

August 6, 1999

BOOKS OF THE TIMES

## BOOKS OF THE TIMES; Liking America, but Longing for India

By MICHIKO KAKUTANI

INTERPRETER OF MALADIES

By Jhumpa Lahiri

198 pages. Mariner Books/Houghton Mifflin Company. \$12.

In this accomplished collection of stories, Jhumpa Lahiri traces the lives of people on two continents -- North America and India -- and in doing so announces herself as a wonderfully distinctive new voice. Indeed, Ms. Lahiri's prose is so eloquent and assured that the reader easily forgets that "Interpreter of Maladies" is a young writer's first book.

Many of Ms. Lahiri's people are Indian immigrants trying to adjust to a new life in the United States, and their cultural displacement is a kind of index of a more existential sense of dislocation. One couple living near a small New England campus "used to trail their fingers, at the start of each new semester, through the columns of the university directory, circling surnames familiar to their part of the world" in search of new friends. Another faculty wife, who has taken a baby-sitting job to fill her empty afternoons, tells her young charge that everything she cares about remains in India in the home she left behind. "Here, in this place where Mr. Sen has brought me," she complains, "I cannot sometimes sleep in so much silence."

What Mrs. Sen misses in America is the close sense of community she knew in India. "Not everybody has a telephone," she explains. "But just raise your voice a bit, or express grief or joy of any kind, and one whole neighborhood and half of another has come to share the news, to help with arrangements." In America, she worries, she could scream at the top of her lungs and not a single person would come to her aid.

Ms. Lahiri's characters realize, however, that America offers them, or at least their children, opportunities they would never have at home. In the story "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine," the narrator, Lilia, says her mother knew she "was assured a safe life, an easy life, a fine education, every opportunity" in the States. "I would never have to eat rationed food or obey curfews or watch riots from my rooftop or hide neighbors in water tanks to prevent them from being shot, as she and my father had."

In the course of this story, 10-year-old Lilia is initiated into the anxieties and complexities of the grown-up world. In experiencing third-hand the travails of her parents' friend, Mr. Pirzada, who has lost contact with his family back home in Dacca during the civil war of 1971, Lilia learns about politics and political turmoil for the first time and the personal consequences of such change. She learns what it means to face losing one's family and one's home, and she learns just how vastly daily concerns in suburban America differ from those in less stable parts of the world. Eliot, the 11-year-old boy in "Mrs. Sen's," learns a similar lesson from his homesick baby sitter, who introduces him to the concepts of isolation and exile and loss.

In fact most of Ms. Lahiri's characters find emotional connection elusive or fragmentary at best. In "A Temporary Matter," a husband and wife have grown estranged after their son's stillbirth. During a week of electrical shutdowns in their neighborhood, they find a parlor game -- "telling each other something we've never told before" -- devolving into a hurtful game of guilt and humiliation. By the end of the week, both are secretly relieved to find their marriage coming to a close.

The young Indian newlyweds in "This Blessed House" similarly uncover the fault lines in their partnership as a silly tiff over some Christian knickknacks discovered in their new home (a 3-D postcard of St. Francis, a Nativity snow globe, a paint-by-number picture of the three wise men) escalates into a fight not only about religion but also about autonomy and control.

Two pairs of unhappy liaisons also stand at the center of "Interpreter of Maladies" and "Sexy." In the title story, a tour guide who is showing an American-born couple around India recognizes in the pair's exchanges -- "the bickering, the indifference, the protracted silences" -- the same signs of discord he sees in his own marriage. His flirtation with the

woman, however, undergoes a strange metamorphosis after she tells him about cheating on her husband; he begins to suspect that he has simply been used as a receptacle for her guilt, that he is only a bit player in her life story.

As for "Sexy," it depicts two adulterous couples: Laxmi's cousin's husband, who is cheating on his wife with a woman he met on an airplane; and Laxmi's friend Miranda, who is sleeping with a married man named Dev whom she met at Filene's department store. After Miranda spends an afternoon baby-sitting the son of Laxmi's cousin, she finds herself re-evaluating her affair with Dev.

In this story, Ms. Lahiri relies far too much on coincidence to propel her characters' lives forward, and two of the stories set in India ("A Real Durwan" and "The Treatment of Bibi Haldar") also suffer from a certain folk-tale contrivance that results in overly neat, moralistic endings. But such lapses do not detract from the overall achievement of this volume. 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.

Photo: Jhumpa Lahiri (Jerry Bauer/Houghton Mifflin)