

## BOOK REVIEW

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### **Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*: Problems of Transculturation**

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*Interpreter of Maladies*

New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1999

Price: \$ 7.80

Jhumpa Lahiri was born in 1967 in London, England. She spent her childhood in Rhodes Island. She graduated from Barnard College with Honours in English Literature and completed M.A. in Creative Writing and in Comparative Studies in Literature and the Arts. She has a Ph.D. on the Renaissance Studies. She worked as a teacher of Creative Writing at Boston University and the Rhodes Island School of Design. Her first published book, a collection of short stories namely *Interpreter of Maladies*, won the Pulitzer Prize in the year 2000 for fiction. She has also written a novel, *The Namesake*. She is living in New York now with her husband and son.

Houghton Mifflin Company first published *Interpreter of Maladies* in the USA in 1999. In India it was published by HarperCollins Publishers India in the same year. The book contains nine stories. Three of them have been set in India and other six in Boston, U.S.

*Interpreter of Maladies*, the debut collection of short stories of Jhumpa Lahiri, tells about the lives of the Indians living in America. She focuses on the people negotiating between the strict traditional cultures of their homeland and their adopted cultures of the new world. She tries to bring out the untold maladies of the self-claimed exiled people. Her portrayals reveal the problems with community, marital and extra-marital relationship, parent-child relationships and the morbid history of care and neglect.

Human relationship is very fragile. A good look at the life gives us the impression that any relationship may be at stake at any time. This is

the result of over-sensitivity of the people. The more people are civilized, the more they have become complicated. Lahiri, a young lady of thirty-eight knows it better. She knows about the world of the young people. In the story "A Temporary Matter," her portrayal of the young couple, Shukumar and Shoba is the representative of the modern youth. Their matrimonial relationship ends with the birth of the stillborn baby. They come to understand that the umbilical chord has been cut by the suppressed affliction, which, though implicit, can easily be understood by Shoba. Shukumar's paternal affection for the dead baby hits the dormant maternal feelings of Shoba that never surpass those of her husband. Her understanding of Shukumar's sobs for the dead baby enhances her decision to be separated, as she does not want to be the cause of anyone's affliction.

Lahiri's ability of multi-dimensional presentation is proved through her short story, "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine." Through the character of Mr. Pirzada, she brings out the fatherly concern for daughters living in a war-affected area. His concern becomes apparent with the hastiness of sitting in front of the television everyday to watch the news.

Lahiri has universalized human maladies in her short story, "Interpreter of Maladies." Here the relationship between Mr. and Mrs. Das has been portrayed in such a way that it gives us an impression that good relationship lies in keeping something secret from each other. Mrs. Das has kept the secret of the birth of her son, Bobby. The secret always torments her. Bobby has become ever tormenting for her. She wants redemption from the eternal affliction by confessing her sin to Mr. Kapasi, the interpreter.

Like many other writers of Indian heritage, Lahiri highlights her characters' longing for their native land. In the short story, "Mrs. Sen's," she portrays the character of a lady, Mrs. Sen, who is obsessed with the thought of going back to India. All of her activities have a native touch that always creates a barrier in her being an American. This common theme of 'rootlessness' is the keynote to most of her characters taken from the native land. Lahiri has never tried to forget her Indian identity. For this she goes back to India to find setting and characters for her stories. This yearning for seeking the identity proves her affinity for her native land.

The characters of the stories have been developed in such a way that they seem to be the introductory characters of a novel. They are with so many potentialities that they can easily be given a new shape with various dimensions. The readers will always have an unquenched desire to know more about them.

Lahiri has always tried to maintain a balance between her characters of the short stories. The cheating husbands of "Sexy" are balanced by the depiction of the unfaithful Mrs. Das of "Interpreter of Maladies." Mrs. Sen's severe homesickness and separation from US culture is contrasted with the adaptability of Lilia's mother in "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine" and Mala in "The Third and Final Continent."

Lahiri has portrayed both positive and negative pictures of the local people of Kolkata. This depiction is available in "A Real Durwan" and "The Treatment of Bibi Haldar."

Lahiri's tendency of playing with the words is obvious in her short stories. Her minute description of everything proves her acute power of observation. She has broken the traditional pattern of writing short stories in a plain way. She has knitted the paragraphs of her stories in the most complicated way. The structure of her stories reveals the uncertainty of life. It is quite impossible to know about the local people of Kolkata through some visits to the area. So though not perfectly portrayed, Lahiri's endeavour to portray the native characters is praiseworthy. Lahiri's short story book *Interpreter of Maladies* has the potentialities to be considered as a great work.