The Dark Side of Caregiving in *Happy Together* and *Interpreter of Maladies*

*Happy Together* and *Interpreter of Maladies* explore the power dynamics of caregiving relationships. Lai Yiu-Fai is an estranged son navigating the boundaries of Ho Po-Wing and Buenos Aires; Mr. Kapasi is a neglected husband who shows the Das family around the historical town of Konarak. Both Lai and Mr. Kapasi lack meaningful relationships with their loved ones, causing them to become obsessively invested in the people they care about. This essay argues that the protagonists’ care for others eventually deteriorates into abusive control. To support this argument, I will show that both Lai and Mr. Kapasi resort to the restriction of mobility to assert control over the individuals under their care.

Initially, both Lai and Mr. Kapasi demonstrate care for other people by showing genuine concern for the other party’s wellbeing. This compassion stems from their desire for meaningful social connections, which they struggle to maintain. In *Happy Together*, Lai looks after Ho after he has been severely beaten up. During their time together, it becomes evident that Lai takes on the role of the giver while Ho assumes the position of a receiver. Lai, being an empathetic caregiver, nurses Ho back to health by cooking for him and bathing him. This genuine concern for Ho is best demonstrated in the scene where Lai offers Ho a cigarette in the taxi.
When Lai locks eyes with Ho, he immediately brings his cigarette close to Ho’s lips, almost as if he knows exactly what Ho wants. Ho then presses the end to his lips and exhales, blowing smoke into the air. Smoke twirls out of his lips as the *tango apasionado* starts playing softly. This scene marks the start of Lai’s caregiving journey as its warm yellow palette and wistful music contrast with the monochrome and quiet preceding scenes. Lai’s arm guides the viewers’ eyes towards Ho, who is his subject of care. The lack of diegetic sound lends a reflective quality to the scene. Furthermore, Wong’s use of step printing, in which frames are duplicated several times, contributes to the camera movement’s dreamlike quality. The shallow depth of field also clearly renders Ho, shifting the scene's focus to him. These elements highlight Lai's preoccupation with caring for Ho as the rest of the world fades away. Lai's harsh backlighting also gives him a glowing angelic appearance with an impressive "halo" effect, solidifying his role as Ho's guardian. The overall effect is a touching sequence of a lover tending to his injured partner.
Similarly, Mr. Kapasi goes out of his way to make his passengers feel at ease in his car. As the tour guide for the Das family, Mr. Kapasi is concerned with their safety and well-being on the road, ensuring that they have a pleasant journey between different locations. His genuine concern for the Das family stems not only from a sense of duty, but also from a desire to build meaningful relationships, particularly with Mrs. Das. To this end, Mr. Kapasi demonstrates expert vehicle maneuvering through his control of speed. This is shown in the line “Mr. Kapasi eased up on the accelerator, hoping to produce a smoother ride” (Lahiri, 125). With only one dependent clause, the sentence's brevity allows us to focus on Mr. Kapasi's concern for his passenger's comfort. The repeated "o" sounds in "hoping," "to," and "smoother" demonstrate assonance, giving the line a flow-on effect that emphasizes Mr. Kapasi's commitment to making the Das family's experience a positive one. Moving on to diction, the phrasal verb "eased up" is defined as a gradual decrease in intensity, which in this case refers to the controlled release of the accelerator to slow the car down. However, “eased up” also implies treating someone less harshly, or in other words, giving someone better treatment. This is comparable to Mr. Kapasi's careful attention to the needs of his passengers. The comparative adjective "smoother" also stands out because it highlights not only Mr. Kapasi's careful driving, but also his desire to outdo himself by providing the Das family with the best experience possible. Other examples of his careful consideration include making sure the doors were locked (Lahiri, 125) and shifting the gears delicately (Lahiri, 126). In essence, Mr. Kapasi drives with extreme caution, showing great concern for the Das family.

However, the care provided by Lai and Mr. Kapasi darkens into possessive control over the other party as they begin to abuse their powers as caregivers. In Happy Together, the established pattern of Lai as the caregiver and Ho as the receiver breaks down when Ho recovers
from his injuries. Lai, fearful of losing control, tries to trap Ho in this one-sided relationship. The scene in which Ho confronts Lai about his missing passport highlights Lai's abuse of power.

In the scene, Lai is shown waiting for Ho in the doorway, leaning back against the wall with a smug expression on his face. The strong lighting from the top-right corner of the frame casts a shadow on Lai's eyes, giving him a mysterious appearance as we cannot tell what he is thinking. He is wearing the same open-neck, red-and-navy checkered shirt that Ho was wearing a few scenes ago, implying that Lai's possessive tendencies extend to Ho's belongings. Lai catches our attention in this scene because his bright shirt overpowers Ho's calm blue T-shirt. Furthermore, despite being partially blocked by Ho's body in the foreground, the differential focus favors Lai, implying Lai's dominance over Ho in this scene. The scene is also shot from an angle below Lai’s eye level to indicate that Lai has the upper hand in this conflict. In terms of composition, Lai is positioned directly in the center of the frame, dividing it into the more claustrophobic left half occupied by Ho and the relatively open space to the right. This deliberate separation of space alludes to Lai's attempts to corner Ho in their psychological battle. All of these factors combine to highlight Lai's
oppression of Ho, depriving him of his opportunity to assert himself and, more literally, his freedom of movement.

Just as Lai confines Ho to his squalid apartment, Mr. Kapasi traps the Das family in his decrepit car. As the driver, Mr. Kapsi holds considerable power in determining where the vehicle will travel. He has command of his territory — his car — and can control its movement along the roads of Konarak. On the other hand, the passengers are dependent on him to bring them to different places, subjecting themselves to the whims of Mr. Kapasi. This is especially true for the Das family, who have an ironic disconnect from local culture and geography. The line "Mr. Kapasi turned the wheels, almost delirious with relief" exemplifies Mr. Kapasi's excessive control of his passengers (Lahiri, 133). This line follows Mr. Kapasi's suggestion that they visit the hills of Udayagiri and Khandagiri in order to extend their tour and spend more time with Mrs. Das (Lahiri, 133). The noun "wheels" refers to the steering wheel that Mr. Kapsi uses to control the direction of his vehicle. This is similar to his control over the Das family's mobility while they are in his car. Moving on, the strong adjective "delirious," versus a more neutral “filled,” suggests Mr. Kapasi's unusually high level of excitement upon receiving Mr. and Mrs. Das' hesitant approval to take a detour. His ecstasy gives his actions a disturbing quality, as he appears to enjoy asserting control as a tour guide. Mr. Kapasi's eerie manipulation of the Das family is also alluded to in the sentence structure. The comma divides the sentence into two symmetrical halves with nearly equal word counts. This is emblematic of Mr. Kapasi’s attempt to separate the Das family from civilization, bringing them to the desolate hills to dedicate more time to his new love interest. Furthermore, both halves contain exactly eight syllables, referencing Mr. Kapasi's careful manipulation of circumstances to fulfill his wishes. In short, Mr. Kapasi succumbs to his selfish desires to ensnare his newfound lover, neglecting his responsibilities as a navigator in the process.
In conclusion, both Lai and Mr. Kapasi's initial care for others graduated into a more sinister desire for power. The power accorded to them as caregivers corrupted them, causing them to assert excessive control over others. As such, my interpretation of power in caregiving relationships yields a valuable lesson: it is not the nature of power that encourages its abuse, but rather the nature of caregiving. The assertion of control over others is a necessary condition for providing good care under most circumstances. In both Lai and Mr. Kapasi’s cases, it was this aspect of caregiving that allowed them to abuse power to satisfy their selfish needs for love and companionship. As the abuse of power is the product of care itself, it can only be mitigated, never eliminated. This essay provides insights into the nature of power abuse among caregivers to help us recognize and address such instances of abuse.

Word Count: 1500
Works Cited
