



BOOK REVIEW

## *Interpreter of Maladies*

A Collection of Short Stories

by Jhumpa Lahiri

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Review: ○ Anurima Banerji

JHUMPA Lahiri's new book of short stories marks her impressive debut in the world of South Asian diasporic literature. She is a writer's writer: her prose is elegant and economical, her observations well-crafted, her characters perfectly believable. The smallest of details fail to escape her, as she relies on rich, but subtle descriptions chronicling the landscapes of minutiae that make up the substance of her characters' everyday lives.

Lahiri weaves a full fabric of human relationships, spanning from the imperfection of domestic life, the intense solitude of lovers engaged in a sensual affair, and the daily dramas that arise within the confines of marriage.

The precision and skill with which she relates the emotional condition of her subjects is sometimes startling. In "A Temporary Matter," a couple becomes increasingly estranged, devastated by the event of a stillborn child. Both partners are unable to cope with the aftermath. The husband, reflecting on their strained relationship, observes how his wife, in her slow detachment, has become an unfamiliar: "Each day, Shukumar

noticed, her beauty which once overwhelmed him, seemed to fade. The cosmetics that had once seemed superfluous were necessary now, not to improve her but to define her somehow." Later, as the two exchange secrets about themselves in the dark, each makes a final confession that breaks apart the frail link which earlier held them together.

In an equally moving story, "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine," the title character (a visiting botanist from South Asia) is afflicted by nostalgia for his homeland and his family. He watches the Indo-Pakistani war of 1971 taking place on the flat surface of a television inside the comfortable American household of a Bengali family that acts as Mr. P's emotional anchor until he is able to locate his relatives and return to a newly liberated Bangladesh. While in the U.S., the media is his only hope for news about his family's fate in the subcontinent, and the rituals of dining on delicacies of curried fish and fowl, shared by his host family, represent his makeshift sense of home.

The story which acts as the collection's namesake reverber-

ates with an astonishing power to surprise and mesmerise the reader. The Interpreter of Maladies is a Gujarati clinic worker, Mr. Kapasi, who assists patients by describing their myriad illnesses to the doctor, who himself doesn't understand the language. Mr. Kapasi's other vocation is acting as a tour guide. In the story, he is taking a visiting Bengali American family to see the Sun Temple at Konarak. During the tour, the wife seems to take a special interest in his career as an interpreter, but she attempts to convince him to use his purely biological knowledge for a more therapeutic function, to diagnose her own heart's burdens:

"Don't you see? For eight years I haven't been able to express this to anybody, not to friends, certainly not to Raj. He doesn't even suspect it. He thinks I'm still in love with him. Well, don't you have anything to say?"

'About what?'

'About what I've just told you. About my secret, and about how terrible it makes me feel. I feel terrible looking at my children, and at Raj, always terrible. I have terrible urges, Mr. Kapasi, to throw things away. One day I had the urge to

throw everything I own out the window, the television, the children, everything. Don't you think it's unhealthy?"

He was silent."

Initially flattered by her attention, the guide is ultimately disappointed by her refusal to engage in anything but the fleeting intimacy of confessional. Still, Kapasi is overcome by the urgency of her revelation and reacts numbly.

In the end, the guide is stymied by the psychological nature of her particular ailment, unable to answer her disillusion and depression with any hope or consolation. His inability to deliver a prognosis paralyzes them both, and their brief connection is severed. While he is adequate to the task of translating illnesses of the body, he has failed as an interpreter of maladies afflicting the soul.

All of Lahiri's stories are infused with this characteristic imprint of melancholy. However, the potential for coming away with a prolonged sense of cynicism is mitigated by which permeates a deep sympathy underlying each piece. The result of this elegiac tone, combined with the compassionate gaze, is that the possibility of the reader's identification and allegiance with a particular figure may be ambiguously suspended. Lahiri's stories eschew the bind of most traditional story structures which tend to emphasize the protagonist and antagonist clearly acting within a defined set of roles. Instead, her characters shatter these roles, presenting each of the figures in their ambivalent, splintered selves.

The direct result of her distancing devices and disidentification as a narrative

strategy is the suspension of judgment on part of the reader. The characters' actions cannot be read as inherently right or wrong; rather, the emotional nuances, the subtly layered observations slowly explored, reveal a complex portrait of intimacy that effectively parallels the dilemmas experienced by people in real life. Lahiri's stories often transcend and blur the boundaries between fiction and documentation with unusual flair.

Out of the nine haunting stories, there are two that deal with solely South Asian subject matter, but strangely enough, they leave a much weaker impression compared to the bulk of the collection concentrating on expatriate Indian identity. Somehow the snapshots of Bengali American life resonate with a deeper authenticity. Perhaps this is because Lahiri's strength lies in illustrating the psychological conflicts of her characters, and she is able to speculate about expatriate perspectives with greater conviction and depth. But the two stories that are about Bengali women in Calcutta — "The Treatment of Bibi Haldar" and "A Real Durwan" — are laboured, and concentrate on the external environments more than the women's inner dilemmas. As a result, the deep observations elicited from mining the interior lives of the characters results in less of an impact in these two stories. They show little of the emotional depth found in the rest of the collection.

Crucially, these are also the dual instances where Lahiri temporarily strays from her preoccupation with the elite and the middle class to turn her lens on lower-income Indian women,

and the impoverished underclass of female labour. From an aesthetic point of view, while the other stories are firmly cast in a realist mould, "The Treatment of Bibi Haldar" is imbued with a slightly magical and supernatural quality that isolates it from the other eight stories. While the effect of Lahiri's language is no less beautiful, the inclusion of this piece interrupts the fluid tone that links the rest of her work.

To her credit, though, rarely does the reader feel the intrusion of the authorial voice taking on an omniscient or patronising tone as it often does with other well-known writers of South Asian descent. Perhaps a comparison with Bharati Mukherjee is inevitable, but Lahiri's writing skills are made superior by their attention to descriptions of the cultural melange that is the South Asian experience, whether in India or abroad. There is no specific moral to the story, no prescription attached to the revelations made.

As a result, Lahiri's compositions never acquire an ethnographic aura, nor do they resort to a judgmental appraisal of the characters' choices and sentiments. Furthermore, there is no gesture made to explain or justify the figures through the symbolic prism of culture. The premise of depicting diasporic life in various settings — "Bengal, Boston, and beyond," as the anthology's subtitle suggests — is normalized instead of being sensationalized. Modernity and tradition are not "issues" but inheritances for contemporary South Asian communities to negotiate; and because the etic eye, so prevalent in expatriate literature, is substituted for by the more intimate emic eye, the thread of compassion is never lost. □