



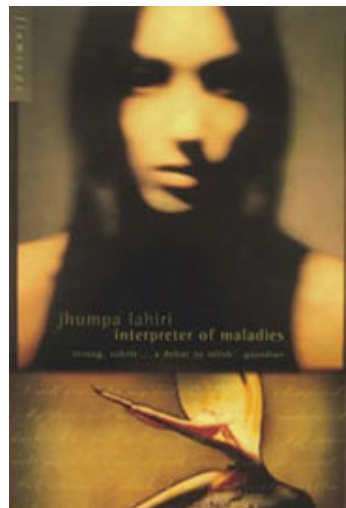
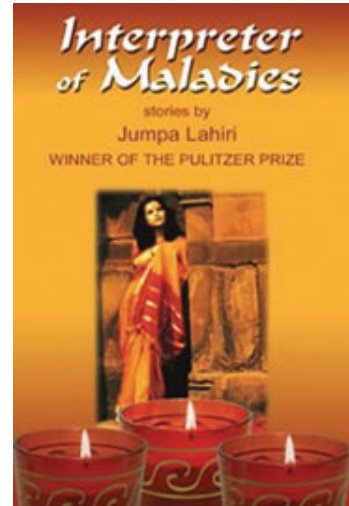
Interpreter of Maladies by Jhumpa Lahiri

Themes of Marriage and Tradition

The stories in Jhumpa Lahiri's collection, *Interpreter of Maladies*, differ in approach and perspective while remaining tied to the same themes and ideas. Each of the stories involves people of Indian descent, albeit in a variety of roles and circumstances. Some of the characters are living in India and some are Indian immigrants living in the United States. Most, however, are, like Lahiri herself, foreign-born children of Indian immigrants, torn between being Indian and being American, and it is this conflict which shapes most of the stories. The title story "Interpreter of Maladies" gives us an American-born Indian family on vacation in India, strangers to their own culture and heritage. It is fitting that this is the tale after which Lahiri titles her collection, because it highlights so clearly the sense of distance from their Indian heritage that is a common thread among so many of the characters in this collection.

Born in London, Jhumpa Lahiri grew up primarily in Rhode Island, where her family moved when she was a child. She attended Barnard College, where she received a Bachelor's degree in English, as well as Boston University, where she earned Master's degrees in English, Creative Writing, and Comparative Literature and the Arts, and a doctorate in Renaissance Studies (Large, Quinn). Besides *Interpreter of Maladies*, she has also published a novel, *The Namesake*.

The two themes which arise most frequently in *Interpreter of Maladies* are marriage and the relationship that the Indian characters have with their Indian ancestry. These issues, in one form or another, come in nearly every story in the collection. The marriages we see in each of the stories have distinct qualities. In "A Temporary Matter," we see the final days of Shoba and Shukumar's marriage, which has been disintegrating since Shoba gave birth to their stillborn child. In "Sexy," the main character, a white woman named Miranda, has an affair with married man from India named Dev, while her Indian co-worker spends time on the phone at work, consoling her cousin in India whose husband has left her for a white woman.



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Infidelity also arises in more ways than one in “Interpreter of Maladies.” In this story, Mr. and Mrs. Das, an American-born Indian couple, are on vacation in India with their two children, Ronny and Bobby. Much of the story involves the attraction that Mr. Kapasi, their tour guide, has toward Mrs. Das. Although no actual infidelity takes place between them, Mr. Kapasi’s conversation with Mrs. Das does result in her revealing to him that Mr. Das is not the father of one of their children, a fact that Mrs. Das says she has never before revealed to anyone.

Not all of the marriages in *Interpreter of Maladies* are falling apart. In “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine,” the story revolves around Mr. Pirzada’s longing to find his wife and family who he fears may be dead in Pakistan. The final story in the collection, “The Third and Final Continent,” is the story of an Indian man who settles in Boston after going to college in England. Before traveling to the United States, he returns briefly to India to marry a woman he has never met in an arranged marriage. He waits six weeks for her in Boston, and then describes the awkwardness of their relationship once she arrives and they begin to live together. On the final page of the story, however, looking back many years later, he tells us he is amazed “that there was ever a time that [he and his wife] were strangers” (Lahiri 197).

The ending of that final story provides a link between the themes of marriage and the characters’ relationships with India. This final story is the only one in which arranged marriage is mentioned, and it is also the only story that shows us such a happy result in a marriage. We do not know whether any of the other marriages were arranged, but the ones involving the younger, American-born characters do not seem to be. The narrator and his wife embrace life in America, but also embrace their Indian heritage more fully than most of the book’s other characters, suggesting to us the source of their happiness and success. It is fitting that Lahiri leaves us here at the end of the book, because the success of the narrator’s travels across three continents gives us an example of a positive outcome of taking the risk of moving to a new country. The narrator uses this as a projection of hope for the future of his son, about whom he writes: “Whenever he is discouraged, I tell him that if I can survive on three continents, then there is no obstacle he cannot conquer” (197-8).



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Throughout the tales in *Interpreter of Maladies*, Lahiri shows us characters that are in conflict, with themselves and with each other. Some of the stories have happy endings, some do not. We find characters like Mr. and Mrs. Das who are so distant from their Indian heritage that they need a tour guide, and we find Mrs. Sen, who sits on her floor every day, chopping vegetables in the same way she did in India, with the same knife she used in India. Love and tradition are always at the heart of the story, and the characters who find happiness are always those who can embrace their present circumstance while at the same time never forget their Indian roots.

Works Cited

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