

A Short Introduction to Famous Short Stories of Jhumpa Lahiri

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Introduction

Nilanjana Sudeshna "Jhumpa" Lahiri is a new American-Indian short story writer. She has also written a novel called *The Namesake*. Jhumpa Lahiri's short story collection *Interpreter of Maladies – Stories of Bengal, Boston and Beyond* is a fine collection. There are several good short stories in it. Her *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction.

Jhumpa Lahiri's Famous Short Stories:

Her short stories depict her east-west encounter, her experience of dislocation and identity-crisis and the like. Some of her most read stories are the following:

1. A Temporary Matter
2. Interpreter of Maladies
3. This Blessed House
4. The Treatment of Bibi Haldar
5. When Mr. Pirzade Came to Dine
6. Mrs Sen
7. The Third and Final Continent

The story *A Temporary Matter* is quite interesting. It is the first story of the collection. The plot is about Shobha and Shukumar – a married couple. They are American citizens of Indian origin. The tragedy of their life is that they have lost their first and only child at delivery itself. The event alters their subsequent life drastically. Once a storm blasts their electric wires and they do not get light for some hours a day. How to spend the time in dark is their problem. They decide to play the game of confession. First they speak of mundane affairs. Shobha gets excited when he tells her their child was a male one. Actually the family wanted a family of children, particularly grandchildren. The revelation causes her some grief. Finally Shobha who does not have interest in life, particularly with Shukumar tells him: "I've been looking for an apartment and I've found one."¹ Such a similar event is described in the Chinese writer Amy Tan's short story in her book *The Joy Luck Club*. This was what she wanted to confess in their game.

The second story *Interpreter of Maladies* that is the title story is interesting all the more. The story is about an American couple Mr. and Mrs. Das. They are of Indian origin as in the case of most of Lahiri's characters. They seem to hail from the state of Orissa and now they are visiting the Sun Temple of Konark. They come there and wait for a tourist guide. On the other hand, there is a man called Mr. Kapasi who is an interpreter of diseases (maladies) to a foreign doctor in Orissa. Thus the title for the story and for the book too. This man is hired as a guide for the Dases. He speaks of the Sun Temple. The couple likes him. Mrs. Das takes a liking for him. Once when the two sit somewhere she tells him that she likes him. She tells him that she does not like her husband. She tells him that she had an affair with a man and got her second child

whom surprisingly her husband likes very much. This is rather ironical. This makes Kapasi understand the fact that many women do not live well with their husbands. He knows his wife does not like him. Similarly Mrs. Das does not like Mr. Das. He understands Mrs. Das is a bizarre woman.

The *Blessed House* is another of Lahiri's fine short story. Here she depicts religious difference of a couple – Sanjeev and Twinkle. The former is a fine Hindu fellow and the latter, it seems, has some faith in Christianity. Sanjeev says they must follow Hinduism. Twinkle, on the other hand, likes Christian rites and loves Jesus. When they have a programme at home their religious differences surface sharply. Finally Sanjeev thinks that he has lost his freedom. A kind of psychological force works here. In Jungian way:

The religious and cultural symbolic manifestation of the search of wholeness becomes an essential part of psychic existence here.²

The next story *The Treatment of Bibi Haldar* is about a broken family. Here Bibi's brother and his wife do not treat her kindly. They ask her to work in their apartment shop. So she does. They do not marry her when she comes of age. She meets people and she says she has dreams. Once the couple's child falls sick and the landlady blames Bibi for it. Even they ask her to live in a story room. All the people dislike the idea. Meanwhile Bibi develops an affair with somebody and gets a baby. The apartment people ask Haldar to vacate their room. So he does and the same room and shop are rented out to Bibi. Now Bibi is quite happy. What makes her happy is not traditional system of life with arranged marriage, but in the context, her affair and child. Yet people do not know who her man is. Shobha Tiwari says:

This is a tale of people of modest living in whose lives humanism is more important than social traditions.³

When Mr. Pirzade Came to Dine is another of Lahiri's story. The story centers around the trauma of change, of the birth of a new nation, Bangladesh and the vicarious suffering of a family in America as they go through the pain of uncertainty of what happened to the family of their guest. Yet Pirzade, the Muslim with a big family and Lillie, a Hindu live harmoniously.

Mrs Sen is another story. The story speaks of a woman Mrs. Sen, a maladjusted and alienated immigrant in America. She is not happy with her job, or with American culture where elders receive scant respect and old people are put in old age homes. She serves in a baby-sitting caring the boy Eliot. Once she asks Eliot if he would put his mother in a nursing home:

'Maybe,' he said. "But I would visit everyday.'

'You say that now, but you will see, when you are a man your life will be in places you cannot know how.'

another, and then she will have to drag herself onto a bus just to get herself a bag of lozengers.⁴

She continued on her fingers:

You will have a wife, and children of your own, and they will want to be driven to different places at the same time. No matter how kind they are, one day they will complain about visiting your mother, and they will get tired too, Eliot. You will miss one day, and

Janet Wilson writes "A wonderfully distinctive new voice,' Jhumpa Lahiri's debut *Interpreter of Maladies* has a rare resonance and power that infuses the trivia and commonality in life with meaning and a sense of direction. Poised as the interpreter of maladies herself, 'frontier' experiences are central thematically, and yet simple human relationships as evinced anywhere in the world fill the silent spaces of her short story collection. Like any serious writer, she is an 'interpreter'"⁵

References

1. All the textual references are taken from Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies – Stories of Bengal, Boston and Beyond*, London, Flamingo, 2000.
2. Tiwari, Shobha, *Jhumpa Lahiri's Interpreter of Maladies*, *Encyclopedia of Literature in English*, ed., M.K. Bhatnagar, New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers, 2001, p. 1060.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 1059.
4. Lahiri, Jhumpa Mrs. Sen, p. 131-132.
5. Wilson, Janet, *Ironic Vision in Jhumpa Lahiri's Interpreter of Maladies*, *Studies in Literature in English*, ed., Mohit Ray, New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers, 2003, p. 186.