



Interpreter of Maladies (1999), by Jhumpa Lahiri Debatable Issues

These are debatable issues for use in a unit on Jhumpa Lahiri's Pulitzer Prize winning collection of short stories, *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999).

Is the collection's depiction of Indian-Americans positive or critical and negative?

- (1) According to the *Washington Post*, reviewers in India of Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* have been conflicted; many have praised the artistry with which Indian-American subjectivity is depicted, but others have objected on the grounds that Lahiri does "not paint Indian-Americans in a more positive light." Setting aside any ethnic boosterism, do the detractors have a point? Do the stories in *Interpreter of Maladies* cast Indian-Americans, especially second-generation Indian immigrants to the United States, in a more critical and negative than affirming and positive (or even neutral) light?

Are many of the stories' endings actually ambiguous?

- (2) Some readers of Lahiri's stories note what they call her regular use of ambiguous endings. They point, for example, to "A Temporary Matter," "Sexy," "Mrs. Sen's," and "This Blessed House." These stories, they say, end in ways that allow the reader to interpret them very differently; the ambiguity of the endings affects the tone that can be discerned in the works, even differently determining whether the story ends happily or sadly for different readers. But is this really true? Does what takes place *prior* to the ending in these (and other potentially ambiguously-ended) stories in *Interpreter of Maladies* actually strongly suggest a likely, tonally-fixed, thematically clear ending, even if it is not made explicit or obvious?

Do Lahiri's characters succeed in blending their Indian and American cultural heritage?

- (3) In 2006 Jhumpa Lahiri was quoted in *Newsweek* discussing the concern she has in her fiction with immigrant (sometimes called diasporic) life. "When I first started writing I was not conscious that my subject was the Indian-American experience. What drew me to my craft was the desire to force the two worlds I occupied to mingle on the page as I was not brave enough, or mature enough, to allow in life." Some have suggested that Lahiri's fiction has an enduring and underlying optimism about that experience: they read her stories as expressions of the possibility of the harmonious reconciliation of one's native ethnic culture with the blended "mainstream" American culture. Are they right? Do Lahiri's characters mostly succeed at mingling the Indian and American?

Is Lahiri a romantic about marriage?

- (4) Jhumpa Lahiri told *The Atlantic* in a 2008 interview that as her literary career has unfolded she has recognized how important the investigation and understanding of marriages has been to her. One question that arises for some readers is whether Lahiri is what might be called a romantic about marriage: does she believe in marriage as a site of durable affection, support, honesty, trust, sexual fulfillment – in short, love? Or does she have a more practical and moderate – maybe even skeptical, doubting, and disbelieving – take on marriage?

Which motif in the collection is the most important?

- (5) The story collection *Interpreter of Maladies* is in some ways inter-connected and unified through Lahiri's use of a short list of motifs that are woven in and out of the stories. That short list of motifs includes: saris and other articles of women's clothing; Indian cooking, such as curry, chutney, fish stew, cumin and other spices; driving in an automobile; and young children. There are at least a couple of others that recur throughout the text. All of these motifs serve a purpose, certainly, but which single motif has the most thematic importance? What thematic meaning(s) does the motif you have chosen develop most richly? Why is it of primary importance in interpreting *Interpreter of Maladies*?