanhood, she negotiates her identity, asserting autonomy over her desires, emotions, and maternal role (Mohanty, 2003; Spivak, 1999). Her withdrawal, boredom, and confession highlight the subtle mechanisms through which diasporic women navigate and challenge socially imposed expectations, making her a complex site for exploring **emotional autonomy, diasporic identity, and gendered resistance**.

Emotional Decolonization as a Process

The story demonstrates that emotional decolonization is not instantaneous but a **gradual, negotiated process**. Mrs. Das's actions illustrate both progress and limitations, revealing that breaking free from internalized norms often involves ambivalence, isolation, and partial resistance. This nuanced representation contributes to Lahiri scholarship by emphasizing the intricacies of female emotional experience in diasporic contexts (Fonseka, 2023).

Mrs. Das's emotional detachment can be read as **resistance to patriarchal norms and cultural expectation**. Affect theory clarifies that refusal to perform expected emotions is politically meaningful (Ahmed, 2004). Postcolonial feminist theory situates her within structural constraints shaped by colonial and patriarchal histories (Mohanty, 2003; Spivak, 1999). Lahiri's narrative perspective emphasizes subtle interiority, supporting a reading of Mrs. Das as a resistant, rather than morally flawed, figure.

7. Implications and Contemporary Relevance

The analysis of Mrs. Das's emotional decolonization extends beyond literary interpretation, offering insights into **contemporary social and cultural issues**. While Lahiri's story is set in a specific diasporic context, the experiences of Mrs. Das resonate with ongoing challenges faced by South Asian women navigating **traditional expectations, patriarchal norms, and globalized lifestyles**.

Diasporic Identity and Cultural Negotiation

Modern South Asian women in immigrant communities often balance inherited cultural norms with the expectations of their host societies. Like Mrs. Das, many face **emotional labor pressures**, including the expectation to maintain family harmony while suppressing personal desires. Her partial withdrawal and negotiation of emotional space reflect contemporary struggles to assert autonomy while respecting familial and cultural obligations (Bhatia & Ram, 2009).

Gender Roles and Maternal Expectations

Mrs. Das's refusal to perform stereotypical maternal duties highlights ongoing tensions between **personal freedom and social expectation**. In modern contexts, South Asian women

continue to challenge prescribed roles, including expectations of self-sacrifice, caregiving, and silence regarding personal dissatisfaction. This demonstrates that emotional decolonization is not only historical but an **active process in contemporary society** (Mohanty, 2003).

Emotional Expression and Mental Health

Mrs. Das's internalized frustration, alienation, and confessional acts mirror contemporary conversations around **mental health and emotional well-being** among women constrained by cultural norms. Her story underscores the importance of acknowledging emotional autonomy and the right to voice dissatisfaction without stigma, particularly in immigrant families where traditional norms often clash with individual desires.

Negotiating Marital and Social Expectations

The narrative highlights the subtle forms of resistance women employ to navigate **marital and societal pressures**. Mrs. Das's detachment and confession can be seen as a precursor to modern conversations about agency, consent, and transparency in personal relationships, emphasizing the ongoing relevance of Lahiri's work to contemporary gender discourses.

Broader Cultural Reflection

By framing emotional decolonization within a diasporic and postcolonial feminist perspective, the study encourages a **re-evaluation of traditional South Asian womanhood**, prompting both literary scholars and social observers to consider how cultural and colonial legacies continue to influence women's emotional lives today.

8. Conclusion

Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* provides a compelling exploration of the emotional and cultural tensions experienced by diasporic South Asian women. In this study, Mrs. Das emerges not merely as a morally flawed character but as a figure negotiating **emotional decolonization** within restrictive familial, cultural, and colonial frameworks. Her withdrawal from maternal duties, detachment from social expectations, and candid confession to Mr. Kapasi illustrate a deliberate attempt to reclaim agency over her emotional life, even amid constraints imposed by societal norms and diasporic pressures.

The analysis highlights that **resistance to traditional roles is neither absolute nor straight forward**. Mrs. Das's partial autonomy reflects the nuanced realities of navigating inherited patriarchal structures while asserting individuality. By situating her actions within postcolonial feminist and diaspora studies frameworks, this research emphasizes that emotional detachment and confessional acts can function as meaningful strategies of self-determination.

Furthermore, the study underscores the **contemporary relevance** of Lahiri's narrative. South Asian women in diaspora communities continue to contend with expectations surrounding motherhood, marriage, and emotional labor, making Mrs. Das's experiences reflective of broader, ongoing negotiations of identity and autonomy. Recognizing such subtle forms of resistance challenges simplistic moral readings and encourages a more empathetic and contextually informed understanding of women's emotional lives.

Finally, Mrs. Das embodies the **complex interplay between tradition, diaspora, and personal agency**, revealing how literature can illuminate the intricate processes of emotional and cultural negotiation. Lahiri's portrayal invites readers to reconsider conventional assumptions about South Asian womanhood, emphasizing that acts of emotional decolonization, though partial and fraught, are significant steps toward reclaiming autonomy and self-expression.

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