Bloom's Literature

Interpreter of Maladies

Few literary debuts experience the immediate success that Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* enjoyed on its release in 1999. Winner of that year's Pulitzer Prize in literature, Lahiri's short story cycle about Indian and Indian-American life captured the attention of the international literary public, also winning the PEN/Hemingway Award and the *New Yorker*'s Best Debut of the Year Award. Though now a staple in literary anthologies and college classrooms, the book was distinguished by humble beginnings; Lahiri explains how, immediately after graduating from college, she had access to a personal computer for the first time, an opportunity that allowed her to come to work early and stay late in order to write (Lahiri "Interview"). She confesses her dissatisfaction with much of her early work but recalls her continued commitment to writing until her words pleased her, until they sounded good, often writing only a page or two at a time. Because writing lengthier text appeared a daunting task for the young writer, the short story became her primary vehicle, yet it is hard to imagine that these fitful starts could result in the artful and seamless prose of *Interpreter of Maladies*.

Lahiri deftly interweaves several recurring themes in the collection, including the value of individuals and families sharing a meal as an act of unity, or community. Similarly, the characters use food to reconnect with their homeland. Relationships between Indian Americans in varying stages of assimilation, as well as the detailed struggles and silences that occur in and between both men and women are also explored, and skillfully exploited as tensions and motive forces in Lahiri's tight plotting.

The first story in the cycle, "A Temporary Matter," is emblematic. The narrator, Shukumar, modestly introduces us to himself and his wife. Recently married, the two are dealing with a fresh tragedy in their young lives together, in the form of a stillborn baby. Until now, Shoba has historically invested herself in shopping and preparing food: "the pantry was always stocked with extra bottles of olive and corn oil, depending on whether they were cooking Italian or Indian. There were endless boxes of pasta in all shapes and colors, zippered sacks of basmati rice, whole sides of lambs and goats from the Muslim butchers and Haymarket, chopped up and frozen in endless plastic bags. Every other Saturday they wound through the maze of stalls Shukumar eventually knew by heart" (7). They shop together and entertain together frequently: "When friends dropped by, Shoba would throw together meals that appeared to have taken half a day to prepare…" (7). After Shoba loses the baby, Shukumar takes over preparing the meals, and a temporary loss of electricity in their apartment provides the serendipitous opportunity for healing, as they are forced to eat Shukumar's hot meals by candlelight, whose flame helps to mend the frosty silences characterizing their now strained relationship.

Similarly, in the tale "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine," Lahiri dwells on the importance of the collective meals between Mr. Pirzada and 10-year-old Lilia's family; simple but evocative meals like "lentils with fried onions, green beans with coconut, fish cooked with raisins in yogurt sauce" (30). Lilia's family looks up Indian names in the local phone book, and subsequently invites one Mr. Pirzada over for "long leisurely meals" (34). Reviewer Charles Taylor writes that "food in these stories is a talisman, a reassuring bit of the homeland to cling to" (Taylor). The story of their evolving friendship with Mr. Pirzada, a temporary visitor to their American university during the war in Pakistan in 1971, takes place around the meals they share, and is told from Lilia's point of view, in a fresh perspective on the arbitrary idea of "nation."

In "Mrs. Sen's," the transplanted Mrs. Sen is committed to maintaining a meal of fresh fish once a day in America, as she had always done in India. Eleven-year-old Eliot, another child narrator in the collection, stays with Mrs. Sen daily after school and enjoys a snack while watching her chop vegetables and spices for her dinner: "With Eliot's help the newspapers were crushed with all the peels and seeds and skins inside them. 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" (117). As Mrs. Sen attempts to learn the customs of America, Mr. Sen presses on her the importance of her learning to drive, and frequently encourages her to try. Mrs. Sen resists, yet is motivated to drive once a day to obtain fresh fish, homesick for her native land: "In Calcutta people ate fish first thing in the morning, last thing before bed, as a snack after school if they were lucky. It was available in any market, at any hour, from dawn to midnight" (124). Mrs. Sen's reluctance to drive and to embrace American customs, as well as her dependence on Mr. Sen as her only relative and friend illuminates another of Lahiri's themes in this collection: the struggle for Indians to balance both Indian and American customs and cultures while living in America.
In “This Blessed House,” Twinkle and Sanjeev argue over the religious objects found in their recently purchased New England home. As a Hindu, Sanjeev finds the statues of Christ irrelevant and even slightly offensive. Twinkle, on the other hand, appears more at home in American culture, and feels less threatened by the "biblical stickers"(145), "white porcelain effigy of Christ" (136), and the "larger-than-life-sized watercolor poster of Christ, weeping translucent tears the size of peanut shells and sporting a crown of thorns," tucked neatly behind the radiator in the guest bedroom (139). The story of their arranged marriage and ex post facto evolution as a couple is delicately interwoven with Twinkle's devotion to the religious artifacts and Sanjeev's quest to accept her idiosyncrasies as his wife and partner. And the delicate, luminous, almost Austenian architecture of the tale is a model both of Lahiri's thematic palette and of her great skill in its application.

Further Information


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