Bloom's Literature

Interpreter of Maladies

It is rare for a debut book, especially a short-story collection, to achieve international best-seller status and to win such major literary awards as the Pulitzer Prize and the PEN/Hemingway Award. Jhumpa Lahiri's Interpreter of Maladies achieved these distinctions. Consisting of nine stories, the collection features characters, mostly South Asian, whose lives are marked by cultural hybridity, migration, and increasing globalization. While some are newly arrived in America from India, others are second generation, some have returned, and still others have never left. Despite their geographical or cultural locations, all have ties to the subcontinent. These pieces have been honored for Lahiri's precise, evocative prose, her skilled use of sensuous details—especially foods, fabrics, sounds—and her depictions of the emotional complexities of love, family relationships, and immigration.

Of Bengali descent, Lahiri was born in London in 1967 but immigrated to the United States when she was three and was raised primarily in Kingston, Rhode Island. She describes frequent family trips to Calcutta, India, while she was growing up but also says she identifies strongly with her Bengali heritage because she grew up in her parents' household: "I feel Indian not because of the time I spent in India or because of my genetic composition but rather because of my parents' steadfast presence in my life" ("My Two Lives"). She attended Barnard College, majoring in English, then earned three master's degrees and a Ph.D. in Renaissance studies from Boston University. She lives in New York City with her husband, journalist Alberto Vourvoulias-Bush, with whom she has two children.


Awareness of aspects of South Asian history heightens appreciation for nuances in Lahiri's writing. Contemporary India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh came under the control of the British East India Company, and then the British crown, in the eighteenth century. As with any such situation of colonization, the presence of the British led to clashes, blendings, and irrevocable changes to both British and South Asian cultures. In 1947, after years of struggles led by such figures as Mahandas Gandhi, the area was declared independent of Great Britain. At the same time partition occurred, dividing the land into two countries: India, where the primary religion is Hindu; and Pakistan, which is primarily Muslim. Pakistan was geographically divided, however, into west and east, with the much larger area of India between its two parts. In 1971 Pakistan experienced a civil war that led to East Pakistan (which had originally been called East Bengal) becoming the separate country of Bangladesh. In Lahiri's story "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine" Mr. Pirzada is a Pakistani Muslim while Lilia's family is Indian and, most likely, Hindu. Lilia's parents search phone directories looking for names familiar to their part of the world and issue dinner invitations to those they find, regardless of religion despite the fact that for many, in their respective home countries, "the idea of eating in the other's company was still unthinkable." Together they watch news reports of Pakistan at civil war on Lilia's family's television and later witness their two countries going to war against one another.

While many contemporary American prose writers are acclaimed for the lyricism and complexity of their prose styles—some on the far side of the Postmodernist spectrum even being noted for convoluted writing—Lahiri's prose is both plain and yet simultaneously rich and evocative. She explained to interviewer Isaac Chotiner, "I like it to be plain. It appeals to me more. There's form and there's function and I have never been a fan of just form." Many critics have noted that the significances of her stories often arise more from key images than from plot. Small but powerful gestures speak volumes: in "Sexy" the cocktail dress that Miranda buys because she thinks it is the sort of clothing a mistress should have will not stay on its hanger, suggesting something is wrong with adultery. When the title character of "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine," who is visiting the United States on an academic fellowship while his family remains at home in Pakistan, hears that India is threatening to go to war with Pakistan, his shock is evoked when his hand slips and he cuts a huge gash across the jack-o'-lantern he has offered to carve. In "A Temporary Matter" Shoba comes in from work, kicks off her tennis shoes, and leaves them and her bag in a heap on the floor, signaling she no longer cares about this space she shares with her husband. Lahiri reveals the complicated nature of cultural identity through the use of irony. For instance, ironies abound in the title story, as the Indian American couple with three children visit the land of their parents but epitomize "ugly Americans"; they show no sensitivity to the landscape or the history of the country.
they are touring, to the people they meet, nor even among themselves. And in "Sexy" Miranda, who is American, hears her Indian friend Laxmi describe the pain her cousin feels because the cousin's husband is having an affair; yet, she does not seem to recognize that she could be causing the same pain to her married boyfriend's family. In another irony, while she acts selfishly and blindly in having the affair, she finds her horizons expanded by her explorations of her lover's Indian culture.

In some ways the title (of the collection and of its third story) acts as a kind of metaphor for what Lahiri as novelist is performing: she interprets the "maladies" of her characters, translating for readers multiple perspectives to highlight the complexity of cultural communication and hybridity. First- and second-generation Indian Americans interact with one another and their relatives in India, an Anglo American woman has an affair with a Bengali man, and two stories about Indian women are set in India. Lahiri also presents perspectives from both genders; her protagonists are sometimes male and sometimes female; sometimes happy in an arranged marriage and sometimes not; sometimes happy in a marriage of choice and sometimes not. Noelle Brada-Williams argues that these multiple perspectives are set in a narrative dialogue of care and neglect, with examples of each playing off the other within and between stories. For instance, the neglect of the marriage in the first story, "A Temporary Matter," is contrasted with the unnamed narrator's courtesy and care first for the elderly Mrs. Croft, and then for his new wife. Her perception spans generations, as well; children play key roles in three stories, while the final story includes a woman who is 103.

Further Information


Primary Works


Interview in which Lahiri discusses her interest in the position of immigrants and their children, her own reading interests, and her views on criticism and reviewers.


Interview in which Lahiri discusses her family and particularly "Mrs. Sen's" and "The Third and Final Continent."


Interview in which Lahiri discusses her parents' inability to feel "American" despite raising a family in the United States and coming to think of it as their home; the ways she felt "different" growing up, both internally and externally; and her own "halfway feeling" about identifying as American.

Criticism


Discusses "Mrs. Sen's," "This Blessed House," and "The Third and Final Continent," illustrating how characters' relationships to small details—a cutting knife, a Jesus trivet, the word "splendid"—signify cultural identity, individual identity, and human connection or its lack.

Through strong close readings, points to dialogues between the stories in the collection to argue that they form a short-story cycle not through the more common unity of setting or recurring characters but through pattern and motif, "including the recurring themes of the barriers to and opportunities for human communication; community … and the dichotomy of care and neglect."


Argues that Lahiri's fiction does not fit into the categories of postcolonial, Asian American, or American literature because it goes beyond those forms in offering recognitions of growth and suggesting that the past can, in fact, be learned from and then moved beyond or that, like Mr. Pirzada, one can go home again.


Examines the use of a first-person-plural female narrator, arguing it is a kind of "ghost interpreter–translator of maladies" that cures Bibi Haldar.


Focusing primarily on "This Blessed House" but with references to others, Kuortti examines the engagement with translation and spaces of hybridity in Lahiri's writing.


Discusses how the characters, plot, and setting of a tourist excursion in India of "Interpreter of Maladies" rewrite E. M. Forster's A Passage to India (1924) to place the cause of human disconnection and misunderstanding in sources other than geography and race.


Brief but helpful close reading of the details in "Mrs. Sen's" that speak to the character's struggles with her new life as a Bengali American.


Traces the importance of food and food preparation in "A Temporary Matter," "Mrs. Sen's," and "This Blessed House," illustrating the ways in which choices about food and food preparation represent assertions of identity and subjectivity.

Bonnie Zare, "Evolving Masculinities in Recent Stories by South Asian American Women," Journal of Commonwealth
Argues that Lahiri and Meera Nair differ from other contemporary South Asian American women writers in depicting male protagonists and in showing those characters working through "internalized colonialist, consumerist and patriarchal norms"; discusses "Interpreter of Maladies" and "This Blessed House."

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