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## Traces of Freedom in *Interpreter of Maladies* and *This Blessed House*

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### ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to carry out a Pettit reading of Jhumpa Lahiri's two short stories from the collection of *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999). Jhumpa Lahiri illustrates the life of the collection of immigrants, who try to maintain freedoms even in other countries. This idea develops from Philip Noel Pettit's theory of freedom. To Pettit, freedom as an anti-power removes all slavery concepts and achieves self-mastery. Pettit believes that everyone is free for doing his/ her deeds based on free will. To him, nobody can interfere with somebody's private property as a master. Also, he centers on anti-power as no domination. The study attempts to find how the characters in these two stories convey Pettit's theory of freedom as anti-power based on their beliefs and desires. The idea applies to the characters who portrait by Lahiri in the *Interpreter of Maladies* and *This Blessed House*. Also, the current research attempts to show the reasons that the characters attempt to keep their freedom in different situations. This research focuses on the main characters to show how they attempt to keep their freedom through their idea and beliefs like Mrs. Das and Twinkle in two story collections. Mrs. Das tries to set herself free by revealing her secret. Also, Twinkle, another character who keeps her favorite objects tries to put aside all prejudices and achieve freedom; based on the examples given, the present research shows how Pettit's theory of freedom develops during the story series.

**Keywords:** Anti-Power; Freedom; Interpreter of Maladies; Jhumpa Lahiri; Philip Pettit

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The concept of freedom has always been an integral part of human life. Hence everyone tried to migrate to other places to preserve this concept. Concerning, it is evident in the works of Lahiri; who is an Indian-American writer. In her works, Lahiri's characters depict the conception of freedom that they tried to gain and keep freedom in other countries far from their hometown. Moreover, she is the child of the generation who immigrates to other countries to obtain a high-level position in life in another country with a different level of class society and also they obtain their freedom free from the barriers of dictated culture. This present idea is observable in her short stories

collected under the *Interpreter of Maladies* consisting of nine short stories.

Since the stories center on the concepts of identity and freedom, this study attempts to find the traces of Pettit's theory of freedom in lines with non-domination and non-interference in heart of two selected works, *Interpreter of Maladies* and *This Blessed House*, especially in the characters treatments to illustrate how people in the different situations have the common treatments to keep their freedom and identity.

*Interpreter of Maladies* and *This Blessed House* are two stories that focus on the concept of identity. According to this concept Lahiri

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tries to show how the identity debate is challenged in a situation far from home and how the characters try to lose identities in the freedoms gained. Concerning, *Interpreter of Maladies* describes the part of the life of the Das family who looked Indian but dressed as foreigners did, the children in stiff, brightly colored clothing and caps with translucent visors as if they try to find lost identity in freedom without any barriers. "Mr. Kapasi was accustomed to foreign tourists; he was assigned to them regularly because he could speak English" (Lahiri, 2000).

*This Blessed House* is the story in which the author centers on the lost identity of the character. Also, she portrays a part of the life of an Indian couple whose female character regardless of the cultural limitations tries to keep her true and favorite identity. Hence, when Twinkle found the porcelain effigy of Christ decides to keep it for herself contrary to her beliefs that she is a Hindu. "Guess what I found."

Twinkle walked into the living room, "lined from end to end with taped-up packing boxes, waving the vinegar in one hand and a white porcelain effigy of Christ... with vinegar" (Lahiri, 2000).

Philip Noel Pettit 1945; is an Irish political theorist. He was interested in political philosophy for many years, so he was a professional fellow in social and political theory. Pettit defends civic republicanism. He writes *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government* which focuses on moral, and political theory. Moreover, he concentrates on philosophical psychology and social anthropology. From the Pettit point of view, the concept of freedom has a peculiar definition. Pettit in his article entitled *Freedom as Antipower*, which was published in 1996 claims that "Fare in terms of the familiar dichotomy between negative and positive concepts of liberty? I am free the n negative case, Berlin says, "to the degree to which no human being interferes with my duties, "I am free in positive case to the extent that I achieve my self- Mastery, with its suggestion of a man divided against himself" (Pettit, 1996). Also, he centers on free will for doing actions (Pettit, 2001).

Pettit in his article entitled "The Instability of Freedom as Noninterference: The Case of Isaiah Berlin" which was published in 2011 mentioned that Sir Isaiah Berlin (1909 - 1997) who was a political philosopher, and one of the liberal thinkers of the twenty century believed in positive freedom; because to him, everyone has self-mastery which no one can interfere with his/ her power. In contrast, Pettit believes in negative freedom. To him everyone is free, and no one is a master to others even though n everybody lacks the will and wisdom. Pettit concentrates on Berlin's point of view on the idea of positive and negative freedom to convey his notion. Pettit depicts, Berlin's positive liberty centers on the absence of interference, and also he illustrates the idea of Berlin that nobody interferes with my activity. Also, he depicts that Berlin's positive liberty has a more profound definition than negative freedom because it focuses on the agent taking an active control or mastery of themselves to gain their identity (Pettit, 2011). He strictly centers on the idea that no one does not allow has a specific power over the other. To prove these lines, this research centers on a quotation by Professor Pettit:

I am free to the degree that no human being has the power to interfere with me: to the extent that no one else is my master, even if I lack the Will or the wisdom required for achievements self- mastery. The account is negative in leaving my achievement out of the picture and focusing on eliminating the danger from others (Pettit, 1996).

From the Pettit point of view, freedom has three aspects. The First part of freedom of action is what an agent performs. Then, the agent's ability to be thereby done, rather than a bystander. Third, enjoying freedom in a society that comes from his/ her actions not under pressure from others (Pettit, 1997). As Regards, Pettit centers on the concept of free actions, selves, and persons. Also, in an essay entitled, "Freedom in the Market" he compares absolute freedom with the people who come to the market for buying:

The marketplace is hailed as the very exemplar of a system under which People enjoy freedom, particularly the negative sort of

freedom associated with Liberal and libertarian thought: freedom as noninterference. The appeal of the Market from this viewpoint is that it represents a regime of free Consumer choice (Pettit, 2006). Petti compares people's freedom to the market situation. As he claims, in the market, the people are free to choose and buy, so nobody interferes with others. He depicts the type of freedom in which all people are free in any situation, position, and mood. Hence, from Pettit's point of view freedom has a social aspect that leads to social liberty due to establishing a republican government; everyone has social freedom to convey his/ her idea of *freedom* as non-interference with other others'ery. In this regard, Pettit, to prove his idea of freedom, explains that some thinker before him has the same idea in this field. As Pettit, (2002) states that: in his book *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government*:

Neither, I should say, is the claim idiosyncratic. I am not alone in finding the republican tradition of thought a fruitful source of ideas “and ideas. Historians like John Pocock (1975) and Quentin Skinner (1978; 1983; 1984) have not only made the tradition visible to us in the past couple of decades; they have also shown how it can give us a new perspective on contemporary politics. Skinner, in “particular, has argued that it can give us a new understanding of freedom and my argument builds on this (Pettit, 1997).

Pettit in his article under the title, “*Freedom as Anti power*” claims that, “I am to the degree that no human being has the power to interfere with me: to the extent that no one else is my master, even if I lack the will or the wisdom required for achieving self- mastery” self-mastery Also, to Pettit in political liberty, the concept of freedom lies in non-domination. Hence, he concentrates on his idea that everyone is free and nobody can find others under the domination of others.

In the following discussion, Pettit centers on the conversational stance conception and he explains the issue in his article under the title “*Freedom in Belief and Desire*”. Regarding, to the online Oxford dictionary the meaning of a conversation is talk, especially an informal one,

between two or more people, in which news and ideas are exchanged. As it cilearnre conversation is the most essential part of human life. Hence, Pettit believes that people used to invest heightening part of their information which comes from others in their everyday life. According to PePettit's relief, “it is true, of course, ththatost human exchange is not primarily intellectual. The conversation is the means whereby we recognize others and seek recognition from them” (Pettit & Smith, 1996). From the Pettit point of view, people convey their idea to each other through their conversation. As he believes, that each society is based on the chain of people's beliefs. To him, “everyone believes them shows up in the fact that no one is surprised at anyone's responding in that way. And so on” (ibid). Since each society establishes common beliefs, sometimes people pretend to have intellectual discussions with others (ibid). Hence, he believes, “Conversation in the sense of someone makes up his mind about what to believe on some characterized need not involve different people in exchange at or over the same time. As a matter, conscious that he will return to the topic again, or as someone reflects on what he came to believe earlier, assessing the worth of the reasons which pushed him, he enters into a sort of Conversation with himself (Pettit, 1997).

Although the conversation is the most essential part of social life and can make the social decisions, Pettit centers on the self-decision based on free will in freedom issues. His notion of freedom is based on Pettit's discussings freedom in the final part of the article. He insists on the equality issue again. Moreover, he believes that freedom is noninterference. From Petti's point of view, humans are mentally bound when all their senses are imprisoned. Hence, he called freedom non-interference and he provides the item with two characteristics, “The first is that under this approach the Interference of a non-subjugating authority impacts on the liberty of the people affected – although, no doubt, with aggregate, long-term benefit-even, if the interference involved, is just the constitutional imposition of a fair but (necessarily) coercive

rule of law. ...The second characteristic mark of the conception of freedom as noninterference is that while it represents even no subjugating interference as a deprivation of liberty ... ” (Pettit, 1997). When Pettit sees freedom as a non-interference, he does not mean disobeying the law but expressing it in the context of the law. Moreover, he emphasizes, “There is a nice balance, then in the relationship between the idea of freedom as noninterference and the idea of freedom as anti-power” (Pettit, 1997).

Pettit is one of the thinkers who concentrates on the modern idea of freedom. To him, freedom centers on non-domination. He does not concentrate on the negative conception of freedom as non-interference, but focuses precisely on the absence of domination as Anna Wierzbicka mentions this notion in her book *Understanding Cultures through Their Key Words*. Besides, according to Pettit in his article, *The Globalized Republican Ideal* people are incredibly free and should enjoy it as no- domination. Totally, to Pettit people are free and nobody can dominate their freedom (Pettit, 2016). Regarding, liberty is concerned with the absence of interference due to the absence of domination by others. From the Pettit’s point of view, which the researcher asks him by email; he believes that “I think of freedom (non-domination) as a property of the person but one that the individual can enjoy only under the norms and laws of a society that offers protection and empowerment”. Indeed, he concentrates on the type of freedom that carries by each person to the social life.

*Interpreter of Maladies* is the story of five family members who were originally from India but had lived in the US for many years. They came to India for a free time about a few days. The title story depicts an Indian-American family, who return to India as tourists (Waterman, 2014). During their travel, something happened that brought them closer to their driver as narrator. Indeed, the mom tried to achieve her freedom by telling the truth. The climax of the story began when she was alone with driver. She told him the great secret, which she had never told anyone. She told him that their son, Bobby, was not her husband, and

he was from someone else. She asked the driver (Kapasi) to help her, but he couldn’t do it, and the secret remained.

The beginning part of the story starts, when the family is sitting in the car and the parents arguing about Tina. “Mr. and Mrs. Das bickered about who should take Tina to the toilet. Eventually, Mrs. Das relented when Mr. Das pointed out that he had given the girl her bath the night before. In the rearview mirror, Mr. Kapasi watched as Mrs. Das emerged slowly from his bulky white ambassador, dragging her shaved, largely bare legs across the back seat” (Lahiri, 2000). The family came from America to visit India. Das’s family rents a car to visit the places. The driver is named Mr. Kapasi, a tour guide, a forty- six years old man.

According to the writer:

The first thing Mr. Kapasi had noticed when he saw Mr. and Mrs. Das, standing with their children under the hotel’s portico, was that they were very young, perhaps not even thirty.... The family looked Indian but dressed as foreigners did, the children in stiff, brightly colored clothing and caps with translucent visors. Mr. Kapasi was accustomed “to foreign tourists; he was assigned to them regularly because he could speak English” (Lahiri, 2000).

Mr. Das tells Mr. Kapasi that both of them, his wife and he are born in America, but they come to India to visit their families. Also, he told Mr. Kapasi that he is a school teacher in New Jersey. “In addition to Tina, “they had two boys, Ronny and Bobby, who appeared very close in age and had teeth covered in a network of flashing silver wires”. The Das family looked Indian but they dressed as foreigners did, the children in stiff, brightly colored clothing and caps with translucent visors. “Mr. Kapasi was accustomed to foreign tourists; he was assigned to them regularly because he could speak English” (Lahiri, 2000).

Mr. Das calls her wife by using her first name, Mina when speaking to Tina which is a strange way to speak to a child Mr. Kapasi. He finds the parent’s behavior uncaring of their children and each other. Hence, Mr. Kapasi notices and judges. and Mrs. Das’s behaviors toward their children. As Lahiri narrates:

Mr. Kapasi found it strange that Mr. Das should refer to his wife by her first name when speaking to the little girl. Tina pointed to where Mrs. Das was purchasing something from one of the shirtless men who worked at the tea stall. “Mr. Das walked back to the “car, but she did not appear to understand the words of the song, for she did not express irritation or embarrassment, or react in any other way to the many declarations” (Lahiri, 2000).

The couple’s behavior towards the country is an American tourist. Mr. Kapasi notices how the couple arguing about air-conditioning:

I told you to get a car with air-conditioning,” Mrs. Das continued. “Why do you do this, Raj, just to save a few stupid rupees? What are you saving us, fifty cents? “Their accents sounded just like the ones Mr. Kapasi heard on American television programs, though not like the ones on *Dallas*” (49). “Doesn’t it get tiresome, “Mr. Kapasi, showing people the same thing every day? “Mr. Das asked, rolling down his window all the way.”Hey, do you mind stopping the car I just want to get a shot of this guy” (Lahiri, 2000).

Since Mr. Das wanted to take a photo of a poor peasant, he asked Mr. Kapasi to stop the car from taking the photo. During the drive, Mr. Kapasi talking about his second job. He said he works as an interpreter in a doctor’s office. It was very interesting for Mrs. Das. To her the job is “romantic” and asking Mr. Kapasi to hear more,” She had also used the word “romantic.” She did not behave in a romantic way toward her husband, and yet she had used the word to describe him. 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” (Lahiri, 2000).

After Mr. Kapasi described a part of her life, Ms. Das felt she could trust him in telling the secret of her life. From the writer’s narration:

He had taken the job as an interpreter after his first son, at the age of seven, contracted typhoid—that was how he had first made the acquaintance of the doctor. At the time Mr. Kapasi had been teaching English in a grammar school, and he bartered his skills as an

interpreter to pay the increasingly exorbitant medical bills....” (Lahiri, 2000).

During lunchtime, Mrs. Das asks Mr. Kapasi to pass his time with them and also wanted to take pictures together. Hence, she asks for his address to send a copy of them. “What’s your address, Mr. Kapasi? “She inquired, fishing for something inside her straw bag” (34). Mrs. Das wanted to have a friendly relationship with Mr. Kapasi. Hence, once her family went to a temple she left them and stay with Mr. Kapasi, “Mr. Kapasi was anxious to be alone with her, to continue their private conversation, yet he felt nervous to walk at her side. She was lost behind her sunglasses, ignoring her husband’s requests that she pose for another picture, walking past her children as if they were strangers”(Lahiri, 2000).

The most important reason she was trying wanted to be alone with Mr. Kapasi was that she wanted to reveal the secret without interference. As Pettit believes in freedom as non-domination, Mr. Das thought she could reach social freedom by telling the truth. Moreover, he believes that freedom is non-interference. From Pettit’s point of view, humans are mentally bound when all their senses are imprisoned. When Pettit sees freedom as a non-interference, he does not mean disobeying the law but expressing it in the context of the law.

Moreover, he emphasizes, “There is a nice balance, then in the relationship between the idea of freedom as noninterference and the idea of freedom as anti-power” (598). Concerning, Mrs. Das thought she could find the legal solution to her secret by telling the truth to an interpreter to achieve her social freedom. Hence, she confesses, Boddy is not Mr. Das’ son:

He’s not Raj’s son. “Mr. Kapasi felt a prickle on his skin. He reached into his shirt pocket for the small tin of lotus-oil balm he carried with him at all times and applied it to three spots on his forehead. He knew that Mrs. Das was watching him, but he did not turn to face her. Instead, he watched as the figures of Mr. Das and the children grew smaller, climbing up the steep path, pausing now and then for a picture, surrounded by a growing

number of monkeys. "Are you surprised?" "The way she put it made him choose his words with care. "It's not the type of thing one assumes," Mr. Kapasi replied slowly. He put the tin of lotus-oil balm back in his pocket" (Lahiri, 2000).

It was the first time, Mr. Kapasi could not translate words. Mrs. Das explains how she married her husband, "We met when we were very young," she said" (ibid).

Mrs. Das wants that Mr. Kapasi helps her in the same way when he helps the patients. Indeed, she wants to find a solution by interpreting the secret to feel free from the mental prison:

She continued, that she did not make many close friends. 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, nursing, warming up bottles of milk, and testing their temperature against her wrist while Raj was at work, 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" (Lahiri, 2000).

From Pettit's Point of view, a free person does not have the freedom to go to travel and is free for doing an everyday routine, but he centers on freedom without domination. As he believes, "it must involve the resources and protections associated with freedom as no-domination. We now have to settle on the breadth of choice—the range of decisions in which such freedom should be available" (55).

According to Pettit, freedom is a concept that translates into non-domination and freedom from every power. Hence, Mrs. Das is in social prison which is why she reveals the secret to Mr. Kapasi. She wants to reach freedom without mental and social domination. Although Mrs. Das has social freedom, she was a prisoner of thought and the truth that should always be kept secret. Hence, she wants to reveal the secret:

I don't understand," Mr. Kapasi said. "Don't you see it? For about 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.

"Well, don't you have anything to say?" "About what?" "About what I've just told you. About my secret, and about how terrible it makes me feel. I feel terrible looking at my children, and at Raj, always terrible. I have terrible urges, Mr. Kapasi, to throw things away (Lahiri, 2000).

For about eight years Mrs. Das keeps the secret in her heart, now she decides to reveal the secret to reach freedom by telling the truth to Mr. Kapasi. As the writer explains in the last lines, she reaches freedom when she said, "Wait for me," Mrs. Das called out. "I'm coming. "Tina jumped up and down. "Here comes Mommy!" "Great," Mr. Das said without looking up. "Just in time. We'll get Mr. Kapasi to take a picture of the five of us" (Lahiri, 2000).

"*This Blessed House*" is a story about a young Indian couple. The story narrates a part of Sanjeev and Twinkle's life who are recently married and moved into their new house. In their new house, they find some new things. As the writer narrates:

"They discovered the first one in a cupboard above the stove, beside an unopened bottle of malt vinegar. "Guess what I found." Twinkle walked into the living room, "lined from end to end with taped-up packing boxes, waving the vinegar in one hand and a white porcelain effigy of Christ... with vinegar" (Lahiri, 2000).

They also found some traces of Christianity. Firstly, Twinkle found the porcelain effigy of Christ which was left by the previous owner. Since they are Hindus and they are not Christians, (as Wierzbicka believes that culture makes lifestyle) (Wierzbicka, 1997), Sanjeev does not like them against Twinkle she thinks it is worth and pretty. She had reached her true freedom free from any cultural or social beliefs. As regards, Pettit believes that when your thought and action are free you reach freedom.

By the next days, they found more Christian items such as a postcard of Saint Francis, a wooden cross key chain; a framed paint-by-number painting of the three wise men, a tile trivet showing Jesus delivering a sermon on a mountaintop; and a snow-filled dome containing a miniature Nativity scene. Twinkle decided to arrange all of them on the mantel:

“By the end of the week, the mantel had still not been dusted; it had, however, come to serve as the display shelf for a sizable collection of Christian paraphernalia. “There was a 3-D postcard of Saint Francis done in four colors, which Twinkle had found taped to the back of the “medicine cabinet, and a wooden cross key “chain, which Sanjeev had stepped on with bare feet as he was installing extra shelving in Twinkle’s study” (Lahiri, 2000).

Although Sanjeev thinks all of them are silly and wonders, Twinkle is interested in them. Sanjeev wants Twinkle to throw them all away, but Twinkle wants to keep them. One of the important reasons she wants to keep them is that she is free to choose for her desires. She is free of cultural interference. Moreover, she hopes to find other items. Hence, she found a watercolor poster of Christ, with a crown of thorns on his head.

Pettit believes, “in people ordinarily suppose that there are certain things they ought to believe and certain things they ought not to believe” (Pettit, 1996). Regarding, Sanjeev tried to obey his desires based on cultural beliefs which is why he did not as Twinkle’s interests as Nugent (2013) believes in the reason of belief and desire (Nugent, 2013), but Twinkle was deeply interested in what she found at home. According to Lahiri:

A few days later when Sanjeev returned from the office, he found Twinkle on the telephone, smoking and talking to one of her girlfriends in California even though it was before five o'clock and the long-distance rates were at their peak. “Highly devout people,” she said’ profound. This you won’t “believe. The switchplates in the bedrooms were decorated with scenes from the Bible (Lahiri, 2000).

Although Sanjeev was not satisfied with keeping the items, Twinkle tried to convince him, “No,” Twinkle said, her voice suddenly small. “This is our house. We own it together. The statue is a part of our property.” She had begun to shiver. A small pool of bathwater had collected around her ankles. He went to shut a window, fearing that she would catch a cold. Then he noticed that some of the water dripping

down her hard blue face was tears” (Lahiri, 2000).

Twinkle can choose her desires regardless of cultural and religious prejudices freely. In this regard, Pettit believes that “To hold a belief or desire freely is to hold it in the presence of ability, should the belief or desire be wrong, to get it right. The question of whether someone believes or desires freely thus arises both for the case where he gets things right and for the case where he gets things wrong” (Pettit & Smith, 1996). Regarding, the items were valuable to Twinkle, because she had chosen them freely, without any interference. From Sanjeev’s point of view, it was ridiculous because they were not Christians. Hence, “He hated that it was in his house and that he owned it. Unlike the other things they’d found, this contained dignity, solemnity, beauty even. But to his surprise these qualities made him hate it all the more. Most of all he hated it because he knew that Twinkle loved it” (Lahiri, 2000).

For Pettit, freedom is a property that all the people try to keep this conception. He believes in the theory of freedom which is discussed in the essay all people try to maintain this conception even in another country because man is a free being by nature and tries to maintain his freedom in all circumstances. Hence, the man removes all limitations to regain his lost freedom. In respect, some of the characters of the short stories collection attempt to not translate into other cultures, because some of them believe their freedoms are based on their culture, and some other ones try to keep freedom by building the bridge between their own culture and others like Twinkle in *This Blessed House*. *This blessed House* conveys the idea that people try to find their freedom in each place and remove the barriers which cover their beliefs. Although the way to achieve freedom in each story is different, all the characters in different situations attempt to maintain freedom through their own beliefs and desires. Besides, in *The Interpreter of Maladies*, Mrs. Das obtains her freedom by telling the secrets about her son to Mr. Kapasi. In short, the characters from the two stories seek freedom, peace, and identity according to their own will and choice.

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