

The interpreter of girls: how Kincaid and Lahiri write women



Among the many problems of society, the constrictions of gender has been perennially prevalent. From birth, people are forced to conform to certain gender roles based on their biological sex. Such constrictions are better associated with women because culture places more burden on them. For instance, female vanity is solely for the purpose to attract a man, yet is a double edged sword. A natural look is considered unattractive yet a woman who wears a lot of makeup and minimal clothing is thought to sleep around. Moreover, the majority of female expectations involve her submission to a man, in which she is obligated to love and cater to one. These requirements are the basis of Jamaica Kincaid's " Girl." Embedded in the necessary commands is the harsh criticism of women in culture, presenting the societal image of what a female is supposed to be and represent. If the girl does not heed to this advice, she will become much like Mrs. Das, the heroine in " Interpreter of Maladies" by Jhumpa Lahiri. This short story tells of the Das family on vacation in India, following a tour led by Mr. Kapasi. In disregarding " Girl"'s advice, Mrs. Das is not conscious of being a woman in Interpreter of Maladies, in which her carelessness illustrates her as promiscuous and unloving.

The introduction of " Interpreter of Maladies" immediately takes note of Mrs. Das's " shaved, largely bare legs" (Lahiri, 335) dragging across the back of the car seat. Even though this statement is in the point of view Mr. Kapasi, it shows an immediate attraction. At the same time, her clothing captures the same interest. While " observing her," Mr. Kapasi describes her wearing " a red and white checkered skirt that stopped above her knees, slip on shoes with a square wooden heel, and a close fitting blouse...decorated at chest

level with a calico applique in the shape of a strawberry” (Lahiri, 337).

Details such as the length of the skirt and fit of the blouse point to Mrs. Das’s licentiousness. Her revealing outfit directly contradicts the warning in “ Girl”:
“ this is how to hem a dress when you can see the hem going down and so to prevent yourself from looking like a slut I know you are so bent on becoming” (Kincaid, 120). This translates to the idea of clothing, or lack thereof, as being sexualized. The less clothes a woman wears, the more promiscuous she is perceived to be.

Repeated several times in “ Girl”, the threat of being called a slut is often used as the consequence of being ignorant towards womanly duties. For example, the speaker chides her to “ walk like a lady” on Sundays and not like the “ slut you are so bent on becoming” (Kincaid, 120). The next repeated element, “ bent on becoming,” makes the speaker, and therefore the reader, believe the girl wants to be perceived sexually by men. This correlates with Mrs. Das’s affair with her husband’s friend, resulting in Bobby’s birth, for “ she made no protest when the friend touched the small of her back, she pulled her against his crisp navy suit” (Lahiri, 350). The consent shows that Mrs. Das reciprocated the same sexual desire, thus wanting the other man to be sexually attracted to her. When Mrs. Das tells Mr. Kapasi of this affair, her main intention is to gain his sympathy, but perhaps she also wants Mr. Kapasi to see her as a woman not bound by marriage.

Despite his job as an interpreter of maladies, Mr. Kapasi does not understand the purpose of the confession; in fact he finds it “ depressing, all the more when he thought of Mr. Das at the top of the path” (Lahiri, 351). Revealing <https://assignbuster.com/the-interpreter-of-girls-how-kincaid-and-lahiri-write-women/>

the truth about Bobby evokes repulsion in Mr. Kapasi, fittingly the one that the speaker in “Girl” predicts. Again cautioning against the pitfalls of promiscuity, the speaker instructs, “this is how to behave in the presence of men who don’t know you very well, and this way they won’t immediately recognize the slut I have warned you against becoming” (Kincaid, 120). This piece of advice applies to “Interpreter of Maladies” in regards to the Mr. Kapasi’s reaction after her confession of adultery. He is illustrated as the “man who doesn’t know you very well,” and her “behavior in the presence of him” disobeys what the speaker instructed. As a result, Mr. Kapasi discerns Mrs. Das differently for the worse. His realization of her as a “woman not yet thirty, who loved neither her husband nor her children, who had already fallen out of love with life” (Lahiri, 351), further discerns Mrs. Das as someone who is careless in both sex and love. Her carelessness about these two subjects extends to a carelessness of how men morally perceive her. In relation to “Girl,” Mrs. Das is therefore is careless of her duties as a woman.

Although sex plays a role in the downfalls of women, love is an inevitable component that can redeem its seemingly immoral quality. The speaker in “Girl” teaches the girl “how to love a man, and if this doesn’t work there are other ways” (Kincaid, 120). The absence of love in the Das family provides a reason for the wife’s wantonness as another “way” to express a feeling similar to it. However, committing adultery does the opposite, for it exhibits that Mrs. Das has no love for her husband or children. Along with Mr. Das, her interactions as a spouse and parent show a disconnect between the Das family. They “bicker” over who should tend to their child, and ends up with Mrs. Das “relenting” because Mr. Das took responsibility the day before, as

well as the lack of air conditioning in the car (Lahiri, 335, 339). When they do not argue, they ignore each other, especially Mr. Das, who is too focused on photography to pay his wife or children any mind. Instead, Mrs. Das converses with Mr. Kapasi, emphasizing her lack of feeling for him, as well as her flirtatiousness with other men. Combined with their bickering, their alienation of each other could be considered bullying, which “Girl” addresses: “this is how to bully a man, this is how a man bullies you” (Kincaid, 120). The speaker wants the girl to be aware of bullying so she will be able to love, but Mrs. Das is incapable of loving her husband, and can only communicate with him through conflict.

In their focus elsewhere, Mr. Kapasi and the reader sees the couple as parents who neglect their children. Mr. Das continuously asks his children where the others are, and Mrs. Das chides her daughter for wanting to interact with her. When Bobby is being beaten by the monkeys, neither of them step in to rescue their son. Their inability to care for their children is a product of their lost love, so they cannot project it onto them. Although the advice of “Girl” is told through a conversation, the speaker can be perceived as an older, wiser, woman such as a mother or grandmother. Despite their harsh tone, the speaker is probably informing her of this brutal reality of women out of love. They want the girl to seriously consider the instructions because if she does not, society will view her as dishonorable and unconventional. In this way, this female authority figure cares about the girl, as she only wants the best for her, which will be accomplished by conforming to society’s expectations for women. In contrast, the lack of connection between Mrs. Das and her daughter expands on her carelessness.

Juxtaposed with the parental figure in “ Girl,” Mrs. Das uses similar abrasiveness towards the children, but there is no evidence of her love for them. Both of these portraits of parenthood are unconventional, yet it is clear that one implicitly is out of love, and the other is completely devoid of it.

Kincaid and Lahiri utilize the female in their short stories as a mechanism of the point of view. The rules and regulations are clear in “ Girl,” so the reader can easily understand what society expects of a girl and its cruel reality. Despite a different setting, the commentary applies to “ Interpreter of Maladies” because Mrs. Das is the product of failure to comply to it. She does not embrace the commands of modesty and love, and in choosing to ignore it, she is deemed a slut who is inept of endearment towards her family. By rebelling against the speaker in “ Girl,” it is evident that Mrs. Das is not conscious about being a proper woman. In its ending, the young girl also rebels, asking if the baker will let her feel the bread, and the speaker is stunned: “ You mean after all you are really going to be the kind of woman who the baker won’t let near the bread?” (Kincaid, 121). A prime example of this kind of woman is Mrs. Das, who has relinquished her values and responsibilities of being a woman in society, resulting in a negative reflection of her character.

Works Cited

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