CHAPTER 6

JHUMPA LAHIRI

Jhumpa Lahiri's debut book, *Interpreter of Maladies*, is a collection of short-stories, three of which the *New York* has earlier published. On April 10, 2000, she was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for fiction, the first person of South Asian Origin to win an individual prize. The official citation reads:

"For distinguished fiction by an American author, preferably dealing with American life, $5,000. Awarded to "Interpreter of Maladies" by Jhumpa Lahiri (Mariner Books/Houghton Mifflin Company). Also nominated as finalists in this category were "Waiting" by Ha Jin (Pantheon Books), and "Close Range: Wyoming Stories" by Annie Proulx." (Scribner)

Previous winners of the Pulitzer for fiction include such quintessentially American authors as John Steinbeck, Ernest Hemingway, Saul Bellow, William Faulkner, Henry Waulk, John Updike, Norman Mailer and Pearl S. Buck. Thus, all of a sudden Jhumpa Lahiri became a star in the literary field and her short stories drew attention worldwide. Reviewing *Interpreter of Maladies* in The New York Times, Pulitzer winner Michiko Kakutani wrote "Ms. Lahiri chronicles her characters' lives with both objectivity and compassion while charting the emotional temperature of their lives with tactile precision. She is a writer of uncommon elegance and poise, and with *Interpreter of Maladies* she has made a precocious debut."
The Pulitzer Prize winning volume of short stories, *Interpreter of Maladies* by Jhumpa Lahiri, despite the clear insignia of Indianness is universally relevant. The loneliness, a deep sense of remorse and emotional isolation that some of her fictional characters go through, are common enough the world over. The individuals of different countries and cultures who for various reasons are forced to live away from their own country go through trying phases. Whether she suggested a cure or not, Mrs. Lahiri’s endeavor to interpret the maladies of the mind that people suffer from and the unique manner in which she makes them realize their own flaws, certainly merit the prize and the prestige she won with her maiden volume of short fiction. With a remarkable insight she delves deep into the psychological depths of her characters and reveals their inner world by a fascinating yet deceptively simple style. We come across more reality than fancy in her fiction. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that her interpretation of the maladies itself acts like a potent medicine. Yet they are interesting and often make humorous studies of life.

Jhumpa Lahiri, like Bharati Mukherjee, Uma Parameswaran and Mena Abhullah may be regarded as a significant short story writer of Indian Diaspora who has enriched the corpus of International writing in English. *Interpreter of Maladies*, a collection of short stories is her first creative work. It has received tremendous response and made a mark on the contemporary literary scene. The first edition of her book, published by Harper Collins, was sold out in a
The New Yorker upholds her as “one of the 20 best writers under the age of 40.” New York Times finds in her “a wonderfully distinctive new voice” and “a writer of uncommon elegance and poise.” Los Angeles Times Book Review praises her for “delicate yet assured” touch, “leaving no room for flubbed notes or forced epiphanies.” Her story collection is called by Newsday as “a stunning literary debut.” Her work exemplifies the role that Diaspora plays in shaping an artist’s imagination. Her anthology has an interesting sub-title “stories from Bengal, Boston and Beyond.” Her range is really wide. Spanning three continents, moving effortlessly from Boston to London, to Calcutta, and even Dhaka, her stories tell us about the lives of Indian immigrants, of people navigating between the strict traditions they have inherited and the baffling New World they encounter everyday.

But there is another side of the coin too, there is no dearth ever of a few carping critics. For instance, for Ragini Ramchandra, Lahiri’s “experience is awfully limited and one is haunted by a sense of absence- the absence of depth.” She is accusing the Pulitzer Prize Committee for selecting her for the prestigious award which “might have belonged elsewhere ... possibly to someone with years of toil, tears, sweat and blood.” In fact, she hardly has any praise for the artistic merits of Lahiri; rather, she finds neither “the idiom nor the experience” in her. Further, she is appalled by her “utter artificiality”,

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theme and weird atmosphere.”

It may be observed that while criticism from the west highly applauds the literary merits of Lahiri, those from the east share mixed responses after the careful and critical analysis of the stories in her collection Interpreter of Maladies. According to Prof. Pashupati Jha:

“... Biculturalism and conflicting mind sets contribute to searing strain, even if temporarily, in the lives of her major characters. These conflicts may be within the confines of a couple’s life in their own house or may spread out to two different cultures that have not gone through the process of acculturation. Sometimes, it also spills over affecting a particular society inhabited by people with contrasting attitudes. Thus, all the stories in the collection finally boil down to the maladies of maladjustment.”

The first story of the collection, A temporary Matter depicts the disturbing early years in the conjugal life of Shoba and Shukumar, born of the Indian parents but settled down in the U.S.A. Shukumar is an academic who reluctantly has to go outside for a conference when Shoba is expecting a baby. When he returns back, he is stunned by the news of the birth of stillborn baby, symbolically signifying the stillness that has crept in their own relationship. According to Rashmi Gaur:
A Temporary Matter illustrates on the one hand the fact that New England marriage can be treated as a temporary matter and on the other the assertion of the validity of a new beginning in life. The style is simple, shorn of any superfluity which makes the underlying pathos and the dim hope of salvation towards the ends all the more poignant.¹¹

The story depicts Shukumar and Shoba trying to avoid each other, as after the dearth of their premature child they are facing an inner crisis and are not in a situation to communicate their feelings to each other. Shoba is not able to forget the absence of her husband at the time of the delivery of her still born child. For her, the arrival of the child was a symbol of the fruition of her love for Shukumar, but its death marks the death of her love and sensitivity for life in general. Shukumar broods on how he and Shoba “had become experts at avoiding each other in their three bedroom house, spending as much time on separate floors as possible. He thought of how he no longer looked forward to weekends, when she sat for hours on the sofa with her coloured pencil and her files, so that he feared that putting on a record in his own house might be rude. He thought of how long it had been since she looked into his eyes and smiled, or whispered his name on those rare occasions they still reached for each other’s bodies before sleeping.”¹² Shukumar’s and Shoba’s reactions to the personal tragedy of child-loss are different, though equally intense. Shukumar wants to stay in the house, seeking consolation in his inertia, putting off any movement to go out, “to get the mail, or to buy fruit or
soothed him, and partly because it was a place Shoba avoided.” (p.8) Shoba, on the other hand, forces a solitary aloofness on herself her deliberate staying out, taking on additional projects, shirking from any emotional intimacy are part of a defense mechanism, which she has developed around her, to enable herself to bury the loss beneath the grave of her aloof silence.

To the Indian psyche, marriage is not primarily a sexual partnership, it is, as Bertrand Russell puts it, an “undertaking to cooperate in the procreation and rearing of children.”¹³ A child cements the bond of marriage – without a child marriage is considered banal and incomplete. The loss of the child turns Shoba into a mechanized automation. The systematic care and affection with which she had created a home for the two of them, cooking chutneys on Sundays, “stirring boiling pots of tomatoes and prunes”, (p.7) writing meticulous on her cookbooks and dating the recipes, has now dried within her. Engrossed in her misery, she overlooks the fact that Shukumar, too, has to tread though his own private hell – still he tries to create a semblance of home for Shoba by cooking food every evening almost religiously. Cooking is the only activity which links him to everyday normalcy and to Shoba, imparting him the satisfaction that he is doing something productive, because if “it
The situation changes when the electricity department announces a power cut for five days, forcing the intimacy of darkness on them. During these power cuts, Shukumar and Shoba start telling each other something they had never shared before. Their confessions do not communicate their real emotion, but still break the ice. Shoba’s revelation, on the last day of the power cut, of her plan for living separately shocks Shukumar. In order to hurt Shoba, he deliberately reveals the fact that their child was a male and he had held it close to his heart. Somehow this revelation brings them together in a flood of tears underlining the fact that cultural roots cannot be severed so easily. Their reunion is symbolized by the Bradford couple walking arm in arm on the road. Kindling of birthday candles is also symbolic, as it conveys the message of dispelling the darkness which something surrounds us temporarily. The darkness of pessimistic situation can be dispelled by going back to those memories which have positive values and associations for us. The simple narrative technique of the story charms the reader.

The second story, *When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine* has the Indo-Pak war as the backdrop. Mr. Pirzada came to Boston on a grant from the Government of Pakistan to study the foliage in New England. He came from Decca where he was a lecturer in Botany at the University.
He had a wife of twenty years and seven daughters between the ages of six and sixteen.

Mr. Pirzada was always worried about the incidents in Dacca. “In March, Dacca had been invaded, torched and shelled by the Pakistani army. Teachers were dragged onto streets and shot, women dragged into barracks and raped.” (p.23)

Lilia is the narrator in the story who says, “A glass for the Indian man.” (p.25) She is immediately corrected by her father. Mr. Pirzada is no longer considered Indian.

The partition is described thus: “like a pie we were sliced up. Hindus here and Muslims there.” Little Lilia did not understand anything as Mr. Pirzada and her parents spoke the same language. Lilia’s father told her that Mr. Pirzada was Bengali, but he was a Muslim. That was the reason why he lived in East Pakistan. A map was shown to Lilia. She was told by her father about the current situation in East Pakistan. Lilia nodded without understanding a word.

Lilia’s curious eyes noticed the act of Mr. Pirzada, which he used to do before dining. :

Before eating Mr. Pirzada always did a curious thing. He took out a plain silver watch without a band, which he kept in his breast pocket, held it briefly to one of his tufted ears, and wound it with three swift flicks of his thumb and forefinger. Unlike the watch on his wrist, the pocket watch, he had explained to me, was set to the local time in Dacca, eleven hours ahead. For the duration of the meal the watch
rested on his folded paper napkin on the coffee table. He never seemed to consult it.(p.30)

Lilia watched Mr. Pirzada very carefully when she learnt that he was not an Indian. She carefully looked at the pocket watch that night: "Life I realized was being lived in Dacca first." Lila had a clear picture before her now. It was morning in Dacca, Mr. Pirzada's daughters getting up from their sleep one by one. Lila thought that their meals, their action were "only a shadow of what had already happened there." She at one time wondered "what would happen if suddenly his seven daughters were to appear on television, smiling and waving and blowing kisses to Mr. Pirzada from a balcony. I imagined how relieved he would be. But this never happened."(p.31)

Mr. Pirzada finally reunited with his family in Dacca. Lila had no memory of his last visit. Her father drove Mr. Pirzada to the airport one afternoon when she was at school. They did not hear anything from him for a long time. The only missing things at the dinner time were Mr. Pirzada and his extra watch. Several months later he informed the family in Boston that he was happy with his wife and children, living in estate belonging to Mr. Pirzada's wife's grand parents in the mountains of Shillong. Lila felt Mr. Pirzada's absence on that day. "It was only then .... that I knew what it meant to miss someone who was so many miles and hours away."(p.42)

Mr. Pirzada's friendly relations with an Indian Bengali family in Boston are narrated in the story. The characters in the story literally live
in two different worlds. Though Mr. Pirzada lived in Boston with an Indian Bengali family, he always remembered his own family in Dacca. He kept a watch ready in his pocket, which was set to the local time in Dacca. The social background of Mr. Pirzada is totally different from the Bengali family. Still the Bengali family open heartedly supports Mr. Pirzada till he flew back to his three storey home in Dacca. The story’s main focus is the relationship of the two different families. Mr. Pirzada narrated in his letter that his seven daughters were a bit taller, but otherwise they were the same, and he still could not keep their names in order. The good news of Mr. Pirzada’s family reunion made Lila’s mother happy, who prepared a special dinner that evening.

The title story *Interpreter of Maladies* is a powerful sketch of the inseparable loneliness of human beings done with superb strokes and without any maudlin sentimentality. Lahiri herself writes about it, “When I was putting the collection together, I knew from the beginning that this had to be the title story, for I think it best expresses, thematically the predicament at the heart of the book – the dilemma, the difficulty, and often the impossibility of communicating emotional pain and affection to other, as well as expressing it to ourselves.”\(^{14}\) According to Prof. Rashmi Gaur, “The title itself is suggestive of the need to communicate to others the pain of abnormal loneliness and imprisoned emotion. The thematic denouement is also clear in order to overcome one’s own self.”\(^{15}\) But on the other hand Prof. Pashupati Jha feels differently. According to him, “culture clash
becomes the crux of the matter in the title story.""16 In fact, Lahiri brilliantly shows the conflict between the first generation Indian-American couple from New Jersey, Mr. and Mrs. Das and their children, Tina, Ronny and Bobby, who have never visited India, and Mr. Kapasi, an old fashioned Indian tourist guide. "Lahiri piles them together into a bulky white Ambassador car on one hot day in Konark in Orrisa before shattering their tenuous bonds into smithereens."17 That the Das couple is mismatched is clear at the outset itself. Even the taxi driver, Mr. Kapasi, notes their casual attitude towards their children: "Mr. and Mrs. Das behaved like an older brother and sister, not parent. It seemed that they were in charge of the children only for the day, it was hard to believe they were regularly responsible for anything other than themselves."(p.49) In addition, while Mr. Das seems to be more attached to India, Mrs. Das is indifferent in her attitude towards this country. Her hostility arises mostly because of the hot climate here: "I told you to get a car with air conditioning", Mrs. Das continued. "Why do this just to save a few stupid rupees. What are you saving us, fifty cents?"(p.49) In this manner the mental conflict runs here on two levels - one, in the personal relationship of Mr. and Mrs. Das and the other, in the too brief embryonic emotional exchange between Mr. Kapasi and Mrs. Das.

The self absorbed Mrs. Das stops polishing her nails and removes her sun glasses the moment she hears Mr. Kapasi’s part time job as an interpreter of maladies. He explains the symptoms of Gujarati patients to a local doctor
who does not know that language. So far, none has taken his profession seriously. His own wife looks down upon this job and when other women ask her, she tells them that he is a doctor's assistant. Mr. Das too is quite unimpressed by Mr. Kapasi's profession, he rather likes his job of a guide since he himself has to bring his students periodically to museum and explain things to them. Only Mrs. Das finds this job of interpreting maladies so romantic: "She did not behave in a romantic way toward her husband, and yet she had used the word to describe him.... Her sudden interest in him, an interest she did not express in either her husband or her children was mildly intoxicating." (p.53)

Mr. Kapasi, so far living a drab life, suddenly becomes lively and yields to the urge to look back at the rearview mirror to get a complete view of the charming face of Mrs. Das. Subsequently, Mrs. Das, so intrigued by this job of an interpreter, asks many questions related to that and finally concludes that such patients are very dependent on him and hence he is more important for them than the doctor himself. After all, the doctor's remedy depends on the accuracy of his interpretation. This is news for Mr. Kapasi himself:

Mr. Kapasi had never thought of his job in such complimentary terms. To him it was a thankless occupation. He found nothing noble in interpreting people's maladies, assiduously translating the symptoms of so many swollen bones, countless cramps of bellies and bowels, spots on people's palms that changed colour, shape, or size. (p.51)
sustained by her invitation to come to the same dining table while having lunch. Not only that, he is invited to be present in the family snaps, there is rather one photograph of him with Mrs. Das alone. He starts fantasizing his future affair with her. He cherishes romantic ideas when he finds Mrs. Das carefully observing the erotic sculpture of the sun temple. When Mrs. Das wants his address from him on a piece of paper, torn from a magazine showing a movie hero and heroine passionately embracing each other, he imagines his future date with Mrs. Das. Thus highly encouraged, in addition to glancing at her face he glanced at the strawberry between her breasts, and the golden brown hollow in her throat. Later when he gets a chance to be physically close to her, he is overwhelmed by the smell of a scent on her skin, like a mixture of whiskey and rosewater. In contrast, he becomes aware of the bad smell emanating from his own perspiration.

Mr. Kapasi does not want their romantic encounter to end so soon, so after the Sun Temple he brings the Das family to the hills of Udayagiri and Khandagiri. As Mrs. Das is too tired to climb the hills, she remains with Mr. Kapasi in the taxi. For Mr. Kapasi, it is a golden chance to enjoy the enchanting proximity of Mrs. Das, for her too, it is a god-sent chance but for a different reason. She suffers from a malady and feels that Mr. Kapasi can interpret the reason behind that. The story reaches its climax when Mrs. Das confides in him that one of her three children, Bobby, is not born of Mr. Das but of a Punjabi
friend of her husband during his sojourn at her home. She has been suffering this agony for the last eight years because she has not told the truth to Mr. Das so far. Unknown to such maladies, Mr. Kapasi fails to offer her any satisfying remedy. He rather alienates her by asking her indiscreetly, “Is it really pain you feel, Mrs. Das, or is it Guilt?” (p.66) Mrs. Das glares at this confronting question but her silence proclaims the imminent gap engulfing the two. Ironically, in order to rescue Bobby from the harassment caused by monkeys, and soothe him by her maternal care, Mrs. Das brings out a hairbrush from her straw bag to comb his hair. But she, inadvertently, throws the address of Mr. Kapasi out, “it fluttered away in the wind. No one but Mr. Kapasi noticed. He watched as it rose, carried higher and higher and higher by the breeze, into the trees where the monkeys now sat, solemnly observing the scene below. Mr. Kapasi observed it too, knowing that this was the picture of the Das family he would preserve forever in his mind.” (p.69) Thus Mr. Kapasi, who can interpret the maladies of hundreds of patients, first fails to diagnose his own malady and then to interpret the painful past of Mrs. Das and offer her alleviating remedy.

Alienation and estrangement are “maladies” that universally afflict people irrespective of class and nationality. The protagonists of “A Real Durwan” and “The Treatment of Bibi Haldar” find themselves in exile in their native milieu. Both these stories are set in Calcutta. Boori ma is poor, while Bibi Haldar belongs to the lower
of a block of flats for many years. She does the job of a charwoman and virtually guards the whole building. Her services resemble those of a real durwan and the residents of the flats are thankful to her for this. Sometimes the residents welcome her to their flats and offer her tea. The following lines highlight Boori Ma’s outsider status: “Knowing not to sit on the furniture she crouched, instead, in doorways and hallways, and observed gestures and manners in the same way a person tends to watch traffic in a foreign city.”(p.76) The condition of Boori Ma becomes miserable when Mr. Dalal, a benevolent resident of the building, goes to Simla for an outing. One day she goes out for a walk and finds a basin fitted on the stairwell missing when she returns to the building. The blame falls on Boori Ma and she is thrown out of the house for neglecting her duty. In the beginning of the short story, Boori Ma is introduced as a refugee and at the end of story we see her again as homeless exile. But Prof Kishan H. Pawar thinks differently. According to him:

“This is another end of the failure of human relationships. The relationship called humane is a failure since it was made. We expect something more from each other than we can offer to them, or can do for others. Basically, human beings are selfish and they can hardly love beyond the spheres of practicality.”18
Extra-marital relationship forms the theme of the story *Sexy*. Here the attitudinal conflict is apparent in the beginning itself in the extra-marital affair of Dev, a Bengal-born settled in the U.S.A. now with Miranda. First, he attempts to Indianise her name to Mira, but he himself becomes more western in his outlook on extra-marital life than her. That is obvious in his desperate and repeated attempts to adjust her limbs during lovemaking and yet his resentment that “he couldn’t get enough of her.” *(p.85)* Miranda, nevertheless, is more curious to know about Bengal so that she can get emotionally close to her increasingly unavailable lover. Hence, after Dev leaves her apartment, she returns to her bed, “still rumpled from their lovemaking and studied the borders of Bengal.” *(p.85)* Subsequently, they have weeks of intense enjoyment when Dev’s wife, who appears to be very much Indian in beauty and attitude, is away for a while in India. Even after her return, Dev comes to Miranda on Sundays pretending to his wife that he is going for a long jog. At the same time, Miranda gets to know of a harrowing tale of infidelity from her friend in the office, Laxmi. Laxmi reveals her of the sad plight of her cousin, even after nine years of her marriage, who is grieved to realize that her husband has been carrying on an affair with a European girl half his age. The turning point in the story comes when Miranda has to look after Rohin, the precocious son of that cousin, for a few hours.

The caption for the story come from the use of the word, ‘sexy’ by Dev for Miranda in a highly romantic situation, and for her: “It
Incidentally, there are so many ‘firsts’ in the story, Dev is the first man in her life with moustache, first to bring bouquets for her and first to whisper her name again and again while making love, and she is the first woman for Dev with such long legs. However, when the word, “sexy’ gets repeated in an unusual situation, revelation dawns upon the mind of Miranda. That innocent child Rohin calls her ‘sexy’ after he sees her in a glamorous silver cocktail dress. When asked to explain what he meant by it, he says, “It means loving someone you don’t know.”(p.107) Then he explains that his father has used the same word for an unfamiliar white girl during his travel in the aeroplane causing the misery of his mother: “She cries, sometimes for hours. Sometimes straight through dinner. Sometimes she cries so hard her eyes puff up like bullfrogs.”(p.104)

Touched by the poignant narration, the same expression ‘sexy’ has a somewhat different impact on Miranda: “Miranda felt Rohin’s words under her skin the same way she’d felt Dev’s. But instead of going hot she felt numb.”(p.107-8) Miranda is haunted by the image of Rohin’s mother desperately shrieking at her husband, “tell me if she’s sexy.”(p.108) This results in an attitudinal change in Miranda, who now starts making lame excuses to avoid Dev. Determined not to become another home-breaker, one Sunday she ventures out alone but under “the clear blue sky spread over the city”(p.110) - the open
perspective on man–woman relationship. In this way, the cultural conflict operates in a different way in this story, Dev, an Indian, acts more westernized than the western Miranda who comes closer to Indian values of compassion and self-sacrifice. Prof. O.P. Mathur also feels the same. According to him,

“... story in which the Indian outlook on life sets thing right is “sexy”, the title of which refers to the chief pursuits of the western man. Western social life has almost become sex–centered, in which genuine love and friendship have been largely usurped by sex. The chief character Miranda, a professional ‘mistress’ selling her body, realizes at the end the depths to which she has fallen ... she therefore returns to her traditional values symbolized by the church and its giant pillars....” 19

The story “Mrs. Sen” deals with the utter loneliness, disorientation, and despair of a Bengali lady in the U.S.A., who has to cope up “simultaneously with being foreign and being a wife.” 20 Mrs. Sen, a woman of thirty and without child of her own so far, has to spend almost all her time in the university apartment, while Mr. Sen, Professor of Mathematics, is all the time busy in his academic engagements. Mr. Sen suggests his wife to learn driving and move out of the house when free. But, for a typical Indian housewife, driving does not come easily. Eventually, Mrs. Sen takes up the job of babysitting but at her own house. Eliot, a child of eleven, comes to her house everyday after his school, because his mother works fifty
mother is aloof, she hardly shows warmth even for her son. Even after her dinner at home, she leaves the left over work for Eliot to finish. To the contrary, for Mrs. Sen, Eliot becomes a surrogate - son, she always gives him something to eat which is outside her official obligation. Eliot too enjoys and reciprocates her affections.

The cultural conflict here works on two levels - Mrs. Sen's sticking to Bengali culture without adjusting to the American one, and the conflicting attitude of her Indian habits with those of Eliot's mother. Mrs. Sen remembers every moment her Calcutta, her dear city, where fresh fishes of favourite types are available in plenty all the time. She tells Eliot: "In Calcutta people ate fish first thing in the morning, last thing before bed, as a snack after school if they were lucky. They ate the tail, the eggs, even the head. It was available in any market, at any hour, from dawn until midnight." (pp.123-24) Other than relishing fish, the next important thing in her life is letters from home. Once when Eliot collects a letter and gives it to her, overjoyed, she embraces him, which in American way is uncalled for. She is always waiting for those letters coming from her relatives because they contain the details of her past life in Calcutta. Yet, those letters are vexing too because her relatives have wrongly concluded that she is leading a heavenly life in America, while she is quite miserable in an alien culture amidst alien people. She bursts out in frustration: "send pictures, they write. Send pictures of your new life. What picture can I send? ... "They
think I live the life of a queen, Eliot. They think I press buttons and the house is clean. They think I live in a palace.” (p.125)

In the whole of this collection, Mrs. Sen is the most isolated character because she had been unwillingly plucked out from her own soil and planted in an alien country where her roots are drying out. The real crisis comes when the shopkeeper informs her on phone that the fish of her choice is available and she has to rush immediately to take its delivery. When she phones her husband in the University to drive her to the market, he delays it much, leaving Mrs. Sen fuming and fretting around her house. Mr. Sen finally comes, drives her and Eliot to market but the damage had already been done. So the next time, Mrs. Sen does not wait for him and drives the car on her own with Eliot inside resulting into a minor accident. Intolerant of such irrational craving for fish, Eliot’s mother takes her son back from Mrs. Sen. Throughout the story we find the juxtaposed and conflicting mindsets of the aloof and officious attitude of Eliot’s mother with that of the deeply emotional attachment of Mrs. Sen and both represent the uneasy mix of American and Indian values. However, the one who is really affected in this conflict is the unfortunate child Eliot, whose attempt to relate himself and belong comes to an abrupt end. Eliot has to live with that hangover, left to fend for him looking “out the kitchen window, at gray waves receding from the shore”, (p.135) with a forced self-denial and subsequent withdrawal.
couple who tries to cope up with a new world they have just entered. They are Sanjeev and Twinkle. According to T. Ravinchanndran, “The title ‘The Blessed House’ is highly ironical because there is constant bickering between Sanjeev and his wife, Twinkle.” 21 Sanjeev and Twinkle are a newly married couple and they have recently moved from Boston to Connecticut where Sanjeev is a high profile professional soon to become the vice-president of his company while he is still thirty-three only. Therefore, everything looks smooth in his life except the ever-conflicting mindset of the couple. When Sanjeev chooses to marry Twinkle she has already been abandoned by her American lover. However, Sanjeev has never had his taste of love and easily accepts the matchmaker’s offer for the attractive Twinkle. While Sanjeev is all for Indian food and fondly recollects his student days when he used to go to an Indian restaurant for bellyful of Mughlai chicken with spinach, for Twinkle Indian food is a bother. “She detested chopping garlic, and feelings ginger, and could not operate a blinder, and so it was Sanjeev who, on weekends, seasoned mustard oil with cinnamon sticks and cloves in order to produce a proper curry.” (p.144)

The conflict arises when the couple starts discovering in the new house so many scattered pieces- Christian things left behind by the earlier tenant. While these items – a white porcelain effigy of
virgin Mary statue - are treasured by Twinkle, Sanjeev is vexed to his last bone by this Christian paraphernalia. Each discovery irritates and unnerves Sanjeev and he secretly waits for a chance to throw everything in the garbage. Further, his ire gets aggravated when Twinkle succeeds in motivating the whole of Sanjeev’s friends, who come for the party, to join in her hunt. And later, she emerges a stunning victor with a solid silver bust of Christ, weighing a good thirty pounds, from the attic. Moreover, even Sanjeev cannot but acknowledge “its undeniable value” and its “dignity, solemnity and beauty.” Yet, because of the widening mental gap between him and his wife, he dislikes even this creation of superb art, “he hated it because he knew that Twinkle loved it.” (p.159) This brief quotation is enough to indicate that conflicting claims are at the core of their conjugal life; a house becomes really ‘blessed’, not by outward decorative pieces, but by inner harmony between the inhabitants.

The new house was a blessed one as Twinkle found a statue of Christ and mother Mary. The switch plates in the bedrooms were decorated with scenes from the Bible. Twinkle as a student of literature wanted to treasure those whereas Sanjeev hated and disapproved of Twinkle’s idea. This made him, almost, hate Twinkle as Sanjeev, an executive in a firm, has no time to be bothered by such sentiment. According to Prof. A.K. Mukherjee, “To Twinkle, the house was a
device to come to the limelight as an Indian woman among the Americans. So the poor husband had nothing to do but “preserve the massive silver face to his ribs, careful not to let the feather hat slip, and followed her.”

“The Treatment of Bibi Halder” is a poignant story that tells us the plight of a 29-year orphan, unmarried girl named Bibi Halder who suffered from baffling disease which made her family members exasperated, and ultimately she was left alone to suffer. The story is of Bengal. Bibi Halder was staying with her relations in flat in Calcutta. She was given a storage roof “a space in which one could sit but not comfortably stand, featuring an adjoining latrine curtained entrance, one window without a grille, and shelves made from the panels of the old doors.”(p.159) She recorded inventory for the cosmetics shop that her cousin Halder owned and managed at the mouth of the courtyard. For her work she was given food, shelter and “sufficient meters of cotton at every October holiday to replenish her wardrobe and act as an inexpensive tailor.”(p.159) Her only obsession in life was to get a husband. Every day she expected a man to come and offer his hand to her, it never materialized. She loved to hear from other woman the details of their marriage. She would sigh after seeing their marriage albums. After devouring the details from other woman, she would say, “when it happens to me, you will all be present.”(p.160) After futile
waiting, she would say, “My face will never be painted with sandalwood paste, who will rub me with turmeric? My name will never be printed with scarlet ink on a card.” (pp.160-61) But Mr. and Mrs. Halder never cared to give any thought to this although Mr. Halder gave an advertisement after being pestered by the inmates of the flat. Mrs. Halder, who was in family way, feared Bibi as an evil omen and wanted to get rid of her shadow lest it brought harm to her child. She gave birth to a female child. She froze with fear when her daughter suffered for five days. At last Mr. Haldar winded up his cosmetic shop and left the place with his wife and daughter. Bibi was left alone with Rs. 300 that Mr. Haldar left with her. But the story takes a turn when the inmates find, after Mr. and Mrs. Halder’s departure, that Bibi Haldar was pregnant. The search for the real culprit ended in futility. She delivered a male child and took care of the child. The story ends with these words, “she was, to the best of her knowledge, cured.” (p.172)

This story shows that male member of society is still unable to face a woman with her problems – the problems created by him only. The men in this story have been shown escapist and the woman is the one who can face the pains created by man. Bibi Haldar is made pregnant by someone but she never tells the name of the man whose child she is expecting. With the help of women of neighbourhood, Bibi runs a shop after begetting the baby boy. According to Prof. Savita A. Patil:
“It sounds to be the feminine voice in this story to prove the abilities of woman in the society where male appears as an escapist and female a daring entity. Bibi Haldar is an individual who maintains her individuality against all odds.”

*The Third and Final Continent* is Lahiri’s last story in the collection. It tells us of an Indian immigrant who reminisces about his first few weeks in America thirty years age. Having studied for four years in London, he makes a short trip to Calcutta for his arranged marriage with Mala. He moves to America only a week after his marriage, to work as librarian at the M.I.T. His wife has to wait for her visa for six weeks before she can join him in America. On his arrival in Boston, he checks into the local YMCA. The year is 1969; the year of America’s landing on the moon. “The timing is more metaphorical than coincidental, the new country the narrator stumbles upon is as foreign to him as the moon.” Sometimes later the narrator rents a room in the home of a 103-year-old crotchety widow, who lives by herself and is visited infrequently by her sixty-eight-year-old daughter. The widow is finicky about the class of the renter, about punctuality and about the American Flag on the moon.

When the narrator’s wife joins him, the lady, Mrs. Croft, puts her through a series of scrutiny and interrogation and finally pronounces: “She is a perfect lady.” (p.195) It is through this scrutiny that the narrator feels empathy for his bride as it reminds him of his own experiences as a confused and bewildered stranger in London. “I like
to think, says the narrator “of the moment in Mrs. Croft’s parlour as the moment when the distance between Mala and me began to lessen.” (p.196) They later on shift to their new house and come to know one day of Mrs. Croft’s death in an obituary column. The narrator grieves as if he had lost his own mother.

His searching for maladies in American with Mrs. Croft, his wife and son are many but he fears that his son will no longer speak Bengali after he and his wife die and it will be a linguistics loss. Yet he encourages his son “if I can survive on three continents, then there is no obstacle he cannot conquer,” and “while the astronauts, heroes forever, spent more hours on the moon, I have remained in this new world for nearly thirty years.” (p.198)

The story offers a statement of the difficulty and desirability of integrating the deepest needs of self-expression and self-realization with the life one must lead as a social being. Using the flashback technique, Lahiri records her early impressions and delineates them suggestively till they form an individual pattern in which agonies and ecstasies are intricately woven. The story records minute details with precision - the details of daily routine, furniture, rooms and people. Unlike “When Mr. Pirzada came to dine.” this story is able to delve deep into the psyche of its characters and project beautifully the staunchest strength of a human being which lies in the assurance of tie.
The nine stories in the collection offer a wonderful variety of experience gathered from the cultural clashes rippling outward in many directions. The trauma of dislocation, an acute sense of loneliness and the pangs of estrangement suffered by the millions of exiled Indians who try unsuccessfully to balance themselves between ‘home’ and ‘abroad’ are the major maladies Lahiri attempts to interpret. Most of her characters keep hanging in limbo – between two identities – non-Indian and Indian, a fact that brings Jhumpa Lahiri fairly close to Bharati Mukherjee, another successful interpreter of immigrant anxiety. In her attempt to diagnose the discrepancies that exist between home and New home abroad, Lahiri stands in close proximity with Shauna Singh Baldwin and even Amit Chaudhuri. In interpreting the ‘meaning of distance’ Lahiri reminds one of Amitav Ghosh in *The Shadow Lines*. In writing about the disturbed conjugality and its impact on the young couple she reminds us of Carver. In portraying tour – guides, seduction and subsequent disillusionment she comes close to Hemingway. She even draws obvious parallels with Isherwood when she writes about a landlady scrutinizing her young renter evoking contrary feeling of disgust and tenderness. The octogenarian young man Khushwant Singh likens her to Somerset Maugham: “Without striving to impress, without a witty turn of phrase, Jhumpa manages to hold the reader’s interest. She reminded me of Somerset Maugham.”

Like Bernard Malamud who dealt at length with the Jewish community in America, Lahiri has created a literature revolving around the Indian
immigrants in America. Like James Joyce, she displays an insight and a penchant for documentation of details.

Jhumpa Lahiri is undoubtedly the first emigrant writer who is concerned with their maladies and tries to be an interpreter. Of course, she is quite different from Mr. Kapasi. She probes deep into the maladies but prescribes no cure. She is an artist and the artist’s another name is an interpreter. The stories reveal the skill Jhumpa Lahiri has achieved in her maiden venture. There is no chronological or sequential development of stories. She has evolved her own style by changing the mode of narration from past to the present and again reversing it without being nostalgic. Her style is almost cinematic and with the help of montage one gets a glimpse into the meaning of the story. One reading is not enough to understand any of her stories. Her keen awareness of the contours of her craft coupled with the use of direct, clear, elegant and sparkling prose makes “Interpreter of Maladies” a priceless treatise.
1. The New York Times, 19/11/2000,


4. Ibid., p.3

5. Ibid.


7. Ibid

8. Ibid. , p.51

9. Ibid.


