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**EXPERIENCE AND DILEMMA IN  
INTERPRETER OF MALADIES**

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Jhumpa Lahiri was born in the UK and then immigrated to the US; her Indian heritage is the basis of many of her short stories. She deals with the questions of identity, alienation and the plight of the culturally displaced. Her stories in *Interpreter of Maladies* show the estrangement and isolation that affect the first-generation immigrants and often the second-generation ones. Albeit, it is not the only concern of the short story collection, but it is one of the most important one.

Jhumpa Lahiri is a second generation immigrant in the US. She is also twice removed from her native place as she was born in the UK and then emigrated to the US. While she was growing up, she felt that she belonged nowhere, though she would live in two places.

*The psychological dislocation that immigrants often suffer can cause their children to feel a similar sense of alienation. Although Lahiri's parents ultimately adjusted to living in America, they must have frequently longed for their mother country, giving Lahiri the opportunity to observe, at first hand, the often painful adjustment of immigrants to life in an adopted country. Her narratives weave together not only the stories of immigrants, but also those of their children, who feel that they belong neither in one place nor another.<sup>1</sup>*

Jhumpa Lahiri creates an imaginary landscape, but her acute powers of observation make sure that the reader feels the complete reality of the situation through the believability of her characters. These characters bring out the themes which many immigrants face.

Immigration is the central theme of the short story, *The Third and Final Continent*, in the short-story collection of *Interpreter of Maladies*. In the story, in 1964, an Indian man leaves his native country to sail to London. He studies at the London School of Economics, sharing an apartment with a group of other expatriate Bengalis. Five years later, at age of thirty six, the man gets a job offered from a library at MIT. Around the same time, his marriage was arranged so he flies first to his wedding in Kolkata and then onwards to Boston. He reads a guidebook warning that America is less friendly than Britain. On the plane he learns that two men have landed on the moon. He studies the differences and expectations and finds a cheap room at the YMCA in Central Square for his first weeks in the country.

The first meal he has in America is a bowl of cornflakes. He is on a budget, resolving to spend little money until his wife arrives, but the noise of Massachusetts Avenue outside his window is too much to bear. He spends each day drinking tea out of a newly purchased thermos, reading the Boston Globe cover to cover and then sleeping fitfully in his room. He comes across an ad for a room for rent and calls. He is told the room is only rented to boys from Harvard or Tech (MIT). He makes an appointment for the following day.

He finds the house with the room for rent on a pretty, tree-lined street. It would be the first detached house he lived in, and the first home without Indians. The woman who owns the house is the quite old Mrs. Croft. She is dressed as if she lived in the turn of the century. They talk of the moon landing and Mrs. Croft demands that the man call it "splendid." The man is baffled, but clearly she is impressed that he is punctual, that he declares the event "splendid," and that he does indeed work for MIT. He moves in. He is warned against "no lady visitors."<sup>2</sup>

He thinks about his wife Mala in Calcutta awaiting her green card. After their wedding, she wept every night thinking of her family only five miles away. He reflects on the death of his mother, which happened in the same bed, years before. She had gone crazy after the death of her husband and it fell to the narrator to take care of her and light her funeral pyre.

When the narrator moves in, he finds Mrs. Croft sitting on the piano bench. She slaps the seat next to her, imploring him to sit down. This becomes a routine, the pair sitting together for ten minutes a day and declaring the moon walk splendid. He does not have the heart to tell her that there is no longer a flag on the moon that the astronauts took it with them when they flew back to earth. When rent is due, instead of putting it on the ledge above the piano as requested, he hands the envelope stuffed with dollar bills to Mrs. Croft. She is confused and doesn't take it at first. That night, when he returns from work, she is still holding the envelope. They do not talk about the moon walk. She tells him that what he had done was very kind.

Mrs. Croft's daughter Helen, dressed in modern clothes, comes to visit and to bring her mother food. Helen tours the narrator's room and they

chat. She says he is the first boarder her mother has called a gentleman. Mrs. Croft yells for them to come downstairs and they fear the worst. But Mrs. Croft chides them for the indecency of a man and woman sharing a room without a chaperone. The narrator helps Helen carry the groceries to the kitchen. The narrator is shocked to learn that Mrs. Croft is one hundred three years old. The piano, Helen explains, was the source of income when Mrs. Croft was widowed. The narrator thinks of his own mother, destroyed by her widowhood.

Six weeks are spent with the narrator worrying about Mrs. Croft's health, but, ultimately, he has no obligation to her. He prepares for his wife's arrival from Calcutta, anticipating it as if simply another season. He sees an Indian woman walking in Cambridge, an overcoat fastened over a sari. A dog tugs at the free end of her sari and the narrator thinks of Mala and the protection she will need in her new home. He moves into a furnished apartment found through the housing office at MIT and says goodbye to Mrs. Croft without ceremony. Compared to the century she has lived, his six weeks with her are a blink of an eye.

The narrator meets Mala at the airport, also without fanfare. He speaks to her in Bengali – the first time in America – and he takes her home. She presents him with two blue sweaters she has made him, but they fit poorly. It takes time for him to get used to having someone there, anticipating his needs. He and Mala are like strangers. He reluctantly gives her a few dollars, thinking only that it is a duty and, when he returns, he finds more kitchen tools and a tablecloth. Mala is making the apartment their home. Still, they talk little.

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 travelling 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 were strangers".<sup>3</sup>

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".<sup>4</sup>

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.

#### References

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