

## Exiles of the World Unite: Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*.

Jhumpa Lahiri's Pulitzer Prize-winning short-story collection *Interpreter of Maladies* is a fictional manifesto for everyone estranged, either physically or spiritually, from their homelands. While it focuses on the experience of Indian immigrants to America, and their difficulties adjusting to its sterility and anomie, much of it rings true to anyone whose life has been spent on both sides of the Pacific Ocean. For everything that is gained in the new world, something is inevitably lost from the old.

Of the nine stories that comprise the collection, four are dedicated to this straddling of worlds - "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine", "Interpreter of Maladies", "Mrs. Sen's", and "The Third and Final Continent." The others concern Indians in India, or Indians whose estrangement from the mother country is not a chief concern. The stories set in India effectively transplant the reader into a gritty, strife-filled world many lack the courage to visit, but the four transcontinental stories are more likely to resonate with transcontinental readers. One of these, "Mrs. Sen's", yet another harrowing fable representing the American Dream as nightmare, very nearly says it all.

Mrs. Sen has accompanied her husband from India to New England for the usual reasons, in order to further his career and improve their so-called quality of life. While he works, she stays at home and does little else but watch television and prepare his meals. Needless to say, coming from Calcutta, she grows lonely. She decides that babysitting is the way out.

Mrs. Sen is still practicing for a driver's license, and thus cannot baby-sit elsewhere than her home, but a desperate single mother nevertheless hands over her son, Eliot, to Mrs. Sen's care. Eliot then becomes the somewhat characterless audience for Mrs. Sen's brooding nostalgia for her native land, and for her good-natured, but trenchant perceptions of her adopted one: " 'Eliot, if I began to scream right now at the top of my lungs, would someone come?' .... 'They might call you,' Eliot said.... 'But they might complain that you were making too much noise.' "

Meanwhile, Mrs. Sen's wavering willingness to practice for her driver's license - arguably the symbol of American citizenship, being the de facto national ID card - comes to represent her willingness to accept America as her home. The scenes in which the gentle and kind, but somewhat flighty Mrs. Sen inches her way into and out of murderous traffic, are among the most subtly powerful condemnations of America's pace of life in recent writing. In a few pages, often in a few words, Lahiri says what social critics like James Howard Kunstler - author of *The Geography of Nowhere* -- have required a book to argue: the automobile is a curse upon the land and its people.

But it is the story's close which haunts one's mind, especially in this age of school shootings, over which neglectful parents inexplicably scratch their heads. We see Eliot, now a latch-key kid, alone in his house for the first time. His mother phones from the office and asks, " 'You okay?' Eliot looked out the kitchen window, at gray waves receding from the shore, and said that he was fine."

Here, the suspicion that Mrs. Sen and Eliot are more than just accidental companions is confirmed. Eliot is the product of an advanced stage of social dysfunction, which Mrs. Sen is encountering for the first time. Each has only one other, barely present family member, whom each cannot leave because of emotional dependence created by a void - "the gray waves receding from the shore."

Lahiri conveys this message with a truly admirable emotional restraint. The reader comes to fear the spare exchanges of dialogue commonly punctuating her scenes. These utterances, like those of Hemingway and Faulkner at their best, strike the heart like flung knives. One must set the book down for a while to let the wounds heal before continuing on.

The collection's only weakness - possibly its Achilles' heel - is its attention to two 'types' that already appear with nauseating regularity in American fiction: the professor and the adulterer. Poor, beleaguered Hester Prynne still suffers from America's obsession with the scarlet 'A', while the possibility of an American literature that can stand on its own two feet, and not on the financial support of the dreary academy, remains remote. Even if Lahiri knows these types better than she does Calcutta streetsweepers, literature might have been better served had she refrained from telling their story once again.

Sadly, her inclusion of these types is probably a partial explanation for the collection's sudden success. Like a legislator that attaches a rider to legislation so that it will pass, she must pepper her stories with references to MIT and international love affairs, so that streetsweepers and Mrs. Sens will be heard. Lahiri cannot be blamed in making this concession to the market; it is the market that is at fault.

Which makes one wonder: now that she is a Pulitzer Prize winner, and needn't convince anyone of her talent,

### About the Author

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what's next? One can only hope that, like fellow Indian Arundhati Roy after receiving her Booker Prize, Lahiri may address, either in fiction or otherwise, the very real problems of Indians everywhere, as Roy did in *The Cost of Living*. Lahiri's taking up residence in New York and in the *New Yorker's* good graces - her book won that magazine's award for Best First Book - are, alas, discouraging signs. May she prove this prediction wrong a thousandfold.

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