

5-2022

Lack of Affirmative Consent: Trauma in Jhumpa Lahiri's "Interpreter of Maladies"

Ansalee Morrison

Chapman University, anmorrison@chapman.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.chapman.edu/english_theses



Part of the [Literature in English, Anglophone outside British Isles and North America Commons](#), and the [Literature in English, North America, Ethnic and Cultural Minority Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Morrison, Ansalee. *Lack of Affirmative Consent: Trauma in Jhumpa Lahiri's "Interpreter of Maladies"*. 2022. Chapman University, MA Thesis. *Chapman University Digital Commons*, <https://doi.org/10.36837/chapman.000326>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Dissertations and Theses at Chapman University Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in English (MA) Theses by an authorized administrator of Chapman University Digital Commons. For more information, please contact laughtin@chapman.edu.

Lack of Affirmative Consent: Trauma in Jhumpa Lahiri's "Interpreter of Maladies"

A Thesis by

Ansalee Morrison

Chapman University

Orange, CA

Wilkinson College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in English

May 2022

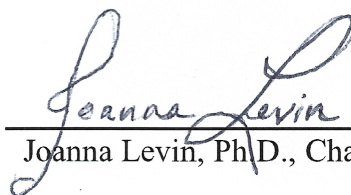
Committee in charge:

Joanna Levin, Ph.D., Chair


Justine Van Meter, Ph.D.

Rei Magosaki, Ph.D.

The thesis of Ansalee Morrison is approved.


Joanna Levin, Ph.D., Chair


Justine Van Meter, Ph.D.


Rei Magosaki, Ph.D.

November 2021

Lack of Affirmative Consent:

Trauma in Jhumpa Lahiri's "Interpreter of Maladies"

Copyright © 2021

by Ansalee Morrison

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my deep appreciation for all those who have helped me academically and personally on my road earning to an advanced degree. Here are some I'd like to mention in more detail in connection with this project.

Thank you to Dr. Joanna Levin for always being willing to answer my questions and help me improve my analysis and writing. I couldn't have hoped for a better thesis advisor. Thank you to Dr. Justine Van Meter and Dr. Rei Magosaki for the feedback on how to improve and frame my argument. I've so appreciated your enthusiasm for this project and its subject. Thank you for your positivity and encouragement.

Thank you Dr. Eric d'Evegne for introducing me to *Interpreter of Maladies* and suggesting that Mina's experience may be more complex than we may immediately realize.

Thank you to Jordan Muhlestein for always being willing to put your editing eyes on my essays, especially with this one. You always help to make them shine.

Thank you to Chapman University for providing me the opportunity to study literature and writing. I will forever be grateful for this period of my life.

Thank you to my fiancé, parents, sister, and brother-in-law for the constant and necessary encouragement and support as I have navigated writing this thesis and completing this master's program.

ABSTRACT

Lack of Affirmative Consent: Trauma in Jhumpa Lahiri's "Interpreter of Maladies"

by Ansalee Morrison

Most scholars who have published analyses of the title story of Jhumpa Lahiri's 1999 Pulitzer Prize-winning short story collection, *Interpreter of Maladies*, read Mina Das's character as a woman who chose to be unfaithful to her husband with a friend who once stayed in their home, resulting in the conception of her second son, Bobby. This general consensus is likely influenced by how Mr. Kapasi, the story's narrator and the tour guide in whom Mina confides her story, concludes that the "pain" Mina complains of is actually "guilt" (Lahiri 63). The work of Tzuhsiu Beryl Chiu, however, stands out among the scholarship as it suggests that Bobby's conception was the result of a rape rather than infidelity and that Mina has thereby "experienced great trauma and suffered the unspeakable pain alone" (172). If Chiu's reading contains some truth that Mina was raped, then Mina's character, choices, and language would be highly effected by that event of trauma. This thesis uses literary trauma theory to explore that possibility and rediscover Mina Das not as a dissatisfied and unfaithful housewife, but as a woman who has perhaps experienced trauma in multiple contexts and finally finds a way to tell her own story. I explore how viewing Mina as a character informed by trauma can illuminate our understanding of her relationships with her parents, her husband, and her children. I also examine how Mr. Kapasi's point of view and the brief section of omniscient narration seem to silence and distort Mina's story, leaving space for this alternative interpretation. In a society becoming increasingly concerned with the definitions of consent, rape, sexual harassment, and abuse, the question of whether or not Mina Das was raped matters because our answer can represent how we interpret and value women's stories of trauma and pain on a greater scale.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>Page</u>
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	IV
ABSTRACT.....	V
1 INTRODUCTION.....	1
2 CRITICAL SYNTHESIS	2
2.1 A Unique Perspective	5
2.2 Ambiguity We Must Attend To	6
3 EXPLORING TRAUMA THEORY.....	9
3.1 A Greater Misunderstanding of Sexual Trauma	9
3.2 The Act of Narrating Pain.....	10
4 ADDRESSING THE NARRATION	14
5 FOCUSING ON MINA AND HER STORY	17
5.1 Mina's Narrative Gaps.....	17
5.2 Mina's Life Experiences.....	19
5.3 Mina's Loneliness.....	21
5.4 Mina's Connection to Her Husband	23
5.5 Mina's Connection to Her Children.....	26
5.6 Mina's Aversion to Family Photos	28
6 CONSIDERING HOW MR. KAPASI SEES MINA	31
6.1 Artistic Reminders	33
7 MOVING FORWARD	35
7.1 Unstable Identity and Trauma.....	35
7.2 The Act of Telling.....	37
7.3 A Possible Redemption.....	39
8 ADDRESSING COUNTEREVIDENCE	41
8.1 Definition Exploration	41
8.2 Surrounding Context.....	42
9 CONNECTING TWO TRAUMAS.....	44
9.1 Absent or Blocked Love	45
9.2 A Forgotten Woman	47
10 CONCLUSION	49

NOTES.....	52
WORK CITED.....	53

1 Introduction

In Jhumpa Lahiri's short story "Interpreter of Maladies," young Indian-American mother Mina Das visits India with her husband and three children. On one day of the trip, she confides in their tour guide, Mr. Kapasi, that her second son, Bobby, was not fathered by her husband. She tells Mr. Kapasi that this is the first time she's revealed to anyone that Bobby's father was her husband's friend who once stayed as a guest in their home. Mina¹ discloses this to Mr. Kapasi because she has learned that he primarily works as a medical interpreter. She believes that if Mr. Kapasi can translate words for pain from one language to another in a medical context, he can also interpret her invisible emotional pain. Mina says, "I'm tired of feeling so terrible all the time. Eight years, Mr. Kapasi, I've been in pain eight years. I was hoping you could help me feel better, say the right thing. Suggest some kind of remedy" (Lahiri 65). Mina's plea, the title "Interpreter of Maladies," and the corresponding title of Lahiri's Pulitzer Prize-winning short story collection call for an interpretation of pain, for a deep and empathetic look at the maladies and wounds that cause that pain. That is what this essay seeks to do.

2 Critical Synthesis

After hearing the entirety of Mina's story, Mr. Kapasi feels "insulted that Mrs. Das should ask him to interpret her *common, trivial* little secret" (Lahiri 65, emphasis added) and responds, "Is it really pain you feel, Mrs. Das, or is it guilt?" (65). His verbal response demonstrates that Mr. Kapasi views Mina's story as a confession of infidelity and suggests that she should feel more guilty than pained at such a memory. Much of the published literary criticism on "Interpreter of Maladies" aligns with Mr. Kapasi's interpretation of Mina's malady. Most of the scholarship does not spend pages contemplating the nature of the sexual encounter between Mina and her husband's "Punjabi friend" (63), and few address it; however, the way the published articles describe Mina and summarize the short story reveal that most critics categorize the ambiguous sexual encounter between Mina and the Punjabi man as an affair.

For example, Vanita Reddy's work focuses on the concept of sexual capital and the construct of beauty in Lahiri's short story collection. When analyzing "Interpreter of Maladies," Reddy writes about how Mr. Kapasi sees himself and Mina as potential lovers, and she classifies Mina's past relationship with the Punjabi man as an affair: "As the intimacy between them builds, Mina, in a private moment with Mr. Kapasi during the tour, confesses a sexual secret. She tells him that unbeknown to her husband, one of her children is the offspring of a Punjabi man with whom she had an extramarital affair" ("Prosthetic Femininity" 78). Reddy also uses the phrase "extramarital affair" ("Prosthetic Femininity" 69) to describe the relationship between Miranda and Dev in Lahiri's short story "Sexy" from the same collection, the plot of which is heavily focused on infidelity. Reddy not only sees Mina and Mr. Kapasi's conversation as a

disclosure of an affair, but she sees the act of telling this story as a way for Mina to gain some “sexual liberation” (“Feminist Cosmopolitics” 51).

Reading Bobby’s conception as an act of infidelity is a popular interpretation among critics of “Interpreter of Maladies.” In “Reading Jhumpa Lahiri’s *Interpreter of Maladies* as a Short Story Cycle,” Noelle Brada-Williams describes how the characters in the various stories balance each other to create a short story cycle, writing that “the cheating husbands of ‘Sexy’ are balanced by the depiction of *the unfaithful Mrs. Das* of ‘Interpreter of Maladies’” (453, emphasis added). Brada-Williams also critiques the Das couple’s “carelessness in maintaining their marriage vows, at least on Mrs. Das’s part” (457). When Brada-Williams briefly focuses on the nature of Mina’s character, she describes her as “a woman with a life of relative comfort and ease who yearns to be freed of the responsibilities of marriage and children” (458). Similarly, in an essay comparing how Lahiri’s use of the guide figure compares with the use of the guide figure in E.M. Forster and R. K. Narayan’s writings, Margaret-Anne Hutton describes the conversation between Mina and Mr. Kapasi as Mina’s “disclosure of her infidelity and her request for guidance” (10). In “Jhumpa Lahiri and Psychological Dislocation in ‘Interpreter of Maladies,’” Smaranda Ștefanovici summarizes that “Bobby is not Raj’s son, he was born out of an illicit relationship with the Punjabi friend” and later describes the relationship as “an extra-marriage one-meeting affair with a friend of her husband” (104).

Interpreting Mina’s character as a self-absorbed woman is also a common reading of the short story. For example, in their essay titled “Face Negotiation and Politeness in ‘Interpreter of Maladies,’” Devi Archana Mohanty and Sangeeta Mukherjee describe Mina as “an indifferent, bored person, who does not even pay minimum attention to her children, and is constantly bickering with them. She is found to be engrossed in her self-inflicted pain and gets desperate to

find a way out” (75). In reference to Mina’s sexual encounter with the Punjabi man, Mohanty and Mukherjee write that Mina “discloses the truth of her *extramarital affair*, her long-nurtured secret which seems to be the sole cause of her depressive mood, to Mr. Kapasi hoping that he is the person who would be able to ‘interpret’ her ‘malady’ correctly” (75, emphasis added). They note that “Mrs. Das’s behavior lacks consistency” (Mohanty and Mukherjee 77). The way they write about Mina reveals that they view her as a frazzled, confusing, and broken woman and they attribute those qualities to the eight-year-old guilt born of an affair.

Like Reddy and others, Jesús Escobar Sevilla also reads the story as one of both past and potential present infidelity. He summarizes that Mina tells Mr. Kapasi “that Bobby is not from her husband Ral², but from a Punjabi friend that she had an affair with some years ago. Mrs. Das confronts Mr. Kapasi in an ethical quandary” (108). Escobar Sevilla describes the conversation between tour guide and traveler as “an infelicitous communication” (107) and comments that both “Mrs. Das and Mr. Kapasi ponder a new personal chance to appease themselves” (107-108). Escobar Sevilla writes of Mina as a woman who already had an affair and contemplates having another one with Mr. Kapasi.

When writing about the interaction between Mina and Mr. Kapasi, Brewster Fitz focuses on Mina’s sexual appeal. Fitz summarizes the interaction this way: “Sitting next to him, displaying her bare, shaved legs in a short skirt, she tells how she no longer loves her husband, how her second son, Bobby, was fathered by a Punjabi friend of her husband, and how she and her husband had premarital sex in the near vicinity of their parents” (118). While Fitz does not use the word “affair,” he constructs his summary in a way that makes it seem like Mina is actively trying to sexually tempt Mr. Kapasi. Fitz writes about Mina as if she is a woman who

pursues an affair with Mr. Kapasi, which implies that he also views Mina as a woman who was already promiscuous.

Yuan Xuesheng's scholarship is unique in that it does focus on the ethics behind Mina's relationship with the Punjabi man and how it affects her family. Xuesheng's summary of the event reveals that he too perceives it as an act of infidelity: "During their visit to the Sun Temple, Mrs. Das told taxi driver Mr. Kapasi about her own adultery and the birth of an illegitimate child" (135). Also unique to Xuesheng's reading is how he uses the term "mental illness" (135) to describe what Mina calls "pain" (Lahiri 65).

While each critic chooses to focus their scholarship on different topics associated with "Interpreter of Maladies," there seems to be a consensus in the published scholarship that Mina's pregnancy with Bobby came as the result of an affair with the Punjabi man. This is a reasonable reading of the text, considering that the narrator describes that Mina "made no protest" to the man's advances and that the man "made love to her swiftly ... with an expertise she had never known" (Lahiri 63). From these lines, one could infer that Mina wanted and enjoyed her sexual experience with the Punjabi man—and many seem to do that. There is one essay, however, that interprets Mina's interaction with the Punjabi man differently.

2.1 A Unique Perspective

In "Cultural Translation of a Subject in Transit: A Transcultural Critique of Xiangyin Lai's 'The Translator' and Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*," Tzuhsiu Beryl Chiu writes that Mina "tells [Mr. Kapasi] that several years ago, her husband's friend, who had been a guest in their home, *raped her*. Consequently, her husband is not the father of one of her sons. She hopes that Mr. Kapasi can comfort her with 'some kind of remedy,' just like he did for the local patients" (171, emphasis added). Not only does Chiu classify Mina's sexual encounter with the

Punjabi man as a rape and not an affair, Chiu also specifically describes that Mina comes to Mr. Kapasi for relief of the pain her secret—not for the possibility to instigate a sexual or romantic relationship with Mr. Kapasi as many of the other critics interpret. Chiu is clear about who she views as at fault for this extramarital relationship, writing that Mina “does not show any sign of guilt because she was a victim. She did nothing disgraceful to her husband; rather, it was her husband’s friend who had committed a disgraceful act” (172). With her unique reading, Chiu recognizes that as a victim of a rape Mina would also likely be affected by deep trauma: “At just twenty-eight years old, she has experienced great trauma and suffered the unspeakable pain alone” (172). Chiu’s essay’s focus lies in comparing how translation behaves (or misbehaves) in the work of Lahiri and Lai. As a result, it seems that Chiu comes to this conclusion about the nature of Mina’s history to illustrate how Mr. Kapasi is incapable of translating or interpreting Mina’s malady across generational, cultural, and national divides: he assumes she feels guilt when in fact she feels pain. Chiu even suggests that Mina’s pain is fundamentally untranslatable, writing, “the untranslatable in this text is Mrs. Das’s ineffable pain” (173). Chiu’s interpretation of the ambiguous sexual encounter of Bobby’s conception as a rape further demonstrates the untranslatability of experience between Mina and Mr. Kapasi.

2.2 Ambiguity We Must Attend To

Chiu’s reading of classifying Bobby’s conception as a rape stands out against the common consensus in the existing scholarship of classifying it as an affair. While Chiu’s interpretation is atypical, the text contains enough ambiguity to allow for such a reading. The narration reports that Mina “made no protest” (Lahiri 63), and there is also a notable lack of affirmative consent in the text. Nowhere in the text does Mina say to Mr. Kapasi that she *chose*

to have sex with this man, only that Bobby is “not Raj’s son” (61) and that she’s never spoken of this before.

If Chiu’s reading contains some truth that Mina was raped, and thereby “experienced great trauma and suffered the unspeakable pain alone” (172), Mina’s character, choices, and language would be highly effected by that event of trauma. What other critics interpreted as self-absorption could be the residual effects of trauma. If Mina was the victim of a rape rather than the participant in an affair, then we can reasonably classify this pain she complains of as a trauma, which opens the door to many possible interpretations inside the field of literary trauma studies.

In the preface to *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, literary trauma theory pioneer Cathy Caruth calls the study of trauma, a “task of listening anew” (viii). As Chiu brings to our attention, Mina Das—however self-absorbed and disconnected from her family—may be a character highly influenced by a deep-seated trauma of sexual violence. As I write about the title story of Lahiri’s short story collection, I seek to engage in Caruth’s task—to listen anew to Mina and her story by the light of trauma studies in an attempt to rediscover her story. The issue of whether this sexual encounter was consensual or forced is significant to understanding the rest of Mina’s story and character because it’s implications would greatly shape Mina’s behavior and identity. So, as I write about “Interpreter of Maladies,” I will entertain this possibility by writing about Mina assuming she is a victim of trauma. In the introduction to *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Trauma*, editors Colin Davis and Hanna Meretoja write, “Trauma matters, and the literature of trauma matters. We are diminished as moral subjects if we do not attend to that reality” (7). Attending to how Mina’s language, storytelling, and actions reveal signs of hidden

trauma can widen our understanding of her character and the story itself. Not attending to this possible trauma would be morally diminishing.

3 Exploring Trauma Theory

3.1 A Greater Misunderstanding of Sexual Trauma

Perhaps the inattention to Mina's possible trauma for both Mr. Kapasi and scholars of the story is a result of a larger and more common misunderstanding of trauma and sexual violence in general. In *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, Caruth includes an essay by Laura S. Brown titled "Not Outside the Range," which challenges the definition of post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD. At the time of the publication of Caruth's book in 1996, "the definition of a traumatic event which must have occurred for this diagnosis [PTSD] to be considered by the clinician" was that "the person has experienced an event that is *outside the range of normal human experience*' (250)" (Brown 100, emphasis added). Brown challenges this definition, writing about how even though rape and incest may occur so commonly that they may not lie outside that range of what's considered "normal" in a culture, the recurring residual results of these crimes indicate that the events are indeed traumatic—not to mention illegal in most areas of the world. In her essay, Brown seeks to illuminate how women's traumas are often hidden and unrecognized, but nonetheless real, overwhelming, possessing, and oppressive. She emphasizes that the definitions of PTSD and trauma are written according to what has historically been traumatic for men—focusing on wartime experiences—and not according to what is traumatic for women. The way the definition of PTSD was defined discounted experiences of oppression or abuse more commonly experienced by women. Brown's work applies to Mina's situation in "Interpreter of Maladies" because, according to Mr. Kapasi, whose point of view recounts the story, Mina's experience appears to not lie outside the range of normal human experience. I would argue that

Mina's reaction to her experience and the language she uses to describe it, however, reveal her experience is in fact traumatic and destructive.

In the years since Brown's essay, others have expanded on this study, validating the connections between sexual abuse, rape, and trauma. In "Trauma and Sexual Violence" published in *Trauma and Literature* in 2018, Emma V. Miller writes that "sexual violence is one of the most likely causes of post-traumatic stress disorder ... and rape victims could comprise the greatest percentage of PTSD diagnoses" (227). Miller also points out, "Writing about the trauma of sexual violence is particularly challenging because it remains a topic that seems to elude the easy grasp of language" (226). Not only are these experiences elusive to language, but they are elusive, period—evading visibility whenever possible because of the social shame and embarrassment associated with being the victim of such a crime, even sometimes moving into a pattern of blaming the victim for the event instead of the perpetrator. Brown's scholarship also addresses the secrecy of female trauma, writing that "[f]or girls and women, most traumas *do* occur in secret" (101). This is also the case with Mina. After telling Mr. Kapasi that her second son's father is not her husband's, Mina adds, "no one knows of course. No one at all. I've kept it a secret for eight whole years" (Lahiri 62). Perhaps it's that secrecy and isolation of the trauma that weighs most heavily on Mina in the following eight years. It seems to make her pain compound.

3.2 The Act of Narrating Pain

In "Interpreter of Maladies," Mina Das breaks her eight years of silence surrounding her trauma in Mr. Kapasi's tour van. While some, including Mr. Kapasi, view this breaking of silence as a search for relief from guilt, we can also view it as a manifestation of the common pattern of trauma victims struggling to place words behind a traumatic experience.

Just like assigning linguistic signs to any emotional signifier comes with an added level of difficulty, organizing one's memory into narrative and finding fitting language to capture the essence of that experience can be especially challenging for trauma victims because of the nature of traumatic memory. For example, J. Roger Kurtz writes that "[t]he psychoanalytic understanding of trauma defines it as an event so overwhelming that it cannot be processed normally at the time of its occurrence, so that its memory is effectively blocked but returns to haunt the victim until it is appropriately confronted and dealt with" (3). Likely, this difficulty with processing trauma combined with the secretive and shameful nature of being involved in this ambiguous sexual encounter—one that could potentially be defined as a rape—drives Mina's struggle to speak of her trauma for eight years.

This silence, however, need not and does not last forever. For victims of trauma, there is simultaneously a struggle between placing words behind trauma so overwhelming they're oftentimes referred to as "unspeakable" and a compulsion to tell one's story. Both these forces—the struggle to speak and the compulsion to tell—are at play in Mina's experience. Bessel A. van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart write, "Traumatic memories are the unassimilated scraps of overwhelming experiences, which *need* to be integrated with existing mental schemes, and be transformed into narrative language" (176, emphasis added). When trauma occurs, it's not automatically bundled as a narrative, so when remembering, the individual's task is to discover how to transform it into a narrative. In "Truth and Testimony: The Process and the Struggle," trauma researcher and Holocaust survivor Dori Laub studied other Holocaust survivors and described "the process of testimony as, essentially, a ceaseless struggle" (61). In the essay, Laub writes in his analysis of the survivors he interviewed that they "did not only need to survive so that they could tell their stories; they also needed to tell their stories in order to survive" (63).

According to Laub, the process of testifying, or telling one's story of trauma, becomes both a compulsion and a survival skill.

Describing this movement between the struggle to speak and the compulsion to tell in "Parsing the Unspeakable in the Context of Trauma," Barry Stampfl suggests that "the unspeakable may be merely a phase in the process of traumatization, not its predetermined endpoint" (16) and later adds that "traumatization need not necessarily conclude in a state of involuntary, deeply conflicted silence" (16). As Stampfl points out, this period of an inability to narrate trauma is a phase and not a destination, allowing for the movement from a phase of silence to a phase of telling. Not only is this movement from the inability to speak to the ability to narrate one's story possible, but as Laub found, it's also therapeutic and necessary. Joshua Pederson writes that "the stories we tell about the catastrophes that beset us—both individual and collective—can be crucial tools for recovery" (97) and Jakob Lothe writes that "narrative is a resource also with a view to the uphill task of coming to terms with, and living with, a traumatic memory" (160). In these examples, the act of telling one's story of trauma is viewed as necessary, similar to Laub's observation of people needing to tell their "stories in order to survive" (63).

In her own way, Mina appears to move through these different phases of trauma and recovery as the story progresses. Perhaps in addition to the secret and the shame, Mina never told her story because she had not learned yet how to assign language to her particular pain and experience. In that light, it seems fitting that she would seek the help of one experienced in placing language behind pain, like a medical interpreter. Miller points out that this struggle to tell is heightened in the cases of victims of sexual trauma, writing, "[t]ransgressing the challenges of translation and the intricacies of criminality, the shame and the guilt, the fear and the repression,

these tales continue somehow against all the odds to be told” (228). This compulsion to tell one’s story that drives trauma victims could also be the force that drives Mina to break her silence, find language to narrate her memory, and tell her story.

4 Addressing the Narration

In order to explore the possibility of Bobby's conception being a nonconsensual interaction, we must consider how the narration of "Interpreter of Maladies" switches between limited third- and omniscient third-person perspective, which effects the overall story. Much of the ambiguity in "Interpreter of Maladies" stems from this unique narrative style. Most of the story follows the thoughts and perceptions of Mr. Kapasi, behaving as a close, limited third-person perspective. Reddy describes this as a "limited point of view of the postcolonial Indian national subject" ("Feminist Cosmopolitics" 45). It's important to note that although Mr. Kapasi's viewpoint relates most of the story, many see him as an unreliable narrator. Chiu writes, "Despite being an experienced and talented interpreter, Mr. Kapasi is actually incapable of interpreting maladies of life, especially for the new generation" (172). Mr. Kapasi cannot accurately translate the experiences of people outside of his own paradigm. As Ștefanovici puts it, Mr. Kapasi "fails as a translator of the transcontinental gap between them. He cannot suggest some remedy to relieve her from the 'terrible' feeling" (104). I will explore this in more detail in later pages, but it's important to acknowledge here that Mr. Kapasi appears to be an unreliable narrator because of the way he projects issues in his own fraught marriage onto the Das couple and his desire to begin a morally ambiguous relationship with Mina.

When Mina Das begins to tell Mr. Kapasi of her life experiences, "Mina's confession marks an abrupt turn from limited to omniscient narration" ("Feminist Cosmopolitics" 52). This narrative summary recounts Mina's feelings of isolation due to lost friendships, her parents moving back to India, and the feelings of being overwhelmed after the birth of her first child. The story then describes how "a Punjabi friend ... [stayed] with them for a week for some job

interviews in the New Brunswick area” (Lahiri 63). It’s noted that this man is a friend of Raj’s whom Mina “had once met but did not remember” (63). The next paragraph begins:

Bobby was conceived in the afternoon, on a sofa littered with rubber teething toys, after the friend learned that a London pharmaceutical company had hired him, while Ronny cried to be freed from his playpen. She made no protest when the friend touched the small of her back as she was about to make a pot of coffee, then pulled her against his crisp navy suit. He made love to her swiftly, in silence, with an expertise she had never known, without the meaningful expressions and smiles Raj always insisted on afterward. He was married now, to a Punjabi girl, and they lived in London still, and every year they exchanged Christmas cards with Raj and Mina, each couple tucking photos of their families into the envelopes. He did not know that he was Bobby’s father. He never would. (63)

After this paragraph, Mr. Kapasi interjects with a question, and the narration returns to that limited perspective where the reader becomes privy only to Mr. Kapasi’s viewpoint.

While one could assume that this narrative summary detailing Bobby’s conception represents what Mina shares with Mr. Kapasi, I hesitate to make that assumption. This omniscient narrator leaves gaps in the story and shies away from defining Mina’s experience either as a rape or an affair. Even though this narrator arrives specifically to tell Mina’s story, it actually overshadows Mina’s voice and blocks the reader from hearing about Mina’s story from her. From this passage, we cannot truly know what Mina thinks or feels. While her conversation with Mr. Kapasi represents the first time Mina has been able to articulate her trauma, the audience does not get to hear that direct witness of the tale and instead hears it summarized by the narrator. Certainly, it draws upon her experience and memory, but it seems to purposefully

keep some things concealed. The way this narrator silences Mina is worrisome. Despite her central role in the plot, Mina's voice is heard very little throughout the story. In the lines of dialogue unobstructed by the narrator or Mr. Kapasi's summary, Mina expresses her inner pain and desire to escape it: "I'm tired of feeling so terrible all the time. Eight years, Mr. Kapasi, I've been in pain eight years" (65). Yet, when the narrator summarizes her experience, it says little to nothing about her pain. The unreliable nature of these two narrators who silence Mina create an ambiguous narrative space that suggests the possibility that there is more to Mina's story than either Mr. Kapasi or the narrator overtly reveal.

5 Focusing on Mina and Her Story

Similar to how the critics' depiction of Mina Das reveals how they interpret Bobby's conception, the way in which Mina speaks about Bobby's conception and the surrounding situation reveals much about her and her own understanding of the experience. If we view the earlier passages in the story, placing Mina's comments and actions alongside the interpretation that she has experienced a trauma that informs those words and actions, we can understand her better, view her actions more empathetically, and possibly make sense of her actions that previously puzzled critics.

5.1 Mina's Narrative Gaps

Told by an omniscient narrator—albeit a selective one—much of Mina's story is characterized by narrative gaps, by skipping over action or focusing on specific details while not attending to others. While the account of what happened is detailed, it still leaves many narrative holes. This can also be a characteristic of telling traumatic experiences; Pederson describes, "Sometimes, trauma marks narrative with gaps and silence" (102). Some of these things that go unsaid include Mina's emotions and experience immediately following the ambiguous sexual encounter with Bobby's father, her pregnancy with Bobby, Bobby's birth, and interactions with her husband as he believes he is the father of this new child. With or without the omniscient narrator, Mina tells none of this story. The sparse narration could be a representation of Mina's memory perception. Even the summary of the sex itself is characterized by silence and the absence of speech: "She made no protest ... He made love to her swiftly, in silence" (Lahiri 63). Writing about the process of processing traumatic events, Henry Krystal writes that "it is possible for this process to stay at the point where a degree of 'psychic closing off' has been

accomplished, which permits a certain automatonlike behavior, which is necessary for survival in situations of subjugation” (81). It’s entirely possible that this happens to Mina if/when the Punjabi man forced himself on her. It’s possible that the narration doesn’t describe Mina fighting off the man because in the moment she entered this “automatonlike” (Krystal 81) state as a survival tactic.

In addition, the narration describing Mina’s interaction with the Punjabi man is recounted as if Mina’s body was not present at all. Mina is completely absent from the first sentence that describes the ambiguous sexual encounter: “Bobby was conceived in the afternoon, on a sofa littered with rubber teething toys, after the friend learned that a London pharmaceutical company had hired him, while Ronny cried to be freed from his playpen” (63). This sentence does not include Mina at all. In the sentence immediately following, Mina is its subject only as a negation of action, of making “no protest” (63). Mina is the object of the actions described and not the agent. Instead, it is the Punjabi man who “[touches] the small of her back,” who “[pulls] her against his crisp navy suit,” and who received celebratory news. Never does the text describe Mina as a willing or active participant. Although it describes that she “made no protest” to the man’s advances, the narration mentions no affirmative consent from Mina. In all other places where she’s mentioned in that paragraph, Mina Das is the object of a sentence or an actionless presence adjacent to the action of the scene.

The pattern of remembering traumatic experience as separated from the body or in a disoriented or disjointed way is actually a common characteristic of traumatic storytelling. In “Healing and Post-Traumatic Growth,” Suzanne LaLonde describes that “in the trauma induced state of dissociation, the thalamus shuts down, which helps to explain ‘why trauma is primarily remembered not as a story, a narrative with a beginning, middle, and end, but as isolated sensory

imprints: images, sounds, and physical sensations that are accompanied by intense emotions’ (70)” (van der Kolk qtd. in LaLonde 2006). The memory-making process that occurs during a traumatic event is characterized by choppiness and images marked by emotions rather than a flowing narrative. This pattern of sensations and emotions characterizing a traumatic memory is manifest in the account of Mina’s memory of the sexual encounter (however filtered by the omniscient narrator/Mr. Kapasi). She recalls the image of “a sofa littered with rubber teething toys” and the sound of Ronny “[crying] to be freed from his playpen” (Lahiri 63). She recalls the sensation of the man “[touching] the small of her back” and “[pulling] her against his crisp navy suit” (63). These sights, sounds, and sensations are specific and have survived in her memory until eight years later. It’s also possible that Mina’s memory of Ronny “[crying] to be freed from his playpen” (63) is actually a revised memory of the sound of her own cries to be freed from the moment or the displacement of her desire to cry out to be freed. Mina’s memory taking form of sensory-based snatches is characteristic of one recalling a traumatic memory, which further validates the possibility that Bobby’s conception was an event of trauma and not pleasure.

5.2 Mina’s Life Experiences

When Mina tells Mr. Kapasi the story of Bobby’s father, she does not start her tale by detailing how the man came to stay at their house, but instead she begins the story by talking about how her marriage to Raj Das was “more or less a set up” (Lahiri 62) by their parents and continues on to speak about the hardships of the early days of their marriage. This choice in Mina’s storytelling demonstrates that to her, the story of her trauma does not start with the Punjabi man’s visit, but with the way she was treated by her parents, her husband, and her friends in the years leading up to Bobby’s conception. Because Mina finds these events significant enough to include in her story, I find it significant to explore how these factors

influence and perhaps even heighten and contribute to her trauma. If anything, they create an isolating environment that makes her experience with the Punjabi man even more traumatic.

Mina's words and the story's narration reveal a pattern in Mina's life of those around her making decisions for her and limiting her autonomy. Although she describes the early days of her marriage as, "we couldn't stand the thought of being separated, not for a day, not for a minute" (62), Mina follows this image of a blissful marriage with wonderings if "it was all more or less a setup" (62) by her parents. She says that when they were growing up, she and Raj "were sent upstairs to play together while our parents joked about our marriage. Imagine! They never caught us at anything, though in a way I think it was all more or less a setup. The things we did those Friday and Saturday nights, while our parents sat downstairs drinking tea ... I could tell you stories, Mr. Kapasi" (62). Beneath the shock value of the story, it seems as if Mina might feel bitter toward her parents, like she never got to make her own choices and that Raj Das was chosen for her. It's possible that she also feels betrayed by her parents, because they forced her into the vulnerable situation of being alone with a boy repeatedly without any kind of protection or supervision. It's unclear if those "things we did" (Lahiri 62) were things Mina wanted to happen or things Raj wanted to happen and she went along with, but Fitz believes that she is suggesting to Mr. Kapasi that "she and her husband had premarital sex in the near vicinity of their parents" (118). There's no way to definitively know, but it's possible Mina grew up allowing Raj to do what he wanted with her. It's possible that these evenings represented to Mina what Hanna Meretoja calls "recurring, formative experiences that fundamentally shape one's self-narrative and sense of self – to the extent that it may be difficult for such traumatized persons to imagine other kinds of self-narratives or forms of agency that would allow them to better fulfil their potential" (27). Because Mina includes these details in her narrative, we can

conjecture that they did shape her “self-narrative and sense of self” (Meretoja 27). For the first twenty years of her life, it’s possible Mina Das experienced what Greg Forter has called “insidious trauma” or “structural trauma” that Pederson describes as “persistent, arching pain often related to enduring societal pressures—like racism or patriarchal oppression ... these less spectacular—but not less damaging—forms of psychic anguish” (107). This familial pressure and being prevented from choosing her own path or spouse could create that “persistent, arching pain” and “psychic anguish” (Pederson 107). It seems that Mina could have experienced insidious and structural trauma for years, which means that she grew up accustomed to silently enduring other people taking advantage of her and oppressing her.

Throughout the course of her life, Mina was trained to not protest and instead to perform the wishes of others, as exemplified by her experience spending time with Raj every weekend at the wish of her parents. Several years later when faced with the situation with a stranger “[touching] the small of her back” and “[pulling] her against his crisp navy suit,” it’s possible she makes “no protest” (62) because she never learned or had been allowed to protest. It’s likely she finds it significant to talk about these experiences leading up to Bobby’s conception because they shaped her reaction to the event.

5.3 Mina’s Loneliness

Along with the possible feelings of being manipulated by her parents and husband, Mina has also endured great loneliness and isolation leading up to and after Bobby’s conception. When speaking with Mr. Kapasi, the omniscient narration describes the social environment of the beginning years of her marriage and surrounding the birth of her first child, Ronny:

As a result of spending all her time in college with Raj, she continued, she did not make many close friends. There was no one to confide in about him at the end of a difficult

day, or to share a passing thought or worry. Her parents now lived on the other side of the world, but she had never been very close to them, anyway. After marrying so young she was overwhelmed by it all, having a child so quickly, and nursing, and warming up bottles of milk and testing their temperature against her wrist while Raj was at work.”

(Lahiri 62-63)

The account recalls that some friends invited her to social outings, but she could never attend because she had to take care of Ronny, and “[e]ventually the friends stopped calling” (63). Some of the critics use this setting of intense loneliness to support their reading of Mina’s relationship with the Punjabi man as an affair, suggesting that Mina’s longing for companionship led to her welcoming the Punjabi man’s advances. For example, Reddy writes that the affair happens when Mina was “feeling desperate and lonely as a young mother” (“Feminist Cosmopolitics” 52).

While I agree that Mina’s mental and social state is a significant detail of the story, I disagree that we can take for granted that her desperation and loneliness drove her to cheat on her husband. Instead, I argue that those forces of loneliness and desperation heighten the impact and trauma of the encounter.

In the account of this period of time, even the baby toys are associated with her loneliness: “she was left at home all day with the baby, surrounded by toys that made her trip when she walked or wince when she sat” (63). Given her negative emotional reaction to the baby toys and the physical discomfort they could inflict, it seems unlikely that Mina would have sought connection and companionship with the visiting friend on “a sofa littered with rubber teething toys” (63). Instead, the inclusion of the details of the teething toys seems to further characterize the memory with loneliness.

After Bobby's conception and birth, Mina continues to exist in a state of exhausting and overwhelming loneliness, now heightened by this burdening secret. She tells Mr. Kapasi, "For eight years I haven't been able to express this to anybody, not to friends, certainly not to Raj. He doesn't even suspect it ... I'm tired of feeling so terrible all the time" (Lahiri 64-65). Chiu's reading of the story also acknowledges the loneliness and pain that Mina experiences in the time following Bobby's birth: "At just twenty-eight years old, she has experienced great trauma and suffered the unspeakable pain *alone*" (172, emphasis added). Mina experienced loneliness and isolation leading up to Bobby's conception, and her experience with the Punjabi man intensifies this isolation because she becomes the keeper of a forbidden secret. An examination of Mina's secret validates a reading of trauma and invalidates a reading of purposeful infidelity.

5.4 Mina's Connection to Her Husband

Mina's life experiences have also distanced her from her husband and created some bitterness toward him. Mina shares with Mr. Kapasi that while the two were first married and in college, they "couldn't stand the thought of being separated, not for a day, not for a minute" (62), yet Mina's attitude toward her husband throughout the story reveals that the couple has long since departed from this blissful, lovebird stage. Within the first few pages of the story, the couple argues "about who should take Tina to the toilet" (43) and the air conditioning in the car. The image of Mr. and Mrs. Das traveling in India does not resemble a couple who can't "stand the thought of being separated" (62). This loss of connection and devotion likely heightens Mina's internal pain. When telling Mr. Kapasi her story, Mina says of Raj, "He thinks I'm still in love with him" (64), implying that she no longer feels love for her husband. While this digression in their relationship could be solely the result of falling out of love as life's demands increase and some critics use this lost love as validation for reading the sexual encounter as an

affair, it's also possible that this distance between Mina and Raj can be traced back to the pain Mina describes.

The conversation between Mina and Mr. Kapasi in the tour van begins with Mr. Kapasi commenting how Bobby is a “brave little boy” (Lahiri 61). Mina replies that it is “not so surprising” because Bobby is “not Raj’s son” (61). Mina’s jab at Raj’s bravery—among other details of her story—reveals that beneath the secret lies Mina’s feeling of resentment toward her husband. This resentment seems to contribute to Mina’s unarticulated trauma. In the account of her life before the Punjabi man’s visit, Mina’s overwhelmed new motherhood is juxtaposed against the image of “Raj ... dressed in sweaters and corduroy pants, teaching his students about rocks and dinosaurs. Raj never looked cross or harried, or plump as she had become after the first baby” (63). Instead of parenthood being an experience to bring the couple closer together, Mina resents how her body and life have been overtaken by tending a child while Raj seems to have lived his dream life.

It is within this tense dynamic that the Punjabi man comes to stay in their home and Bobby is conceived. The omniscient narrator describes how Mina felt when the Punjabi man came to stay at their home: “She had been outraged when Raj told her that a Punjabi friend, someone whom she had once met but did not remember, would be staying with them” (Lahiri 63). In other words, this man entered into the home—the woman’s space—without her invitation. Casting a brief psychoanalytic lens on this passage, it’s reasonable to interpret the Punjabi man as a phallic symbol and the home as a yonic symbol. Therefore, an intrusion of the male on the female has already occurred metaphorically before it happens literally. Mina feels that this intrusion was allowed by Raj. Just as she possibly resents her parents for not protecting

her from potentially compromising situations in her youth, Mina could also resent Raj for not protecting her from the Punjabi man.

One potential reason why most critics interpret Mina's story as an affair could be the inclusion of omniscient narrator's line, "He made love to her swiftly, in silence, with an expertise she had never known, without the meaningful expressions and smiles Raj always insisted on afterward" (Lahiri 63). This line could mean that she took pleasure in the experience and shows that she compared her experience with the Punjabi man with her sexual relationship with her husband. Certainly, that's how most critics likely interpret it. I will examine this line in more detail in later pages, but for now it is sufficient to say that this passage reveals more about the disconnection between Mina and Raj than it does about the connection between Mina and the Punjabi man. Because Mina's relationship with Raj is riddled with resentment and bitterness, Mina likely views these "meaningful expressions and smiles Raj always insisted on" (63) as disingenuous and performative.

Other passages reveal a disconnection in the couple's relationship, which is both a cause and effect of Mina's trauma. Mina tells Mr. Kapasi, "For eight years I haven't been able to express this to anybody, not to friends, certainly not to Raj. He doesn't even suspect it. He thinks I'm still in love with him" (Lahiri 64). This emotional distance from her husband has blocked her from confiding in him and seeking solace in their relationship, which likely creates even more resentment for him. This resentment isolates her more and perpetuates this silence. It's cyclical. Chiu writes, "Because she could not confide in her husband, but remained anxious since then, *she could not feel loved* either" (172, emphasis added). Not only does Mina "no longer [feel] affectionate toward her husband or children" (Chiu 172), but this trauma has also blocked her ability to "feel loved" by her husband (Chiu 172). All this disconnection combines together to

create a toxic relationship between Mina and Raj and a marriage where she couldn't possibly feel comfortable confiding in him that someone they had called a friend violated his trust.

5.5 Mina's Connection to Her Children

Throughout the narration, Mr. Kapasi observes Mina to be distant from her children, interpreting her to be selfish and self-absorbed. The free indirect discourse records, "They were all like siblings, Mr. Kapasi thought as they passed a row of date trees. Mrs. and Mrs. Das behaved like an older brother and sister, not parents ... it was hard to believe they were regularly responsible for anything other than themselves" (49). The first image of the couple Mr. Kapasi describes is of them "[bickering] about who should take Tina to the toilet" (43). He also observes her "walking past her children as if they were strangers" (58). Certainly, these observations depict a neglectful mother, but I'm not satisfied with that assessment alone. Instead, I seek to explore how Mina's responses to her children may be traced back to her trauma.

Mina's memory of her ambiguous sexual encounter with the Punjabi man is associated with her children's unfulfilled needs and her identity as a mother. The narrator that depicts Mina's memory recalls that "Bobby was conceived in the afternoon, on a sofa littered with rubber teething toys, after the friend learned that a London pharmaceutical company had hired him, while Ronny cried to be freed from his playpen" (63). Details associated with her responsibilities as a mother—rubber teething toys and Ronny's cries at her neglect to retrieve him from the playpen—stand out in Mina's memory of the event. As a result, it's possible that her children's needs, or her failure to fulfil their needs, may trigger her memory of the Punjabi man. If that's the case, it is not surprising that Mina reacts adversely eight years later in situations related to her ability or inability to fulfil her children's needs. For example, on the first page of the story Mina does "not hold the little girl's hand as they walked to the restroom" (43)

and doesn't walk back to the group with Tina and instead buys some puffed rice from the tea stall. Then in the van, she tells Tina, "Leave me alone" (48) when Tina asks to have her fingernails painted too. It's possible that Mina's distance from her children is less of a result of mere carelessness, and more of a coping mechanism against the traumatic memory.

Mina's words to Mr. Kapasi reveal that she traces the way she feels about her family to the secret she carries. She says, "I feel terrible looking at my children and at Raj, always terrible. I have terrible urges, Mr. Kapasi, to throw things away. One day I had the urge to throw everything I own out the window, the television, *the children*, everything" (64, emphasis added). The terribleness she feels about this traumatic memory is similar to the terribleness she feels in association with her children. It's possible that she has the urge to throw her children out the window because her children's mere existence reminds her of the trauma she endured. While it could be easy to interpret Mina's distance from her children to be a result of mere negligence or a dissatisfaction and frustration with motherhood and domesticity, we can't ignore that she says her feelings of terribleness toward her children are connected to her traumatic memory, which is connected to her children's existence and her inability to care for their needs.

Scholarship on mothers' responses to trauma and their relationships with their children shows a similar pattern of blocked connection. Laub writes of a woman who, several years after surviving the Holocaust, struggled to connect with her children because of her own experiences of trauma: "Her own children she experiences with deep disappointment as unempathetic strangers because of the 'otherness' she senses in them" (63). For this woman, she struggled to connect with her children because they existed in a paradigm completely separate from the paradigm of pain that she existed in. While Mina's experience is extremely different from the woman in Laub's essay, and I wouldn't suggest comparing those two diverse yet both

debilitatingly painful traumas, it's possible that they produced similar results of upsetting a woman's ability to connect with her children.

Chiu's analysis of the story also connects Mina's strained relationships with her family members to her trauma:

At just twenty-eight years old, she has experienced great trauma and suffered the unspeakable pain alone. Because she could not confide in her husband, but remained anxious since then, she could not feel loved either. Consequently, she no longer feels affectionate toward her husband or children. Soon she lost her passion for life, which is discernable in her careless behavior toward her family. (172)

Chiu's description of Mina not feeling "affectionate toward her children and husband" (172) echoes Laub's analysis of the woman who perceived her children as strangers. As Chui compares the writing of Lahiri and Lai, Chui notices that the female protagonists of the two works "are haunted by something missing, unfulfilled or unattainable in their lives and suffer from inexpressible pain because they can no longer confide in their husbands as sympathetic others. Consequently, they cannot love their husbands or children" (173-174). Chiu focuses on how this loss of connection can upset their ability to love and goes as far as to say that Mina is no longer able to love her children. While I wouldn't say that Mina's capability of loving her children is unredeemable, I would argue that the trauma blocks her ability to express or feel love for her children and husband.

5.6 Mina's Aversion to Family Photos

Throughout their day trip, Raj insists on taking photos, and Mina generally avoids appearing in them. We could attribute this to a desire to be absent from her family, driven by her complicated feelings of disconnection. However, I argue that this behavior is also a direct result

of her sexual encounter with the Punjabi man. In fact, it's highly possible that Raj's constant insistence on family photos makes Mina more consciously aware of this experience. She doesn't chafe at all photos but definitely avoids appearing in ones of the whole family. Mr. Kapasi notices that Mina "was lost behind her sunglasses, ignoring her husband's requests that she pose for another picture" (Lahiri 58). When Mina announces that she will stay in the tour van, Raj protests by saying, "But we could use one of these pictures for our Christmas card this year. We didn't get one of all five of us at the Sun Temple. Mr. Kapasi could take it" (60). To this Mina responds, "I'm not coming" (60). After Mina Das discloses Bobby's conception story, the narrator adds the detail that each year the Punjabi man and his wife "exchanged Christmas cards with Raj and Mina, each couple tucking photos of their families into the envelopes" (Lahiri 64). This annual tradition of exchanging Christmas cards represents the only communication Mina has with Bobby's father. This puts extra meaning on the Christmas card and family photos. Each family photo the Das family takes could be the image of Mina the Punjabi man has for the next year. Mina knows this. As such, the family photo becomes not just a record of an experience, but a representation of communication with the Punjabi man. Although the audience learns the meaning of the Christmas card and potential family photos later on in the story, Mina is aware of this throughout the story and avoids appearing in photos accordingly.

When suggesting they get a family photo for their Christmas card, Raj says, "Mr. Kapasi could take it" (60). This further complexifies the family photo issue for Mina. If Mr. Kapasi takes the photo, then the photo will be framed and filtered by Mr. Kapasi. At this moment, Mina believes Mr. Kapasi will be able to accurately interpret her pain of sexual trauma. This photo, which may portray her vulnerability, will land in Bobby's father's mailbox. If we look at it this way, it makes sense why she doesn't want to be in the photo and curtly responds, "I'm not

coming” (60). If we accept my and Chiu’s suggestion that Bobby’s conception was a rape, it explains why Mina would not want to be in family photos because she doesn’t want the man who raped her to see her through the lens of someone who can interpret her pain.

6 **Considering How Mr. Kapasi Sees Mina**

Because Mr. Kapasi's point of view directs most of this story and because he is the person Mina comes to for a "remedy" (65), it's important to look at Mr. Kapasi's perception of Mina and how it may affect and even distort the narrative's storytelling. Reddy writes, "As a stylish and beautiful subject, Mina vacillates between being the object of Mr. Kapasi's desire and the object of his critique and disillusionment" ("Prosthetic Femininity" 80). Before learning about Mina's past, Mr. Kapasi sexualizes Mina and focuses on her body. He watches her "dragging her shaved, largely bare legs across the back seat" (Lahiri 43) and is distracted by "the strawberry between her breasts [on her shirt], and the golden brown hollow in her throat" (53). He later fantasizes that "when Mr. Das was busy taking a picture, he would hold her hand" (60). Reddy writes, "For Mr. Kapasi has already imagined Mina as a sexually illicit body—indeed, it is this very illicitness and lack of decorum that defines Mina's sexual capital in the first place" ("Prosthetic Femininity" 85). Mr. Kapasi's perception of Mina is largely and primarily shaped by his sexual desire for her and fascination with her appearance. Mr. Kapasi's daydreams about a connection with Mina are driven by sexual desire. He describes the thought of her paying attention to him as "intoxicating" (Lahiri 53). Mr. Kapasi "had never admired the backs of his wife's legs that way he now admired those of Mrs. Das, walking as if for his benefit alone" (57). As she walks away, he has "an overwhelming urge to wrap his arms around her" (59). There's little doubt that Mr. Kapasi feels lustful toward Mina.

Mr. Kapasi's preoccupation with Mina is a response to his dissatisfaction with his own strained and likely loveless marriage. I will analyze this relationship in greater depth in later pages, but in short, Mr. and Mrs. Kapasi's first son "died one evening in his mother's arms" (52).

According to Mr. Kapasi, his employment at the doctor's office "reminded her [his wife] of the son she'd lost, and ... she resented the other lives he helped, in his own small way, to save" (52). The loss their child has driven the Kapasis apart to the point that Mr. Kapasi feels like the marriage is a lost cause. Before hearing Mina's story, Mr. Kapasi projects the issues of his own marriage onto Raj and Mina: "He wondered if Mr. and Mrs. Das were a bad match, just as he and his wife were. Perhaps they, too, had little in common apart from three children and a decade of their lives. The signs he recognized from his own marriage were there—the bickering, the indifference, the protracted silences" (53). In this passage, we learn more about the Kapasi marriage than the Das marriage. It is in response to his contentious marriage that Mr. Kapasi begins to fantasize about a relationship with Mina that could fulfill their emotional needs previously unfulfilled by their spouses:

She would write to him, asking about his days interpreting at the doctor's office, and he would respond eloquently, choosing only the most entertaining anecdotes, ones that would make her laugh out loud as she read them in her house in New Jersey. In time, she would reveal the disappointment of her marriage, and he his. In this way their friendship would grow, and flourish. (55)

Mr. Kapasi fantasizes about Mina because he hopes a connection with her will fill his unmet need for connection. Mina has become the means by which Mr. Kapasi may solve his frustrations with his own marriage.

Because Mr. Kapasi has expended so much mental energy desiring Mina sexually and fantasizing about creating an extramarital relationship with her, Mr. Kapasi has, by extension, already imagined Mina to be a woman who *would* have an affair if presented with the opportunity. He constructs her as an adulteress in his mind before hearing about her life

experiences or the identity of Bobby's father. By the nature of these assumptions he has made about her, Mr. Kapasi lacks an ability to complete the task Mina asks of him, which is to interpret her malady from her traumatic sexual encounter with the Punjabi man and "suggest some kind of remedy" (65). As he listens to her story, Mr. Kapasi assumes Mina was willingly unfaithful to her husband because it confirms the assumptions he already made about her. It's a confirmation bias. As a result, Mr. Kapasi is fundamentally incapable of understanding Mina and her experience. He views Mina through the lens of his own unhappy marriage and his sexual desire for her. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that Mr. Kapasi interprets Mina as feeling "guilt" instead of "pain" (63).

6.1 Artistic Reminders

The disparity between what Mr. Kapasi imagines Mina to be and the reality of her character can be exemplified by their reactions to the tourist destination they visit. Mr. Kapasi takes the Das family to see the ancient temple in Konarak on their tour. Raj reads from his guidebook about the artwork at the temple, "the medallions in the spokes are carved with women in luxurious poses, largely erotic in nature" (Lahiri 56). The narration continues to describe the images as:

countless friezes of entwined naked bodies, making love in various positions, women clinging to the necks of men, their knees wrapped eternally around their lovers' thighs. In addition to these were assorted scenes from daily life, of hunting and trading, of deer being killed with bows and arrows and marching warriors holding swords in their hands. (57)

Seeing the friezes on this visit prompts Mr. Kapasi to reflect on his own strained romantic life and realizes that "he had never seen his own wife fully naked" (57). If the images prompted Mr.

Kapasi to reflect on the rifts in his own marriage, it's reasonable to assume that they also prompt Mina to reflect on the rifts in her relationship as well, likely extending her memory of her sexual encounter with the Punjabi man. Reddy agrees with this inference, writing that "the erotic friezes on the exterior of the Konarak temple prompt Mina's memories of her sexual past with another man" ("Prosthetic Femininity" 85). Because the story is limited to Mr. Kapasi's point of view in this scene, there is no way to definitively know what Mina thinks while she views these sexual images. However, based upon what we gather about Mina's sexual past—namely her afternoon with the Punjabi man—we can guess that the images evoke a silent traumatic response. Mr. Kapasi observes that Mina "stopped every three or four paces, staring silently at the carved lovers, and the processions of elephants, and the topless female musicians beating on two-sided drums" (Lahiri 57). While Mr. Kapasi may assume she's contemplating symbols of feminine beauty and hope she "had understood Surya's beauty, his power" (58), Mina may be also reflecting on the phallic image of the "marching warriors holding swords in their hands" (57). Mina may be examining the wounded deer, seeing herself in that image. Viewing these images likely brings back the memory of her encounter with the Punjabi man. It is after viewing these potentially triggering images that Mina opens up about her experience and tells her story.

7 Moving Forward

7.1 Unstable Identity and Trauma

It's largely accepted in trauma studies that traumatic events can alter one's identity. In "Female Subjects and Negotiating Identities in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*," Bahareh Bahmanpour writes about a way to see and interpret Lahiri's female characters and their identities: "Female characters of Lahiri's fiction negotiate their new unstable identities through their own different means and their own individual voice" (49). Specifically in "Interpreter of Maladies," the instability of Mina's identity can be read as a result of how trauma splinters the self, or at least the sense of self. In an interview conducted by Caruth and transcribed in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, Robert Jay Lifton speaks about the effects of trauma on one's identity:

In trauma one moves forward into a situation that one has little capacity to imagine; and that's why it shatters whatever one had that was prospective or experiential in the past. Whatever prospective consolations one brought to that experience. And being shattered, one struggles to put together the pieces, so to speak, of the psyche, and to balance that need to reconstitute oneself with the capacity to take in the experience ... one is inwardly or unconsciously struggling with how to cohere and how to absorb and in some measure to confront what one has had to thrust upon one, what one has been exposed to. (Lifton 137)

Lifton's approach to the struggle to reconstruct the self after an event of trauma seems to capture Mina's struggle. For eight years, under the surface, Mina has been trying to "confront what one has had to thrust upon one" and "put together the pieces, so to speak, of the psyche" (Lifton 137). The nature of trauma is to shatter the self, leaving the traumatized to piece that self back

together later. These eight years represent that struggle. Because this trauma has caused her to break into pieces, it's possible that Mina doesn't have solid answers yet about who she is or what her trauma means.

For Mina, her sexual encounter with the Punjabi man alters her identity and, as a result, also heightens her trauma. Regardless of the consensual or nonconsensual nature of the event, the conception of her second child turned Mina into the mother of an illegitimate child and the woman who had an ambiguous sexual encounter with someone other than her husband. After becoming pregnant with Bobby, Mina likely views her own identity differently, but her husband and surrounding community are oblivious to that shift. This gap between her struggle with her identity and her identity perceived by those around her creates a dissonance that adds to the trauma she has already experienced.

How the critics of "Interpreter of Maladies" interpret what happened between Mina and the Punjabi man directly impacts the way they view Mina's identity. For example, as Chui views Mina as the victim of a crime and not someone who was unfaithful to her husband, Chui describes Mina as someone who "has experienced great trauma and suffered the unspeakable pain alone" and has "lost her passion for life" (172). To contrast, because Xuesheng views Bobby's conception as an act of infidelity and that Mina couldn't "resist temptation" (137), he also views Mina as someone who has lost touch with morality. Xuesheng writes of Mina as someone who "does not resist the temptation of desire and also loses her rational judgment that she can't cheat and betray, which destroys the existing moral and ethical norms and leads to the loss of human nature" (137). The way these two critics view what Mr. Kapasi calls "the heart of the matter" (Lahiri 65) influences the way they view Mina's identity.

As we grapple with this question of whether or not this interaction was consensual and what that means for Mina's identity, it appears that Mina also joins in the struggle. For these eight years, she's lived in the gap between her possible identities. Van der Kolk and van der Hart write, "Many traumatized persons, however, experience long periods of time in which they live, as it were, in two different worlds: the realm of the trauma and the realm of their current, ordinary life" (176). It is this struggle in the gap between identities that drives Mina to seek an interpretation of her pain and trauma from Mr. Kapasi. Mina asks Mr. Kapasi to interpret her malady because she does not know how to interpret it herself. If she knew she had been untrue to her husband, she would have no need to ask Mr. Kapasi about it. As Mina tells her story, it seems that she's grappling with questions associated with her identity, which is why she's searching for someone to interpret her "malady." Mina makes a point of telling Mr. Kapasi on two occasions that he's the only person she's confided in: "I've kept it a secret for eight whole years" (62) and "For eight years I haven't been able to express this to anybody, not to friends, certainly not to Raj" (64). After telling Mr. Kapasi, he's the only person who has access to both possible identities, and she asks him to interpret it and "[s]uggest some kind of remedy" (65). The remedy Mina seeks could be an answer to the question of who she is. Is she the woman who has fallen out of love with life? Or was she the silent victim of a silent crime? Mr. Kapasi's answer to Mina is meant to address what he sees as "the heart of the matter" (65). He says, "Is it really pain you feel, Mrs. Das, or is it guilt?" (65). This signals that he views her as the woman who had an affair.

7.2 The Act of Telling

Despite the fact the Mr. Kapasi arguably misinterprets Mina's pain, Mina does appear to experience a kind of healing process because she appears to overcome some of her struggle to

connect with her family in the last scene—something that was previously blocked for her. There's a pattern and belief in both psychological and literary trauma theory that the act of telling one's story of trauma can be therapeutic and healing for the person who has experienced trauma. LaLonde writes, "By telling the trauma story, the survivor reexperiences the traumatic experience, but on her own terms" (201). Even though the reader is not privy to the exact words Mina uses by nature of the omniscient summary, by placing language behind her experience and telling her own story, Mina gains some measure of control over this experience she seemed to have had little control over when it occurred. LaLonde continues on to write that "[t]he process of clarifying feelings and emotions through stories is especially therapeutic for survivors; after all, they often engage in psychic numbing, as manifested in dissociation" (204). For Mina, the act of telling her story acts as a therapeutic process that can counteract the numbing, disconnection from her family members, and "terrible urges" (64) she describes. As she recounts what happened to her when the Punjabi man came to visit, Mina becomes both the audience and the teller of her own story. Even though Mr. Kapasi misinterprets her trauma, Mina gets to experience this narrative anew by witnessing herself tell the story of her trauma.

This act of putting language behind traumatic memory seems to create a shift in Mina. After Mr. Kapasi suggests she feels guilty for the experience, "[s]he opened her mouth to say something, but as she glared at Mr. Kapasi some certain knowledge seemed to pass before her eyes, and she stopped" (65). In this moment, she likely realizes that Mr. Kapasi is incapable of interpreting her malady and that Mr. Kapasi's interpretation is incorrect. She may realize she does not feel guilt as he suggests, but pain, as she has said all along. When she realizes that is it not guilt she feels, but pain, she leaves Mr. Kapasi's presence, shutting the door of the van on him, and by extension, the Punjabi man. Through telling her own story, Mina gains an

understanding of her experience. Perhaps the remedy Mina seeks lies not in hearing Mr. Kapasi respond to her story, but in experiencing her response to her own story and gaining control over her experience through narrative language.

7.3 A Possible Redemption

After this “certain knowledge seemed to pass before her eyes” (65) and she exits the van, Mina suddenly is able to engage with her family. She calls to her family, asking them to “wait for me” (66) and doesn’t respond adversely to Mr. Das’s request for that “picture of the five of us” (66) she had previously avoided. Mina—who earlier avoided caring for her children—is the one to notice that Bobby has disappeared. After they find Bobby, “Mrs. Das reached into her straw bag to find a bandage which she taped over the cut on his knee” (67) and says, “Poor Bobby ... Come here a second. Let Mommy fix your hair” (68). Of this sequence of events, Escobar Sevilla writes, “Mrs. Das’ awkwardness fades away when she notices that Bobby is being attacked by the monkeys and urges Mr. Kapasi to help him” (109). This motherly instinct to care for her children—something that seemed to have been blocked earlier because of its association with her trauma—kicks in after she’s able to place language behind her experience and her eight years of pain. This is a dramatic shift.

Xuesheng describes this shift: “After this trip to the temple, the Das family transformed from a fragmented family to a complete one, from a lack of warmth, care and understanding to a harmonious family” (141). While I don’t agree with Xuesheng’s assessment that the story’s conflicts are all neatly resolved by its conclusion, it is important to note that the resolution—however imperfect—and healing that takes place in the Das family at the end of the story has also been noticed by others who’ve analyzed the text. Kurtz writes that “one of the remarkable features of trauma studies is its abundant optimism about the potential for healing. Brains can be

retrained; wounds can heal. Some practitioners go so far as to argue that working through an experience of trauma can actually leave a person healthier than before” (11-12). I do not wish my analysis to metaphorically tie up this story with a bow and suggest that Mina Das has completely healed from her trauma of eight years after managing to tell her story one time. Such a rhetorical move would demean and minimize the gravity of Mina’s trauma. I do suggest, however, that by Mina transitioning from being so absent in her family to expressing concern for her child’s safety and attempting to fill his needs, it seems like the story ends with some measure of hope. Mina has asked Mr. Kapasi for an interpretation and a remedy, but perhaps by telling her own story, she’s able to gain control of the narrative and come to her own interpretation, which then creates a remedy Mr. Kapasi could never offer her.

8 Addressing Counterevidence

Of course, my reading of Lahiri's short story speculates that the encounter between Mina and the Punjabi man was not consensual, which counters the popular reading of the text. Because I'm exploring the possibility that Mina experienced a traumatic sexual encounter that was neither romantic nor desired, I find it necessary to more fully examine potential counterevidence that previous critics may have relied on to support their reading as an affair. For example, in the passage portraying the conversation between Mina and Mr. Kapasi about the sexual encounter that led to Bobby's conception, the omniscient narrator, referring to the Punjabi man, summarizes, "He made love to her swiftly, in silence, with an expertise she had never known, without the meaningful expressions and smiles Raj always insisted on afterward" (Lahiri 63). It's possible that many critics' assumption that Bobby's conception was the result of an affair is because of the use of this phrase, "made love" (63). However, a closer examination of how this phrase is used in this moment and throughout the text may actually further support my reading of this encounter as a rape and bring the theme of female trauma more to the forefront of the story.

8.1 Definition Exploration

In the Oxford English Dictionary's entry for *love*, the fifth definition is "Sexual desire or lust" ("love" def. 5). This definition seems most fitting to describe attention from the Punjabi man. "To make love" is the third phrase in the Oxford English Dictionary's entry for "love" and its two definitions are "To pay amorous attention; to court, woo" and "To engage in sexual intercourse, esp. considered as an act of love" ("love" def. P3.a (a) and (b)). The use of the abbreviation for *especially* signals that this phrase is used most often when love is involved, but the actual emotion of love is not always requisite to qualify calling sexual intercourse "making

love.” While the use of this phrase “made love” could suggest genuine love between the two participants, there’s room in these definitions for real love to be completely absent and for “sexual desire and lust” (“love” def. 5) to fill that space.

8.2 Surrounding Context

A closer look at the sentence that employs the phrase “[h]e made love” (63) and the surrounding text further supports that this ambiguous sexual encounter was not driven by love, and it allows room for interpreting the act as a rape. To begin, the sentence places the Punjabi man in the position of subject: “*He* made love” (63, emphasis added). The narration mentions that the man didn’t make any attempt to make their time “meaningful” like Raj would (63). The use of the words “in silence” and “an expertise” suggest that the experience was marked by procedure rather than sentiment. The description mentions no sexual or romantic desire coming from Mina for the Punjabi man. Considering the facts that the man had only met Mina once before in such an unremarkable encounter that she “did not remember” him (63), the man approached Mina in his excitement of receiving the news that “a London pharmaceutical company had hired him” (63), and he had since had no contact with Mina aside from exchanging Christmas cards, it is reasonable to assume that there was no *love* involved on his part. I’ll confidently argue he was driven by lust.

It’s significant to note the ambiguity of exactly who uses the phrase “He made love” (63), which relates to my earlier discussion of the highly selective omniscient narrator. It is possible that this section of the narration represents Mina’s own recollection through free indirect discourse. It is also possible that this is a paraphrase of how Mina tells the story, and Mina uses the euphemism “made love” (63) to describe the experience to cushion the disturbing realization that she was raped. It’s one thing for her to recognize she did not invite or welcome the man’s

advances, but it's another to admit it aloud. As she has revealed to Mr. Kapasi, this is the first time she has spoken of this sexual experience and attempted to convert her memory into "transformed ... narrative language" (van der Kolk and van der Hart 176). As such, she is experimenting with what language to use to describe her experience. Perhaps instead of directly saying that his sexual attention was unwanted, Mina experiments with different ways to communicate that, and "made love" (63) is the first phrase she tries. By speaking for the first time of the event, Mina is navigating what Miller described as "the challenges of translation and the intricacies of criminality, the shame and the guilt, the fear and the repression" (228). It should not surprise us that Mina struggles to find the words to describe her experience.

Still, the nature of the story's brief omniscient narration makes it unclear if Mina Das says the words "he made love to *me* swiftly," or if the phrase represents how Mr. Kapasi summarizes her story, or if this is how the omniscient narrator chooses to describe the act. It's possible that Mr. Kapasi assigns this euphemism to Mina's story because he has already decided that she is the kind of woman who would have an affair through displacing his own marital strife onto Mina and Raj. It's possible that the omniscient narrator is trying to deflect and direct Mina's story. Considering all these factors, I argue that using the phrase "he made love" as the sole evidence to support that Bobby's conception was the result of an affair is shortsighted and ignores a host of other evidence that suggests a more nuanced interpretation.

9 Connecting Two Traumas

In a discussion of the phrase “made love,” it’s important to recognize that the phrase also appears earlier in the narrative in connection with Mr. and Mrs. Kapasi’s relationship. While Mr. Kapasi observes Mina looking at the nude figures at the ancient temple of Konarak, “it occurred to him, as he, too, gazed at the topless women, that he had never seen his own wife fully naked. Even when they had *made love* she kept the panels of her blouse hooked together, the string of her petticoat knotted around her waist” (Lahiri 57, emphasis added). The use of this phrase “made love” creates a link between these two relationships, between Mina and the Punjabi man and between Mr. Kapasi and his wife. Beyond this one phrase, Lahiri also links the two women through Mr. Kapasi’s projection of his marital issues onto the Das couple: “He wondered if Mr. and Mrs. Das were a bad match, just as he and his wife were. Perhaps they, too, had little in common apart from three children and a decade of their lives. The signs he recognized from his own marriage were there” (53). These two links encourage us to consider the connections and disconnections between the two couples and the two women, particularly when it comes to their individual experiences with trauma.

Very little information is provided through the third-person limited narration of Mrs. Kapasi’s story. Through this small amount of information, however, the reader learns that Mrs. Kapasi is also a woman deeply affected by trauma due to the death of her first son. While we learn of Mina’s possibly traumatic past partially from her own words and partially through the omniscient narrator, we only hear of Mrs. Kapasi’s trauma through Mr. Kapasi’s reflection on his career. This layering distorts Mrs. Kapasi’s story, but it does highlight enough details to give a brief glimpse into Mrs. Kapasi’s life:

In the end, the boy had died one evening in his mother's arms, his limbs burning with fever, but then there was the funeral to pay for, and the other children who were born soon enough, and the newer, bigger house, and the good schools and tutors and the fine shoes and the television, and the countless other ways he tried to console his wife and to keep her from crying in her sleep, so when the doctor offered to pay him twice as much as he earned at the grammar school, he accepted. Mr. Kapasi knew that his wife had little regard for his career as an interpreter. He knew it reminded her of the son she'd lost, and that she resented the other lives he helped, in his own small way, to save. (52)

While this passage focuses on the progression of Mr. Kapasi's career and how it interacts with his growing family, it also reveals a traumatic past for Mrs. Kapasi. Mrs. Kapasi's first son "died one evening in his mother's arms" and after she spent her nights "crying in her sleep" (52). It is unclear how long this restless sleep lasted. It's possible she continued this behavior for years and that it continues through the timeline of "Interpreter of Maladies." According to Mr. Kapasi, his employment at the doctor's office "reminded her of the son she'd lost, and ... she resented the other lives he helped, in his own small way, to save" (52). Whether or not Mrs. Kapasi actually feels this way toward Mr. Kapasi's job, the fact that *he* believes it creates a rift in their relationship. Because Mrs. Kapasi never speaks for herself in the text, I'm wary of accepting the facts Mr. Kapasi *knows* about what Mrs. Kapasi thinks and feels without question.

9.1 Absent or Blocked Love

In spite of the use of the phrase, "made love" (57, 63), actual love seems to be absent from both these relationships—the Kapasis, and Mina and the Punjabi man. Early in the story, the reader learns that Mr. Kapasi's "parents settled his marriage" (52), signaling that it was an arranged marriage. Because the two did not choose each other, it's possible that there is no

original affection between Mr. and Mrs. Kapasi.³ The suggestion of an arranged marriage also signals the possibility of the absence of Mrs. Kapasi's autonomy. The detail of Mrs. Kapasi keeping "the panels of her blouse hooked together, the string of her petticoat knotted around her waist" (57) could signal modesty or the lack of Mrs. Kapasi's choice. Certainly, these details could communicate that she in fact does not love her husband, nor does she want to be intimate with him. It's possible that the sexual relationship between Mr. and Mrs. Kapasi is not completely consensual, despite their marital relationship, just as it's possible the sexual encounter between Mina Das and the visiting friend was not consensual.

Beyond the fact that the two didn't choose each other, the text reveals other hints of rifts in Mr. and Mrs. Kapasi's marriage. Mr. Kapasi wonders "if Mr. and Mrs. Das were a bad match, just as he and his wife were" (53). While this detail represents Mr. Kapasi's projection of his own marital issues onto Mina and Raj, it also reveals that Mrs. Kapasi is living in a marriage where her partner believes that the two of them are a bad match. Mr. Kapasi believes there is nothing either of them can do to improve their marriage. Mr. Kapasi's conviction on this matter likely affects Mrs. Kapasi negatively. When Mr. Kapasi thinks of going home to his family, he reflects on how "his wife would serve him in silence. The thought of that silence, something to which he'd long been resigned, now oppressed him" (59). When observing how Mr. and Mrs. Das treated each other, Mr. Kapasi sees "[t]he signs he recognized in his own marriage ... the bickering, the indifference, the protracted silences" (53). Mr. Kapasi seems to attribute this to them simply being "a bad match" (53), but it's also highly possible that Mrs. Kapasi's ability to connect with her husband has been restricted by the grief of losing her first born son.

9.2 A Forgotten Woman

Mrs. Kapasi's trauma is largely ignored by Mr. Kapasi, the narrator, and the scholars of the text. Mr. Kapasi never reveals his wife's first name, nor does he recall any of her words. In Mr. Kapasi's mind, his wife is virtually invisible, and when she does appear, she's characterized by "silence" (59) and "protracted silences" (53). Most of the essays I read on the short story similarly do not acknowledge Mrs. Kapasi. If published scholars do mention her, they do so in passing and use her story as a means at getting at another point. For example, Ștefanovici cites the passage about her keeping her blouse on in bed—but doesn't mention the loss of their child—to show how Mr. Kapasi must feel unsatisfied with his sexual relationship with his wife and seeks to explore one with Mina (106). Fitz mentions Mrs. Kapasi only to illustrate how Mr. Kapasi gives tours as a way to escape his home life: "On weekends, to supplement his income, but also to get away from his rather uninteresting life with his wife and children, he works as an interpreter, guide and driver for tourists" (118). In Xuesheng's work, he does acknowledge the loss of the Kapasi's first child but does not elaborate beyond how it shows how Mr. Kapasi is not equipped to interpret emotional pain: "Kapasi, who can only interpret the physical pain, could not cure her inner pain, just as he and his wife could not get rid of the pain of losing their child" (135). Even Chiu takes this summary's perspective for granted and definitively writes, "His wife resents him because he has saved others' lives as an interpreter but failed to save their son" (171). Mrs. Kapasi's story of loss is revealed several pages before learning of Mina's pain, but because Mrs. Kapasi's pain is told within the story of Mr. Kapasi's career and because the narrative focuses on Mina's story, Mrs. Kapasi's story is largely forgotten by critics.

There are two stories of female trauma within "Interpreter of Maladies"—Mina's ambiguous sexual encounter with the Punjabi man and Mrs. Kapasi's experience of losing her son. While I do not wish to compare the traumas of the two women, I do wish to link their

trauma and bring them both to light. Lahiri links these two women's stories through the use of the phrase "made love" (57, 63), through Mr. Kapasi's projection of his dissatisfaction with his wife onto the Das couple, and through the presence of trauma associated with the birth or death of a child for both women. Lahiri must have included these two parallel stories on purpose. Lahiri's positioning of these two stories outlines and critiques, through the ironizing of Mr. Kapasi's perspective, the structures of power that cause Mrs. Kapasi's story to be marginalized and cause both women's stories to be misinterpreted. Despite the story being called "Interpreter of Maladies," it appears that it may be more about the *mis*interpretation of emotional wounds and about how easy it is to overlook others' internal pain. Although Mr. Kapasi's point of view drives the story, he misinterprets the pain of a stranger and his wife. Mr. Kapasi misinterprets Mina's story by assuming she feels "guilt" more than "pain" (63). He also misinterprets his wife's story by assuming that she is a "bad match" (53) for him rather than a woman still mourning the loss of her son. Lahiri's inclusion of Mr. Kapasi's unreliable narration critiques the way in which people miss, misunderstand, or ignore other's stories of pain, particularly in situations influenced by racial or gender power structures. A feminist and postcolonial reading of the text encourages us to recognize and value the pain of both Mina Das and Mrs. Kapasi.

10 Conclusion

Since the 1999 publication of *Interpreter of Maladies*, the definitions of consent, rape, sexual harassment, and abuse have taken a more central role in national and international conversations. Decisionmakers are reconsidering these definitions and concepts through legal and cultural lenses. Certainly, a great contributing factor of this shift is the #MeToo movement that brought to light issues of sexual harassment and abuse previously hidden or viewed as normal. Attitudes and behaviors once culturally accepted are now questioned and often censored. In September of 2014, for example, a law was adopted in California addressing issues of sexual assault and the definition of consent on college campuses. The law requires affirmative consent in order to classify a sexual interaction as consensual. It defines affirmative consent as “affirmative, conscious, and voluntary agreement to engage in sexual activity” (Senate Bill 967, sec. 1.a). Further, the law clarifies that “[l]ack of protest or resistance does not mean consent, nor does silence mean consent” (Senate Bill 967, sec. 1.a, emphasis added). If we interpret Mina’s experience in “Interpreter of Maladies” according to this law, Mina making “no protest when the friend touched the small of her back” (Lahiri 63) is not enough evidence to categorize this sexual activity as consensual. While this law only applies to college campuses in California, it provides a contemporary lens for viewing and interpreting consent and its meaning.

Because of the secretive nature of sexual violence, it’s difficult for experts to pin down numbers associated with sexual violence around the world. Looking just at statistics in the United States—which is where Mina’s fictional experience occurred and where “Interpreter of Maladies” was published—the Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network reports that in the United States, “[o]n average, there are 463,634 victims (age 12 or older) of rape and sexual assault each

year” (Victims of Sexual Violence: Statistics), “out of every 1,000 sexual assaults, 975 perpetrators will walk free” (The Criminal Justice System: Statistics), and “[o]nly 310 out of every 1,000 sexual assaults are reported to police” (The Criminal Justice System: Statistics). These staggering numbers could represent real women whose stories are silenced, misinterpreted, undervalued, ignored, or forgotten by third parties such as family members, friends, police officers, lawyers, or judges. These numbers represent hundreds of thousands of women in the United States and likely millions around the world in situations like Mina Das whose stories are silenced or ignored. In 1995, Brown asked, “What does it mean if we admit that our culture is a factory for the production of so many walking wounded?” (103). This question begs examination today.

A conversation about Mina Das and her trauma matters because conversations surrounding issues of trauma, consent, and sexual assault are relevant and shaping our society today. How we respond to her story and Mrs. Kapasi’s parallel story could be an indicator of how our culture responds to women’s stories and silent expressions of trauma. Mina Das’s story matters because it could represent women around the world who are forced into sexual experiences they do not consent to. Because cultural and government systems may not honor their stories, many of these women are left seeking for “some kind of remedy” (Lahiri 65) alone.

The scholarship I’ve culled for this research represents a variety of cultural and ethnic backgrounds. I have cited critics and sources from India, Iran, China, Taiwan, Romania, United Kingdom, Spain, and the United States (“Sangeeta Mukherjee,” “Dr. Devi Archana Mohanty,” “Bahareh Bahmanpour,” Xuesheng, “Back Matter,” “Smaranda Ștefanovici,” “Margaret-Anne Hutton,” “Jesús Escobar Sevilla,” “Vanita Reddy”). These critics from around the world have classified Mina Das’s malady as the consequence of guilt. While that is a reasonable reading of

the text, it is unreasonable to ignore the ambiguity of the narrative style and wonder how Mina would tell her own story if the omniscient story had not taken over.

I realize my reading of Mina Das's story as one about searching for "a remedy" (63) after trauma conflicts with much of the existing scholarship on the short story. Most scholarship does not question the ambiguity of Mina story and classifies it as an affair. I respect the scholarship that has come before mine. Still, there's enough of a gap, enough room for interpretation, enough ambiguity, to wonder if there is more to this story than what has been previously assumed. No one asks why Mina continually expresses that she's in pain and feels terrible. The issue of silencing women's stories is not unique to American culture or Indian culture. This is a global issue. Brown wrote that "[t]o deny that ... many other women's experiences of trauma, are in fact traumatic, and to insist that only the disordered and diseased would respond to such treatment with severe distress, sends a message that oppression, be it based on gender, class, race, or other variables, is to be tolerated" (105). To ignore Mina's and Mrs. Kapasi's stories—their told and untold stories—is to send the same devastating message.

Notes

1. While writing this essay, I contemplated how to refer to Mina Das. Most of the story's narration and most of the critical essays refer to her as Mrs. Das. If we attend closely to the text, we notice that she specifically requests Mr. Kapasi not to call her Mrs. Das (Lahiri 64), a request he immediately disregards. I realize that the decision to refer to a woman by her first name while referring to men by their more respected titles can be problematic in some situations. However, in this particular situation, I choose to refer to her not as Mrs. Das and instead will refer to her as Mina, in an attempt to honor the request Mr. Kapasi ignores. Much of my analysis of the short story focuses on how Mina has been disrespected and used by others. My choice to call her by her own name and not the last name of her husband is a small attempt to give her back some of the power and autonomy that has been denied her by other characters and past critics.
2. This seems to be an editorial oversight, but Escobar Sevilla's essay calls Mina's husband Ral instead of Raj.
3. My comments here do not seek to disrespect the cultural practice on arranged marriage; I'm just trying to show that it's possible Mrs. Kapasi's trauma may be layered and influenced by many factors.

Work Cited

- “Back Matter.” *Comparative Literature Studies*, vol. 52, no. 1, Penn State University Press, 2015, pp. 225-232, doi.org/10.5325/complitstudies.52.1.bm.
- Bahmanpour, Bahareh. “Female Subjects and Negotiating Identities in Jhumpa Lahiri’s *Interpreter of Maladies*.” *Studies in Literature and Language*, vol. 1, no. 6, 2010, pp. 43-51. *CS Canada*,
www.cscanada.net/index.php/sll/article/view/j.sll.1923156320100106.006/1450.
- “Bahareh Bahmanpour.” *LinkedIn*, www.linkedin.com/in/bahareh-bahmanpour-7bb43674/?originalSubdomain=ir. Accessed 23 Oct. 2021.
- Brada-Williams, Noelle. “Reading Jhumpa Lahiri’s *Interpreter of Maladies* as a Short Story Cycle.” *MELUS*, vol. 29, no. 3/4, Oct. 2004, pp. 451-464. *EBSCOhost*,
doi:10.2307/4141867.
- Brown, Laura S. “Not Outside the Range: One Feminist Perspective on Psychic Trauma.” *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, edited by Cathy Caruth, The John Hopkins University Press, 1995, pp. 100-112.
- California State, Legislature. Senate Bill 967. *California State Legislature*, 28 September 2014,
leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billNavClient.xhtml?bill_id=201320140SB967.
- Caruth, Cathy. “Preface.” *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, edited by Cathy Caruth, The John Hopkins University Press, 1995, pp. vii-ix.
- Chiu, Tzuhsiu Beryl. “Cultural Translation of a Subject in Transit: A Transcultural Critique of Xiangyin Lai’s ‘The Translator’ and Jhumpa Lahiri’s *Interpreter of Maladies*.”

- Comparative Literature Studies*, vol. 52, no. 1, Penn State University Press, 2015, pp. 160-177.
- “The Criminal Justice System: Statistics.” *RAINN.org*. Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network, www.rainn.org/statistics/criminal-justice-system. Accessed 14 Oct. 2021
- Davis, Colin and Hanna Meretoja. “Introduction to Literary and Trauma Studies.” *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Trauma*, edited by Colin Davis and Hanna Meretoja, Routledge, 2020, pp. 1-8.
- “Dr. Devi Archana Mohanty.” *Google Scholar*, scholar.google.com/citations?user=1zIZr2gAAAAJ&hl=en. Accessed 23 Oct. 2021
- Escobar Sevilla, Jesús. “Transnational Spaces of Identity Recognition in Jhumpa Lahiri’s *Interpreter of Maladies*.” *Journal of English Studies*, vol. 17, 2019, pp. 103-125. doi.org/10.18172/jes.3502.
- Fitz, Brewster. “Bibi’s Babel: Treating Jhumpa Lahiri’s “The Treatment of Bibi Haldar” as the Malady of Interpreters.” *South Asian Review*, vol. 26, no. 2, Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, Dec. 2017, pp. 116-131.
- Hutton, Margaret-Anne. “Figuring the Guide in Jhumpa Lahiri’s ‘Interpreter of Maladies’, R. K. Narayan’s *The Guide* and E. M. Forster’s *A Passage to India*.” *Modern Languages Open*, no. 1, Mar. 2020. EBSCOhost, doi:10.3828/mlo.v0i0.277.
- “Jesús Escobar Sevilla.” *Lionsfarne Research Group: Literature and Culture of the English Speaking Countries*, w3.ual.es/GruposInv/hum-807/jesus-escobar-sevilla.html. accessed 23 Oct. 2021.

- van der Kolk, Bessel A. and Onno van der Hart. "The Intrusive Past: The Flexibility of Memory and the Engraving of Trauma." *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, edited by Cathy Caruth, The John Hopkins University Press, 1995, pp. 158-182.
- Krystal, Henry. "Trauma and Aging: A Thirty-Year Follow-Up." *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, edited by Cathy Caruth, The John Hopkins University Press, 1995, pp. 76-99.
- Kurtz, J. Roger. "Introduction." *Trauma and Literature*, edited by J. Roger Kurtz, Cambridge University Press, 2018, pp. 1-17.
- Lahiri, Jhumpa. "Interpreter of Maladies." *Interpreter of Maladies*, 2nd edition, Mariner Books, 2019, pp. 43-68.
- LaLonde, Suzanne. "Healing and Post-Traumatic Growth." *Trauma and Literature*, edited by J. Roger Kurtz, Cambridge University Press, 2018, pp. 196-210.
- Laub, Dori. "Truth and Testimony: The Process and the Struggle." *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, edited by Cathy Caruth, The John Hopkins University Press, 1995, pp. 61-75.
- Lifton, Robert Jay. "An Interview with Robert Jay Lifton." Interview by Cathy Caruth. *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, edited by Cathy Caruth, The John Hopkins University Press, 1995, pp. 128-147.
- Lothe, Jakob. "Narrative." *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Trauma*, edited by Colin Davis and Hanna Meretoja, Routledge, 2020, pp. 152-161.
- "Love, N. (P3.a)." *Oxford English Dictionary*, www.oed-com.libproxy.chapman.edu/view/Entry/110566?rskey=XBkwM6&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid1330452103. Accessed 23 Sept. 2021.

- “Love, N. (5).” *Oxford English Dictionary*, www-oed-com.libproxy.chapman.edu/view/Entry/110566?rskey=XBkwM6&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid1330452103. Accessed 23 Sept. 2021.
- “Margaret-Anne Hutton.” *University of St Andrews*, [risweb.st-andrews.ac.uk/portal/en/persons/margaretanne-hutton\(ddc2833d-2c63-4b46-bb87-ac53285b7062\).html](http://risweb.st-andrews.ac.uk/portal/en/persons/margaretanne-hutton(ddc2833d-2c63-4b46-bb87-ac53285b7062).html). Accessed 28 Oct. 2021.
- Meretoja, Hanna. “Philosophies of Trauma.” *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Trauma*, edited by Colin Davis and Hanna Meretoja, Routledge, 2020, pp. 23-35.
- Miller, Emma V. “Trauma and Sexual Violence.” *Trauma and Literature*, edited by J. Roger Kurtz, Cambridge University Press, 2018, pp. 226-238.
- Mohanty, Devi Archana and Sangeeta Mukherjee. “Face Negotiation and Politeness in ‘Interpreter of Maladies.’” *The IUP Journal of English Studies*, vol. 13, no. 4, IUP Publications, 2018, pp. 71-78.
- Pederson, Joshua. “Trauma and Narrative.” *Trauma and Literature*, edited by J. Roger Kurtz, Cambridge University Press, 2018, pp. 97-109.
- Reddy, Vanita. “Jhumpa Lahiri’s Feminist Cosmopolitics and the Transnational Beauty Assemblage.” *Meridians*, vol. 11, no. 2, Duke University Press, 2011, pp. 29-59. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/10.2979/meridians.11.2.29.
- Reddy, Vanita. “Prosthetic Femininity, Flexible Citizenship, and Feminist Cosmopolitics in the Fiction of Jhumpa Lahiri.” *Fashioning Diaspora: Beauty, Femininity, and South Asian American Culture*, Temple University Press: American Literatures Initiative, 2016, pp. 64-100. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvrf88w6.6.

- “Sangeeta Mukherjee.” *Vellore Institute of Technology*. research.vit.ac.in/researcher/sangeeta-mukherjee. Accessed 23 Oct. 2021.
- “Smaranda Stefanovici.” *Google Scholar*, scholar.google.com/citations?user=CLQneJkAAAAJ&hl=en. Accessed 28 Oct. 2021.
- Stampfl, Barry. “Parsing the Unspeakable in the Context of Trauma.” *Contemporary Approaches in Literary Trauma Theory*, edited by Michelle Balaev, 2014 edition, Palgrave Macmillan, November 2014, pp. 15-41.
- Ștefanovici, Smaranda. “Jhumpa Lahiri and Psychological Dislocation in ‘Interpreter of Maladies.’” *Studia Universitatis Petru Maior - Philologia*, vol. 18, no. 1, Jan. 2015, pp. 103–109. *EBSCOhost*, search-ebSCOhost-com.libproxy.chapman.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,uid&db=ufh&AN=110029906&site=eds-live.
- “Vanita Reddy.” *Department of English, College of Liberal Arts*. liberalarts.tamu.edu/english/profile/vanita-reddy/. Accessed 23 Oct. 2021.
- “Victims of Sexual Violence: Statistics.” *RAINN.org*. Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network, www.rainn.org/statistics/victims-sexual-violence. Accessed 25 Oct. 2021.
- Xuesheng, Yuan. “Identity Crisis, Ethical Selection and Ethical Consciousness in Jhumpa Lahiri’s *Interpreter of Maladies*.” *Language in India*, vol. 21, no. 4, Apr. 2021, pp 134-143.