

THE COMPLEX LIVES OF INDIAN IMMIGRANTS IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S INTERPRETER OF MALADIES

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Abstract

In *Interpreter of Maladies*, Jhumpa Lahiri gracefully weaves narratives of Indian immigrants and first-generation Indian-Americans grappling with the fraught space between inherited tradition and an unfamiliar new world. Through nine short stories, Lahiri explores the cultural tensions between assimilation and rootedness, often immersing readers in characters who feel both connected to—and estranged from—their heritage and their adopted homeland.

Many characters endure profound struggles of identity, intimacy, and belonging. Lahiri's protagonists—whether in America or visiting India—face loneliness, longing, alienation, and hope. Stories such as *Mrs. Sen's* highlight the painful effort of preserving cultural traditions in a foreign environment, while *The Third and Final Continent* and *Sexy* shows the challenges of relationships between different cultures and the shifts in loyalty that come with them.

Lahiri's storytelling is semi-autobiographical: she draws extensively on her own experiences, family history, and the Bengali diaspora, lending authenticity to her portrayal of immigrant psychology and emotional nuance. Themes of communication breakdowns and romanticized illusions recur—most notably in the title story, where Mr. Kapasi and the Das family misinterpret each other across social and cultural divides, culminating in lost opportunities for connection.

By framing each personal encounter within the broader context of diasporic dislocation, Lahiri reveals how food, language, marriage, tradition, and grief shape—but do not define—her characters. Readers witness how assimilation often inflicts emotional loss even as characters forge new “hybrid” identities between worlds.

Interpreter of Maladies ultimately presents a subtle, compassionate examination of the immigrant condition: an intricate portrait of individuals seeking identity, intimacy, and belonging amid cultural collision and transformation.

Key words: migration, displacement, culture, nostalgia.

Jhumpa Lahiri won the Pulitzer Prize in 2000 for her debut short story collection. *Interpreter of Maladies* consists of nine short stories. The stories in *Interpreter of Maladies* focus on the lives of Indian immigrants to America, of individuals navigating between the strict traditions they need inherits and therefore the hard new world they have to encounter every day. Lahiri herself couldn't absolutely integrate with the US culture so it's not wrong to think about her stories as semi-autobiographical. The stories specialize in characters, several of Indian heritages, who struggle with problems with identity, personal relationships, the feelings of alienation, isolation, loneliness, longing, loss and hope which so often mark the immigrant experience.

A Temporary Matter is a story about Shukumar and Shoba, an Indian couple living in Boston during a power cut. Shukumar is a doctoral dissertationist and Shoba works as a proof-reader. The tragedy of their life is that they lose their first child at delivery, drastically altering their lives. The story highlights the maladies, alienation, and breakdown of communication in their family life, as well as the loss in their immigrant lives.

Marriage is the union of two hearts, and for an Americanized couple, it seems like a curse. They had enough in each other to be happily married, but they had their own ideas about a family. When Shoba's child was born dead, her husband was away for a paper presentation, which became traumatic for her. She started avoiding her husband and their relationship deteriorated.

Shukumar thought this chillness would pass soon, but they became experts at avoiding one another. The power cut coincided with their lunchtime, causing them to dine in the dark. Shoba

suggested eating candlelight, and they systematically avoided their friends and relatives. Shoba's mother, who moved from Arizona, never spoke to Shukumar about her. In India, Shukumar and Shoba would share stories, poems, or jokes during power cuts, but Shukumar was not good at telling jokes. She suggested they share something new, and they agreed to go to Baltimore for the presentation. Despite their struggles, their marital relationship remained true to each other. When their house goes dark, they talk, and Shukumar even tries to kiss her awkwardly. They make love, but they don't for many months. Shoba weeps without sound and whispers his name. The next day, she tells Shukumar that she required alone time and has found an apartment. He tells her a secret: she gave birth to a dead male child, which he had kept from her. Shoba is shocked and starts crying, but Shukumar is with her. The story ends with them weeping together for the things they now knew.

Lahiri's "A Temporary Matter" explores themes like loneliness, loyalty, feeling left out, and tradition among the Indian community living in the United States. The darkness represents the twilight of the two distant cultures and the darkness of the relationship between Indians and Americans. The story leaves the end open, allowing readers to imagine the future of their relationship.

'Lahiri attempts to portray the marital boredom that is typical of American society wherein marriage itself turns into temporary matters. In case of Shoba and Shukumar who are clearly Americanized, the insecurity and uncertainty of a staggering relationship add to the unstable life of exile. Actually, the darkness represents the twilight of the two distant cultures. It also represents the darkness of the relation of Indian in America. 'Jhumpa Leaves the end open because it is not certain whether the stillness is temporary or the patch up is temporary in their relationship. She does not conclude on the note of certainty she allows space for her readers' imagination.' (Devika)

In Jhumpa Lahiri's collection, second story "When Mr. Pirzada came to Dive," the story revolves around an Indian scholar, Mr. Pirzada, received a grant from the Pakistan government to study New England's growth. The story is autobiographical, reflecting Lahiri's own experiences as an immigrant's child. Mr. Pirzada brings a lot of warmth into the family's life, even though he left behind his wife and seven daughters. Despite being a Muslim, Mr. Pirzada's Muslimness does not clash with the Hinduness of the family. Lilia, the narrator's mother, doesn't see any difference between her parents and Mr. Pirzada, she thinks he must be Indian. However, her father explains that Mr. Pirzada is actually a Pakistani. Lilia's innocent mind cannot comprehend how a single geographical space can be divided into two countries.

Mr. Pirzada's visits come to an end when he completes his project and flies home anxiously. The story ends happily when Mr. Pirzada's sends card confirming that he and his family are safe. After hearing from Mr. Pirzada about his family's safety, Lilia and her parents celebrate their happiness with a special dinner.

In a third space, India and Pakistan may consider each other as enemies, but thrown together, there is love, concern, and prayer for each other.

The Interpreter of Maladies is a story focusing on a first-generation Indian-American couple, Mr. and Mrs. Das, who travel from New Jersey to Konarak, Orissa. Their children, Tina, Ronny, and Bobby are with them in their journey. The story highlights the cultural clashes between the American and Indian cultures, with the family looking Indian but dressed as American. The story also highlights the cultural diversity between the visiting Indian-Americans and the native Indians.

Mr. and Mrs. Das are drawn to Mr. Kapasi, who is an interpreter to a Gujarati Doctor practicing in Orissa. Mrs. Das is guilt-ridden over the existence of the "Nagamithunas," a half-human and half-serpentine couple believed to be living in the sea. Mina's husband friend, a Punjabi,

seduces her during her weakness and gives birth to Bobby. Her husband is unaware of the secret, and she seeks relief.

Mr. Kapasi, unaware of the confession, looks stunned. When she sees her son's blood shed by the monkeys, she feels a sense of relief and guilt. The story highlights the universality of illicit sexual relationships, as it is not exclusive to American families or cultures. The story provides a brilliant analysis of a second-generation Indian immigrant family, the oldest institution of marriage, and the intersections of human relationships and honesty.

The next story *A Real Durwan* is about Boori Ma, a stairwell sweeper who deported to Calcutta and thrown out of the flat because of a theft. The people forget her honesty, her truthfulness. Her only fault was her garrulousness and she always boasted of her past and rich parents. The story is set in Bengal and it remains us of a poem by tagore "Purtan Bhrutuyu" (The Old Servent) although Boori Ma was not an idiot. Her services "come to resemble those of real durwan" (IM 73). The streets and places names of Calcutta are mentioned here and there in thi story of Boori Ma. 'College road', 'Circular road', 'Jodhpur park', Howrah Bridge' and realistic appeal to the story. The story is based on "search for a Real Durwan" (IM 82).

In *Sexy*, the theme of infidelity and secretive sex life is explored. The story revolves around a married man, Laxmi's cousin's husband, who falls in love with another woman, Miranda. The story highlights the consequences of such an affair, as the man, who was married, sat next to Miranda on a plane from Delhi to Montreal instead of flying home to his wife and son. Miranda, a young American woman, meets Dev, a Bengali man working in an investment bank. Dev's wife goes away for visiting her parents in India, and both Dev and Miranda co m ntinue their adulterous affairs. Miranda's friend Laxmi's cousin also falls in love with an English woman, half his age, Madhuri Dixit, an Indian actress. Despite the suffering Indian woman, she forgives him for the boy, but Laxmi is furious and threatens to shoot them both. So there are to adulterous incidents in the story.

Nirad C. Chaudhuri for example, writes in *The continent of Circe*:

The life, the mind, and the behavior of Indians are so strange for the people of the west that if these are described in ordinary English, the books would be Unintelligible to English – speaking readers. Most Indian writers solve this problem, not by choosing a genuine Indian subject and creating an adequate western idiom to express it, but by selecting wholly artificial themes which the western world takes to be Indian, and by dealing with them in the manner of contemporary western writers. To put it briefly, they try to see their country and society in the way Englishmen are Americans do and write about India in the jargon of the same masters. The result is an inefficient imitation of the novels about India written by Western novelists. (Iyengar).

The story ends with the son of Laxmi's cousin, Rohini, asking Miranda to wear a silver cocktail dress. Rohini, who has been with Miranda, tells her that she is "sexy" and that Dev had used the same word. Miranda realizes that her smartness and beauty are not the real cup of tea for Dev, and that love doesn't mean being sexy; it means being each other's' thoughts. Although Jhumpa Lahiri is rarely explicit in her opinions or comments, there is always an undertone of irony in her stories.

Mrs. Sen is a story about an American emigrant who works as a baby-sitter while her mother goes to work. The family is closely observed by an eleven-year-old American boy, Eliot, who is looked after by Mrs. Sen. Mrs. Sen's job is to buy fish and coke, which is a common practice in Calcutta. The boy is surprised to see the long blade Mrs. Sen uses for cutting vegetables and fish, which she brought from India. Mrs. Sen mentions that during big celebrations, her mother send word to neighborhood women to bring blades like this one, and they sit in a circle on the roof of their building, laughing and gossiping.

The story gradually exposes the American child to life in an Indian woman's kitchen. The story ends when Mrs. Sen dashes her car against a telephone pole, and Eliot is with her, although no one is badly hurt. Eliot's mother stops Eliot from visiting Mrs. Sen anymore. However, the poignant part of the story is the close relationship that develops between Mrs. Sen and Eliot. Mrs. Sen has no friends in America and her husband has no time for her. She tells Eliot how she feels lonely and her golden dreams of living in a foreign land vanish. Eliot's mother and American lady have no time to realize the delicate emotion that develops between an American child and an Indian woman who takes time to adopt herself in a foreign country.

The Blessed House is a story about Sanjeeb and Twinkle, who move to a new house in Connecticut where Sanjeeb works. Twinkle is working her master's thesis about an Irish poet, and Sanjeeb chose her over anyone else. Both are emigrants, with Sanjeeb having his parents in India and Twinkle in California. Twinkle's Indian connection was unusual to Douglas and Nora, who visited the new house on house warming day. The new house is blessed, as Twinkle finds a statue of Christ and Mother Mary and decorates the bedroom with Bible scenes. Sanjeeb, an executive in a firm, dislikes Twinkle's idea, viewing it as a cursed house. Sanjeeb sees the interest in antic monuments in his wife as a temporary way to highlight her as an Indian woman among the Americans. He follows Twinkle, keeping her silver face and feather hat safe.

Jhumpa Lahiri's "The Treatment of Bibi Haldar" is a poignant story about Bibi Haldar, a Bengali woman who suffers from a mysterious disease that exasperates her family members. Bibi lives with her cousin in a flat in Calcutta, where she works as a cosmetic shop owner. She is given a storage room on the roof, food, shelter, and enough cotton to replenish her wardrobe. Bibi's only obsession is to get a husband, which she never gets. She enjoys hearing about marriage details from other women and hopes that they will be present when she happens. However, Mr. and Mrs. Halder, who are inmates of the flat, do not care about this. They give an advertisement after being pestered by the inmates. Mrs. Halder fears Bibi is an evil woman and wants to get rid of her shadow to prevent harm to her child. She gives birth to a female child, and she suffers for five days. Haldar leaves the place with his wife and daughter, leaving Bibi alone with Rs.300 left with her. The story turns when the inmate finds out Bibi is pregnant. The search for the real culprit ends in futility, and she delivers a male child and takes care of a child. The story ends with Bibi being healed as much as she knows is possible.

"The Third and Final Continent" is the last story in the collection, moving from London to Boston. The story is of a Bengali man who graduates in commerce and goes from Calcutta to London and then travels with an old woman named Mrs. Croft. Mrs. Croft was proud of her country's accomplishments, especially after America landed on the moon. She was particular about rent payments and only allowed bachelors to stay in her rooms. This was surprising to Indian ears who came to America with the idea of an advanced society where permissiveness was the norm.

The narrator leaves her house and when his wife Mala appears from India, the new apartment goes to the work. The old lady is dead, and the narrator's son goes to college. The child, born in America of Indian Origin, looks askance at the sentimentality of his father, who is born as a naturalized citizen of American emigrant. However, the connection to India remains strong, making it hard to completely cut ties.

The story ends with the father rumination, stating that if he can survive on three continents, there is no obstacle he cannot conquer. He understands that his achievement is normal, but he is not alone in chasing opportunities far from home. He is often bewildered by each mile traveled, meal eaten, person he has known, and room slept.

Aruti Nayar in her article *An Interpreter of Exile* rightly observes that

... Lahiri negotiates the dilemma of the cultural spaces lying across the continents with a master's touch. Though endowed with a distinct universal appeal, her stories do bring out rather successfully predicaments of the Indians who trapeze between and across two traditions, one inherited and left behind, and the other encountered but not necessarily assimilated.

Jhumpa Lahiri's stories do document the character's trauma of displacement and the feeling of cultural nostalgia. But there is no will and malice against the host country and no clash between Indianness and Americanness unlike her fellow litterateurs. This does not deny that their stories are also documented by the exiled souls chained in the silent boundaries of space and time. Stories show that Jhumpa Lahiri has acquired in her first enterprise. There is no chronological or sequential development of stories. She has evolved her own style by changing the mode of narration from past to the present and again reversing it without being nostalgic. Her style is almost cinematic and gives a glimpse of the meaning of a story with the help of montage. One reading is not enough to understand any of her stories although her themes are not burdened with any serious thoughts. Nevertheless, they make a dent on the reader's consciousness.

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