

# THE HINDU

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## Jhumpa Lahiri: Elegant outsider

THE LAST century saw writers of Indian origin turn into international stars. The latest addition to the constellation is



Jhumpa Lahiri, no doubt surprised by the speed with which the spotlight has hit *Interpreter Of Maladies*, her collection of nine quiet short stories. The Transatlantic Review Award, the Louisville Review Fiction Prize, Fellowship at Provincetown's Fine Arts Work Centre, The New Yorker's nomination among 20 best writers under 40, and now the Pulitzer Prize at age 33.

A dizzy flight for the shy, immigrant Cinderella who began writing in collaboration with a classmate during school recess. This was the misfit's way of interpreting the maladies of not quite belonging, with an almost convincing illusion of participation through observation and comment. The child found that writing brought understanding, if not cure.

Reading Lahiri is to hear Sisyphean echoes of this "almost" haunting the tunnel. The word seesaws between the actual and the possible, in ways tantalising enough to keep hope aloft for plodding melancholy. See how she deals with what in India we deem success. In "The Third and Final Continent" the Indian has crossed the seas to make his fortune, in Europe first and then in America. Thirty years in the new world and what is his predominant mood? Not the heroic exhilaration of the astronauts whom he mentions. "Still, there are times I am bewildered by each mile I have travelled, each meal I have eaten, each person I have known, each room in which I have slept. As ordinary as it all appears, there are times when it is beyond my imagination."

It would be trite, and false, to say that these stories are about immigrant experiences. Is not displacement a universal malaise today? And the wanderer's dreams of the home (within the secure folds of community care) a thing of the past even in the motherland? For the reader in the global village, there is not only self recognition here, but the astonishment of finding so much in so little said. Nor are Lahiri's characters given to much articulation, even in her first person narratives. The extraordinariness of their experience is evoked by ordinariness of

expression.

Nowhere is this brought home as piercingly as in "Mrs. Sen's". Modelled on the author's mother, Mrs. Sen, who has accompanied her husband abroad, expends restless ingenuity in the search for fish, fresh and whole, in the alien markets of the West. With a mental sound track of women chattering, gossiping and laughing all night long on the roof of her home in India, as they chop vegetables for the next day's feast, Mrs. Sen dices endless vegetables in her cold drawing room. Looking at a pine tree beyond the window she says, "Here, in this place where Mr. Sen has brought me, I cannot sometimes sleep in so much silence." Her alienation draws its meaning from the bewilderment of the little White boy she babysits. The chords round it off when, as a latchkey child, he no longer needs Mrs. Sen in the silence of his own home.

What makes Lahiri special is not just the limpid prose with hints of fearful currents below. Beguiled by the placidity, you are not quite prepared for the sudden jerks which almost sweep you into drowning. This mingling of the expected and the unexpected, is through telling details, "almost" inanimate - a map of India, a black dress, green chewing gum, an empty mug, a porcelain Christ, a mailbox, a bottle of anti wrinkle cream ... Her olfactory images play with the paradoxes, seducing you to believe that truth can inhere only in discordia concors. Cruelty and betrayal are the motifs of her tales of married life. The sting is sharper for her empathy with exploiter and victim. True, the serpent holds poison, but naivete is the original sin.

Finally, what shocks you in these fastidiously spare narratives is the loss of communication in an age of web and net. Without the safety net of community support, individual relationships contort themselves into inhuman shapes, and freedom turns mockery. Unintrusively, Ms Lahiri traces this tragedy in which we all play our parts.

The writer has avoided cleverness and self-consciousness, certainly pretentiousness, which often plague the Indian writer in English who deliberately targets a Western audience. She has the outsider's perception of the insider.

To read her for the first time in The New Yorker (January 1999) was to realise that here was a writer with greatness round-the- corner. And now she is face-to-face with it.

GOWRI RAMNARAYAN

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