

Note

Beauty and the Beast: An Exploration of the Ugly American Myth and Postcolonial Otherness in Lahiri's "Interpreter of Maladies"

Stacy Shaneyfelt¹

As an avid American traveler, it is often tempting to claim Canadian citizenship when fellow American travelers repeatedly tarnish the American image aboard when American travelers selfishly seek the closest McDonalds or Starbucks, stubbornly refuse to speak a few local phrases as a sign of respect, and often exhibit profane, obnoxious displays in scantily clad attire. These behaviors reflect the Ugly American myth and disseminate a sense of superiority to foreign hosts. Likewise, Lahiri's exceptional short story, "The Interpreter of Maladies," also exemplifies the theme of the Ugly American myth and contains implications of postcolonial "otherness" as the Das family visits India, seeking heritage and culture but instead are ultimately unwilling to immerse themselves in the riches and beauty of the country and its people. Accordingly, the Das family, especially Mrs. Das, is blatantly blinded by western ways.

First of all, the Ugly American myth is perpetuated by the Das family as they clutch their American habits instead of seizing valuable life lessons from their trip and cultural quest. Just as the American tendency is "to eat fast, work fast, not take time for any pleasantries" (Reinhard), the Ugly American myth often emulates these traits when Americans travel abroad, manifesting in the fact that "Americans won't listen" (Reinhard). In turn, these notions are also embodied by the Das characters as they reinforce the Ugly American myth and refuse to "listen" to Mr. Kapsai, only wanting to hear what they choose to receive from the trip.

From the initial sentence in the text, the family shows cultural insensitivity as they bicker at the tea stall about "who should take Tina to the toilet" (Lahiri 325), an obvious sign that trivial matters are more important than learning about local customs. The children greedily view the trip in terms of satisfying their own gratifications as they try to feed pieces of gum to the goats (Lahiri 326), view monkeys as petting zoo pawns, not "the hanuman" (Lahiri 327), and act rambunctiously throughout the duration of the trip.

¹ After earning her graduate and undergraduate degrees from Slippery Rock University of Pennsylvania, Stacy Shaneyfelt worked as a secondary English and Drama educator for fourteen years. Although teaching is her greatest reward, she also exudes a strong passion for travel. She also earned a 2002 Fulbright Summer Exchange to Thailand and Vietnam. Stacy is currently working on her ESL certification as a graduate student at Robert Morris University in Pittsburgh, PA, USA. *Email: sshaneyf@yahoo.com*

In addition to the narrow-minded attitudes, the Das family's inability to adapt to the new culture is further demonstrated by fashion indiscretions, more glimpses of the Ugly American myth. For instance, the children are dressed in "stiff, brightly colored clothing and caps with translucent visors" (Lahiri 325), a visual display of America's material obsession. Ms. Das' attire, too, does not respect the local culture with her provocative fashion and offensive mannerisms with her "largely bare legs across the back seat" (Lahiri 325) and her "close-fitting blouse styled like a man's undershirt. The blouse was decorated at chest-level with a calico appliqué in the shape of a strawberry" (Lahiri 327); her clothing choices are definitely inappropriate fashion selections for a visit to a holy place, the Sun Temple at Konarak (Lahiri 325). Again, these examples reveal the disrespect to the local culture by the bold Americans, magnifying the Ugly American myth.

Besides the inappropriate fashion blunders and impertinent behaviors of the American characters in the story, the Ugly American myth is also depicted by the Das family's overall curt attitudes toward the gracious tour guide, Mr. Kapasi. Mrs. Das, for example, "gave an impatient sigh, as if she had been traveling her whole life without pause" (Lahiri 327), showing her lack of interest in cultural interaction. Her intolerance is further denoted by her snide comments, "I told you to get a car with air-conditioning" (Lahiri 328), "my legs are tired" (Lahiri 335), "this place gives me the creeps" (Lahiri 339), and her emphasis on money: "just to save a few stupid rupees" (Lahiri 328).

Led by Mrs. Das' demeaning attitude and selfish comments, the family also treats Mr. Kapasi like a servant "without displaying any interest in him" (Lahiri 325). These comments and mannerisms typify the Ugly American myth, the notion that Americans are more concerned with their own comfort and self-gratification than celebrating and relishing in the new cultural experiences of the host country.

Besides embodying the Ugly American myth through the American characterizations, the story also demonstrates a postcolonial sense of "otherness" as the Das family views Mr. Kapasi and Indian culture, in general, through an oppressive light. Just as Abdul JanMohamed argues that the western concept of the orient views the west as ordered, rational, masculine, good, then the orient is chaotic, irrational, feminine, and evil (Lye), this good/bad dichotomy or "us versus them" mentality also permeates the short story. This division is further evident as Mr. Das implores Ronny not to touch the goat (Lahiri 325), insinuating the same general attitude toward the Indian people and culture, making the people (and the guide) dehumanized and definitely "othered."

Again, Mrs. Das' comment, "God, let's get out of here" (Lahiri 339), shows her perceived superiority over the Indian culture. Her intentions of the trip are inauthentic; instead, she seems to view the India as just an exotic backdrop that she "could use one of these pictures for our Christmas card this year" (Lahiri 335). Her comment indicates not only her discomfort with the culture but also her fantastical vision of it as exotic, worldly, or "other."

"Othering" and other Postcolonial ramifications in this short story reflect the writings of Edward Said. He argues, "The Orient has been represented as the binary opposite of the West or occident" (Denyer). His assertion that it is "everything about the West which it finds uncomfortable or unsettling to its superior image and which it projects onto its negative conceptualization of the Middle-East. Here, the Orient is seen as the occident's other" (Denyer), certainly dominates the short story. To illustrate, Mrs. Das' Christmas card comment and behaviors during the road trip verify Said's argument that "Orientalism is a western fantasy of the Middle-East which is based on this otherness" (Lye). Thus, her postcard image of India does not align with the reality of it, further causing her disappointment and frustration.

Mr. Das, too, seems to fantasize about the differences within the cultures and "others" as he "took a picture of a barefoot man, his head wrapped in a dirty turban, seated on top of a cart of grain sacks pulled by a pair of bullocks. Both the man and the bullocks were emaciated" (Lahiri 329). Instead of interacting with Mr. Kapasi or the local people, Mr. Das seems to view them literally and figuratively through the "lens" of his camera and the limited, American worldview.

Similarly, Postcolonial implications in this text also reinforce Frantz Fanon's suggestion that colonialism, "...has created a sense of division and alienation in the self-identity of the non-white colonized peoples" (Denyer). Even though the Dases are Indian American, they view themselves as Americans foremost, embracing their superiority. Mr. Kapasi's self identity seems deflated by the Americans, especially when he is insulted that "Mrs. Das should ask him to interpret her common, trivial little secret" (Lahiri 337). Her mundane comments, "But so romantic" (Lahiri 329), "that's so neat" (Lahiri 329), and "pretend I'm there" (Lahiri 335), also illustrate her lack of true interest in Indian culture, further showing her alleged moral and cultural superiority over him, his country, and also her family's native land.

Cultural superiority also occurs with Mr. Das' introductory handshake to Mr. Kapasi as forceful, "like an American so that Mr. Kapasi felt it in his elbow" (Lahiri 325). This display seems to express a dominant sense of western power dynamics and exertion over the "other." Even the Das' guide book "looked as if it had been published abroad" (Lahiri 326), more evidence of their lack of true regard for Indian culture.

In sum, "Beauty and the Beast" reflects the dichotomies in this text because the Indian beauty transcends the American ugliness of the Das characters. Mr. Kapasi is the true "beauty" of the Lahiri's poignant short story, "The Interpreter of Maladies" through his wise, gentle, and insightful reflections. Instead of experiencing a true quest for cultural identity and beauty, the Das family exudes the "beastly" Ugly American myth and display a strong sense of Postcolonial "otherness" toward their Indian companion and family homeland. Their behavior sadly affects Mr. Kapasi, giving him a "picture of the Das family he would preserve forever in his mind" (Lahiri 339). Like the lens of Mr. Das' camera, this story offers a snapshot of Americans traveling abroad as well as Postcolonial notions of identity, power, race, gender, and socioeconomic status.

Works Cited

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