

JHUMPA LAHIRI INTERPRETER OF MALADIES 1999

PULITZER PRIZE 2000

With accomplished precision and gentle eloquence, Jhumpa Lahiri traces the crosscurrents set in motion when immigrants, expatriates, and their children arrive, quite literally, at a cultural divide.

Imbued with the sensual details of Indian culture, these stories speak with passion and wisdom to everyone who has ever felt like a foreigner.

Like the interpreter of the title story, Lahiri translates between the strict traditions of her ancestors and a baffling new world.

Amazon.com Review

Mr. Kapasi, the protagonist of Jhumpa Lahiri's title story, would certainly have his work cut out for him if he were forced to interpret the maladies of all the characters in this eloquent debut collection.

Take, for example, Shoba and Shukumar, the young couple in "A Temporary Matter" whose marriage is crumbling in the wake of a stillborn child

Or Miranda in "Sexy," who is involved in a hopeless affair with a married man.

But Mr. Kapasi has problems of his own; in addition to his regular job working as an interpreter for a doctor who does not speak his patients' language, he also drives tourists to local sites of interest. His fare on this particular day is Mr. and Mrs. Das--first-generation Americans of Indian descent--and their children. During the course of the afternoon, Mr. Kapasi becomes enamored of Mrs. Das and then becomes her unwilling confidant when she reads too much into his profession. "I told you because of your talents," she informs him after divulging a startling secret.

I'm tired of feeling so terrible all the time. Eight years, Mr. Kapasi, I've been in pain for eight years. I was hoping you could help me feel better; say the right thing. Suggest some kind of remedy.

Of course, Mr. Kapasi has no cure for what ails Mrs. Das--or himself.

Lahiri's subtle, bittersweet ending is characteristic of the collection as a whole. Some of these nine tales are set in India, others in the United States, and most concern characters of Indian heritage.

Yet the situations Lahiri's people face, from unhappy marriages to civil war, transcend ethnicity.

As the narrator of the last story, "The Third and Final Continent," comments: "There are times I am bewildered by each mile I have traveled, each meal I have eaten, each person I have known, each room in which I have slept." In that single line Jhumpa Lahiri sums up a universal experience, one

that applies to all who have grown up, left home, fallen in or out of love, and, above all, experienced what it means to be a foreigner, even within one's own family.

From Publishers Weekly

The rituals of traditional Indian domesticity, curry-making, hair-vermilioning all buttress the characters of Lahiri's elegant first collection and mark the measure of these fragile people's dissolution

Frequently finding themselves in Cambridge, Mass., or similar but unnamed Eastern seaboard university towns, Lahiri's characters suffer on an intimate level the dislocation and disruption brought on by India's tumultuous political history.

Displaced to the States by her husband's appointment as a professor of mathematics, Mrs. Sen (in the same-named story) leaves her expensive and extensive collection of saris folded neatly in the drawer. The two things that sustain her, as the little boy she looks after every afternoon notices, are aerograms from home written by family members who so deeply misunderstand the nature of her life that they envy her and the fresh fish she buys to remind her of Calcutta.

The arranged marriage of "This Blessed House" mismatches the conservative, self-conscious Sanjeev with ebullient, dramatic TwinkleAa smoker and drinker who wears leopard-print high heels and takes joy in the plastic Christian paraphernalia she discovers in their new house.

In "A Real Durwan," the middle-class occupants of a tenement in post-partition Calcutta tolerate the rantings of the stair-sweeper Boori Ma. Delusions of grandeur and lament for what she's lostA"such comforts you cannot even dream of them"Give her an odd, Chekhovian charm but ultimately do not convince her bourgeois audience that she is a desirable fixture in their up-and-coming property. Lahiri's touch in these nine tales is delicate, but her observations remain damningly accurate, and her bittersweet stories are unhampered by nostalgia.

"Brimming bowls and colanders lined the countertop, spices and pastes were measured and blended, and eventually a collection of broths simmered over periwinkle flames on the stove." (p. 117)

With the sizzling descriptions of Indian food and eye-opening moments portraying the juxtaposition of American and Indian culture, the award-winning Jhumpa Lahiri crafts a collection of 9 breathtaking stories that make up the *Interpreter of the Maladies*.

Throughout the story Lahiri uses clever imagery and diction to both capture moments in the novel and reveal underlying problems of dysfunctional relationships. As Shoba, the newly miscarried wife of Shukumar, refuses to put her shoes in the closet Lahiri tells of her reluctance to continue living as a wife. Mr. Pizarda, a Bengali man stuck in America as his wife and children suffer from the Pakistan war, gives a young girl Lilia a “steady stream of honey-filled lozenges, raspberry truffles, slender rolls of sour pastilles”, telling bounds about his grief and longing for his own children (p. 29). Spot-on descriptions of the daily life of both Americans and Indians combine together in her stories yet are made fresh and insightful in their shocking endings.

Her shrewd, but not judgmental tone, captures both the flaws and perfection of Indian culture

The stories, in their individuality, are weaved together in their themes of accepting American culture and loving Indian culture.

This thread of unification continues in the stories’ emphasis on love, and the toll that these moves take on relationships.

Throughout the book, characters such as Mrs. Das deal with the guilt of having a boy after an affair, Miranda choose to stop her affair with the married Dev, and Elliot struggle to adapt to life with the carefree Twinkle. The couples struggle with the stress of adapting to a chaotic and foreign life in America in contrast to the culturally rich and slow life of India

Yet the relationships born from love, lust, and arrangement overcome their flaws at the end of each story either with a tough ending or a rebirth.

Every relationship has its flaws, as does every book.

Even with its beautiful and smooth writing, the *Interpreter of the Maladies* at times can drone on. The emphasis of describing settings and one broken relationship after another can at times cause the stories to feel as they were, in the words of a customer on Amazon, “written from a recipe.” Shocking endings can leave readers in confusion. Personally I cannot think of a sentence that describes exactly what Jhumpa Lahiri was trying to convey or reveal in her book; true themes and meanings are very hard to find. Her diction and stirring statements can distract from the plot and add to this confusion.

“Still, there are times I am bewildered by each mile I have traveled, each meal I have eaten, each person I have known, each room in which I have slept. As ordinary as it all appears, there are times when it is beyond my imagination.” (p. 198)

Even with its minor flaws, Jhumpa Lahiri’s beautiful description of Indian cultures, the struggle of living in America, and truths of relationships along with its personal significance.

This is a collection of stories about the lives of Indian and Indian-Americans who are nostalgic for their home on the other side of the world but are also trying very hard to adjust to their life in their adopted country.

The nine stories in the book are:

A TEMPORARY MATTER

1. A Temporary Matter : A happy couple, Shukumar and Shoba who are hard-working Indian-Americans, lose their baby, and through their grief, they are alienated from each other. Environment in the background, such as the electrical power, the candles, and Indian food, provides the mood of this story.

A marriage comes apart after a baby is born dead...the couple are depressed and avoiding each other....when the electricity department switches the electricity off for an hour every night...they open up and reveal their true feelings in the dark....the husband thinks that things are getting better....while the wife is using the time to leave him and move out of their marriage totally....

What is " temporary " ?

Electricity blackouts once a day while engineers fix street problem .

Shoba's pregnancy

The blackout confession time .

The relationship between them is over and this is a temporary respite before it self destructs .

The hiatus in the relationship caused by the death of the baby is temporary and will soon be re-assembled in a new way that they can both live with....

WHEN MR. PIRZADA CAME TO DINNER

This story reflects the feelings of innocent people from a personal level on both sides of a complicated political struggle. Told from the ten-year old Lilia's point of view, this story tells of the concerns of immigrants for their old countries. Mr. Pirzada, from Pakistan, is friends with Lilia's parents and visits them often, bringing sweets to the girl. He is concerned for the safety of his daughters back home, as things can go awry during a war. Since Lilia is a second-generation American, she views all this with deep emotion, yet childish understanding, and she misses Mr. Pirzada when he leaves for Pakistan.

Girl remembers mr pirzada coming every night for dinner with her parents...he establishes himself as an important part of their lives.....this is played out against the drama of the war to establish bangladesh.....mass murders and military attacks....mrs pirzada and his daughters are caught in the fighting.....and he is worried beyond mind....but at the same time he has to engage with american halloween and carves the pumpkin head....a symbol of mindlessness superimposed on history of savagery...

....the americans support pakistan and do not wish to know what is going on in east pakistan.....the heroine learns about the american revolutionary war to gain independence from the british, but the teacher will not allow information about the exact similar war in asia...bangladesh wanting independence from pakistan.

INTERPRETER OF MALADIES

An Indian-American couple visit their old country and hire a tour-guide as their driver. The driver talks about his other job as an interpreter in a doctor's office. Something resembling a romance starts to develop between the wife and the driver. In the story each character is flawed in some way and sees the others from a mistaken angle, and each character ends up feeling disappointed.

Tour guide in india driving an americo-indian couple to the sun temple....unhappy marriage....driver feels as if he has a chance with the wife who has been flirting with him....he makes various moves on her...but she turns out to be a "user" who is looking for justification that one of her children is not her husband's child.....the tour guide is soured off by her attitude...tour to the sun god temple at konarak

A REAL DURWAN

The Durwan, a stair-sweeper of an old apartment building who is an old woman, attracts the pity and the kindness of the residents, since she does this work without expecting anything. The old woman feels just as strongly about the residents and the building, as well. When a sink in the stairway is stolen, however, the residents turn their backs on the old woman, kick her out of the building and start looking for a "real Durwan."

Old woman acts as concierge to a block of flats in bad repair...but a wealthy couple start renovating and modernizing the building with the other tenants taking up the challenge.....but of course the old lady 'durwan'/ caretaker is thrown out onto the street without any money or belongings.....new capitalism destroys everyone's humanity in various horrible ways....

SEXY

Miranda and Laxmi work for a public radio station in Boston. Miranda is having an affair with Dev, an older, married Indian man. At work she hears Lami's phone calls through her cubicles. Laxmi's cousin's husband is having an affair, and the grief of it has made the cousin unable to care for her son. When The cousin comes to visit Laxmi, Miranda babysits for her son, Rohin. Laxmi's cousin is the victim of infidelity. It is through her stories that Miranda starts to feel and then face her own guilt and aimlessness.

Young woman picked up by a married man in an upmarket department store....she starts an affair with him.....and he calls her sexy.....but one weekend she looks after a friend's nephew.....whose father has abandoned the family and run off with his young mistress....the word "sexy" is used and some force of responsibility hits her and she ends the affair by shirking off her adulterous lover.....

MRS. SEN'S

An eleven year-old boy is babysat by Mrs. Sen in her own home. Mrs. Sen is a university professor's wife who is homesick for her native land and is obsessed with objects like her special vegetable cutting blade and fish from the market. She also resists attempting to adapt to the new country and learning to drive. One day, on a whim, she drives to the market on her own and has an accident with the boy in the car. Afterwards, the boy stops staying with her.

Young boy is left by his mother with mrs sen.....she is paid to be his guardian after school everyday....and he describes her customs from saris to cooking indian delicacies...her husband is trying to get her to drive...but she is very frightened and later has an accident with young eliot in the car....which ends her guardian duties. The description and character of mrs sen is very well described and drawn....as well as her longing and nostalgia to go home to india.

THIS BLESSED HOUSE

An Indian-American couple, newly married, try to adjust to each other and their new house, which was owned by fanatically religious Christian people who left artifacts hidden inside the house. The clash of cultures and the young couple's ineptitude to accept each other's different qualities are highlighted in this story.

Young Indian married couple move into a new home bought after their marriage. He has a high flying consultancy job in boston,usa.
The home is a very elegant American colonial with big grounds.

But on moving into the house they keep on discovering christian religious artifacts everywhere in the house, until they have a complete christian/ christ memorabilia museum on their mantel piece.

They discover a statue of the virgin in the garden ...and later during the housewarming party they discover a statue bust of christ's head crafted in heavy silver.

They have fights about the stuff as they are hindu and not christian....he wants to tip it but she wants to keep it..

and manages to persuade him to leave the stuff alone...

The story poses a double problem..

1) reflects the state of their new married life and her achieving dominance over him

2) why did the previous owners of the house if such fanatical christians leave all this stuff behind them ?.....

THE TREATMENT OF BIBI HALDAR

Bibi Haldar is a twenty-nine year-old spinster who has a strange ailment. From the descriptions of her symptoms in the story, she suffers from seizures. The cure is marriage, the doctors have said, and that's what Bibi Haldar wants, but despite all the efforts, she lacks the qualities of being marriage-able. Bibi keeps the inventory of her brother's cosmetics stall, but when the brother's wife becomes pregnant, she is afraid Bibi will infect her unborn child. When a daughter is born to her and the child becomes ill, a seriously prejudiced treatment of Bibi begins. Women of the community sympathizing with Bibi stop their purchases from the brother, causing the brother to go bankrupt, leave his store, and move out. Bibi is left to live in the storage room, which she fixes to make it livable. Then it is discovered that Bibi is pregnant, but the father of the baby is a mystery for she might have been attacked during a seizure. The women help her with the care of her son and Bibi starts her own business with the old wares of his brother's store and manages to raise her son on her own, with her ailment now cured.

The despised sister with epilepsylives with hateful brother and even more hateful wife....she lives on the roof....the neighborhood gossips about her and what could fix her ailments.....they also take care of her most of the time.....someone suggests that she needs a husband.....and the neighbors undertake to find her one....but no luck....her family desert her and she becomes a recluse on the roof of the building...and such a recluse that everyone basically stops worrying about her....until one day they find vomit on the roof and track her down to "five months" pregnant....now one knows who the father is.....once her baby is born her epilepsy stops and she becomes a local business woman.....

THE THIRD AND FINAL CONTINENT

An Indian-descent young man, a newcomer to the United States from London, rents a room from a quirky old woman in Cambridge, Mass. After living with her for six weeks, he feels attached to her. When the young man's new wife arrives from India, he moves out to an apartment on the campus of MIT. As he is trying to adjust to his wife, whom he doesn't know well, the old woman dies. After a while, the young man starts feeling love for his wife, but he also remembers the old woman, as she was the first person he liked in the new country, which started his adaptation process to the USA

Young indian student travels from india to london to study and lives in rather rough digs....later he gets a job in america and is also married in an arranged wedding....he goes ahead and rents a room from an old lady of 103....born in 1866....present date is 1969 ...and usa has placed a man on the moon... he makes friends with her....and when his new wife arrives he takes her to meet the old woman....who says "she is a real lady"...later we are told he reads her obituary in the paper and grieves for her....but he realizes that day he and his wife fell in love with each other.....third continent is.....?

Space.....moon.....earth

india.....uk.....usa

birth.....marriage.....death ?