



Interpreter of Maladies (1999), by Jhumpa Lahiri Selected Passages

Each of these selected passages from the stories in Jhumpa Lahiri’s collection, *Interpreter of Maladies*, can be used as evidence to support an argument on one or more of the debatable issues that we have introduced in this unit. Note that these are not the *only* passages from the story collection that can be used as evidence; you can find your own additional passages, too, and in fact to argue for certain positions on the debatable issues you will need to.

“A Temporary Matter”

“It wasn’t until after [Shukumar’s] father died, in his last year of college, that the country began to interest him, and he studied its history from course books as if it were any other subject. He wished now that he had his own childhood story of India” (12).

“Each day, Shukumar noticed, [Shoba’s] beauty, which had once overwhelmed him, seemed to fade. The cosmetics that had seemed superfluous were necessary now, not to improve her but to define her somehow” (14).

“Something happened when the house was dark. They were able to talk to each other again. . . . The fourth night they walked carefully upstairs, to bed, feeling together for the final step with their feet before the landing, and making love with a desperation they had forgotten” (19).

“[Shukumar] had held [his stillborn infant son] until a nurse knocked and took him away, and he promised himself that day that he would never tell Shoba, because he still loved her then” (22).

“They wept together, for the things they now knew” (22).

“When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine”

“When I saw [Mr. Pirzada’s pocket watch] that night, as he wound it and arranged it on the coffee table, an uneasiness possessed me; life, I realized, was being lived in Dacca first Our meals, our actions, were only a shadow of what had already happened there, a lagging ghost of where Mr. Pirzada really belonged” (30-31).

“But I could not concentrate. I returned to the blond-wood shelves, to a section I had noticed labeled ‘Asia.’ I saw books about China, India, Indonesia, Korea. . . . [Mrs. Kenyon] glanced at the cover, then at me. ‘Is this book a part of your report, Lilia?’ ‘No, Mrs. Kenyon.’ ‘Then I see no reason to consult it,’ she said, replacing it in the slim gap on the shelf. ‘Do you?’” (33).

“Most of all I remember the three of them [Mr. Pirzada and the narrator’s mother and father] operating during that time as if they were a single person, sharing a single meal, a single body, a single silence, and a single fear” (41).

“Though I had not seen him for months, it was only then that I felt Mr. Pirzada’s absence. It was only then, raising my water glass in his name, that I knew what it meant to miss someone who was so many miles and hours away, just as he had missed his wife and daughters for so many months” (42).

“Interpreter of Maladies”

“The little girl stuck out her hand. ‘Mine too. Mommy, do mine too.’ ‘Leave me alone,’ Mrs. Das said, blowing on her nail and turning her body slightly. ‘You’re making me mess up’” (48).

“Mr. and Mrs. Das behaved like an older brother and sister, not parents. It seemed that they were in charge of the children only for the day; it was hard to believe they were regularly responsible for anything other than themselves” (49).

“[Mr. Kapasi] wondered if Mr. and Mrs. Das were a bad match, just as he and his wife were. Perhaps they, too, had little in common apart from three children and a decade of their lives. The signs he recognized from his own marriage were there – the bickering, the indifference, the protracted silences” (53).

“It occurred to [Mr. Kapasi], as he, too, gazed at the topless women, that he had never seen his own wife fully naked” (58).

“‘Well, don’t you [Mr. Kapasi] 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?’” (65).

“A Real Durwan”

“Why demand specifics? Why scrape lime from betel leaf? Believe me, don’t believe me. My life is composed of such griefs you cannot even dream them.’ So she garbled facts. She contradicted herself. She embellished almost everything. But her rants were so persuasive, her fretting so vivid, that it was not so easy to dismiss her” (72).

“Her throaty impostures hurt no one. All agreed that she was a superb entertainer. . . . In short, over the years, Boori Ma’s services came to resemble those of a real *durwan*” (73).

“Sexy”

“I know what it’s like to be lonely,’ [Dev] said, suddenly serious, and at that moment Miranda felt that he understood her – understood how she felt some nights on the T, after seeing a movie on her own, or going to a bookstore to read magazines, or having drinks with Laxmi, who always had to meet her husband at Alewife station in an hour or two. In less serious moments Dev said he liked that her legs were longer than her torso, something he’d observed the first time she walked across a room naked. ‘You’re the first,’ he told her, admiring her from the bed. ‘The first woman I’ve known with legs this long.’ Dev was the first to tell her that” (89).

“After lunch they made love, on sheets covered with crumbs, and then Dev took a nap for twelve minutes. . . . At the end of twelve minutes Dev would open his eyes as if he’d been awake all along, smiling at her, full of a contentment she wished she felt herself” (94).

“‘Tell me,’ Rohin’s mother would shriek, ‘tell me if she’s sexy.’ In the end his father would admit that she was, and his mother would cry and cry, in a bed surrounded by a tangle of clothes, her eyes puffing up like bullfrogs. ‘How could you,’ she’d ask, sobbing, ‘how could you love a woman you don’t even know?’” (108).

“It was cold but sunny, and so [Miranda] walked all the way down Commonwealth Avenue, past the restaurants where Dev had kissed her, and then she walked all the way to the Christian Science Center. The Mapparium was closed, but she bought a cup of coffee nearby and sat on one of the benches in the plaza outside the church, gazing at its giant pillars and its massive dome, and at the clear-blue sky spread over the city” (110).

“Mrs. Sen’s”

“Eliot’s mother nodded, too, looking around the room. ‘And that’s all . . . in India?’ ‘Yes,’ Mrs. Sen replied. The mention of the word seemed to release something in her. She neatened the border of her sari where it rose diagonally across her chest. She, too, looked around the room, as if she noticed in the lampshades, in the teapot, in the shadows frozen on the carpet, something the rest of them could not. ‘Everything is there’” (113).

“‘Eliot, if I began to scream right now at the top of my lungs, would someone come?’ . . . Eliot shrugged. ‘Maybe.’ ‘At home that is all you have to do. Not everybody has a telephone. But just raise your voice a bit, or express grief or joy of any kind, and one whole neighborhood and half of another has come to share the news, to help with

arrangements.’ By then Eliot understood that when Mrs. Sen said home, she meant India. . . . ‘They might call you,’ Eliot said eventually to Mrs. Sen. ‘But they might complain that you were making too much noise’” (116-117).

“[Mrs. Sen’s] sari, a different pattern each day, fluttered below the hem of a checkered all-weather coat” (119).

“Eliot knew she wanted him sitting beside her because she was afraid. She dreaded the roar of the ignition, and placed her hands over her ears to block out the sound as she pressed her slippered feet to the gas, revving the engine” (119).

“‘Do you miss your mother, Eliot, these afternoons with me?’ [Mrs. Sen asked]. The thought had never occurred to him. ‘You must miss her. When I think of you, only a boy, separated from your mother for so much of the day, I am ashamed.’ ‘I see her at night.’ ‘When I was your age I was without knowing that one day I would be so far. You are wiser than that, Eliot. You already taste the way things must be’” (122-123).

“‘These are things that happened the day I left India,’ [Mrs. Sen said]” (128).

“Eliot looked through the tiny window in the camera and waited for Mr. and Mrs. Sen to move closer together, but they didn’t. They didn’t hold hands or put their arms around each other’s waists” (130).

“The first day, just as he was taking off his coat, the phone rang. It was his mother calling from her office. ‘You’re a big boy now, Eliot,’ she told him. ‘You okay?’ Eliot looked out the kitchen window, at gray waves receding from the shore, and said that he was fine” (135).

“This Blessed House”

“‘We’re not Christian,’ Sanjeev said. . . . [Twinkle] shrugged. ‘No, we’re not Christian. We’re good little Hindus’” (137).

“A few ashes had fallen to the floor where [Twinkle] had been standing. [Sanjeev] bent down, pinched them between his fingers, and deposited them in his cupped palm. . . . Although there were elements of tragedy and struggle in the Fifth Symphony, he had read, it was principally music of love and happiness. . . . He was of average height as well, and had wished ever since he had stopped growing that he were just one inch taller” (140).

“It was a quality he did not understand. It made him feel stupid, as if the world contained hidden wonders he could not anticipate, or see. He looked at her face, which, it occurred to him, had not grown out of its girlhood, the eyes untroubled, the pleasing features unfirm, as if they still had to settle into some sort of permanent expression. Nicknamed after a nursery rhyme, she had yet to shed a childhood endearment” (142).

“Though she did not say it herself, he assumed then that she loved him too, but now he was no longer sure. In truth, Sanjeev did not know what love was, only what he thought it was not” (147).

“‘You have enough money in the bank to raise three families,’ his mother reminded him when they spoke at the start of each month on the phone. ‘You need a wife to look after and love.’ Now he had one: a pretty one, from a suitably high caste, who would soon have a master’s degree. What was there not to love?’” (148).

“Unlike the other things they’d found, this [bust of Christ] contained dignity, solemnity, beauty even. But to his surprise these qualities made him hate it all the more. Most of all he hated it because he knew that Twinkle loved it” (157).

“[Sanjeev’s] head ached from gin and his arms ached from the weight of the statue. He said, ‘I put your shoes in the bedroom.’ ‘Thanks. But my feet are killing me.’ Twinkle gave his elbow a little squeeze and headed for the living room. Sanjeev pressed the massive silver face to his ribs, careful not to let the feather hat slip, and followed her” (157).

“The Treatment of Bibi Haldar”

“‘Who takes me to the cinema,’ [Bibi said,] ‘the zoo-garden, buys me lime soda and cashews? Admit it, are these concerns of mine? I will never be cured, never married.’ . . . The doctor in charge of Bibi’s case, exasperated, concluded that a marriage would cure her. . . . Needless to say, Bibi was delighted by the diagnosis, and began at once to prepare for conjugal life” (161-162).

“But she was not our responsibility, and in our private moments we were thankful for it” (167).

“For years afterward, we wondered who in our town had disgraced her. A few of our servants were questioned, and in tea stalls and bus stands, possible suspects were debated and dismissed. But there was no point carrying out an investigation. She was, to the best of our knowledge, cured” (172).

“The Third and Final Continent”

“‘The pace of life in North America is different from Britain as you will soon discover,’ the guidebook informed me. ‘Everybody feels he must get to the top’” (174).

“‘There is an American flag on the moon!’ [Mrs. Croft exclaimed]. ‘Yes, madame.’ Until then I had not thought very much about the moon shot. It was in the newspaper, of course, article upon article. . . . The voyage was hailed as man’s most achievement. . . . The woman bellowed, ‘A flag on the moon, boy! I heard it on the radio! Isn’t that splendid?’ ‘Yes, madame.’ But she was not satisfied with my reply. Instead she commanded, ‘Say, “splendid”!’ I was both baffled and somewhat insulted by the request” (179).

“My wife’s name was Mala. The marriage had been arranged by my older brother and his wife. I regarded the proposition with neither objection nor enthusiasm. It was a duty expected of me, as it was expected of every man” (181).

“The astronauts, I had read in the paper, had seen [the American flag planted on the moon’s surface] fall before they flew back to Earth. But I did not have the heart to tell [Mrs. Croft]” (183).

“There was nothing I could do for her beyond these simple gestures. I was not her son, and apart from those eight dollars, I owed her nothing” (189).

“I realize that morning . . . it was my duty to take care of Mala, to welcome her and protect her” (190).

“Mala laughed then. Her voice was full of kindness, her eyes bright with amusement. . . . Mala rose to her feet, adjusting the end of her sari over her head and holding it to her chest, and, for the first time since her arrival, I felt sympathy. . . . As strange as it seemed, I knew in my hart that one day her death would affect me, and stranger still, that mine would affect her” (195).

“I like to think of that moment in Mrs. Croft’s parlor as the moment when the distance between Mala and me began to lessen. Although we were not yet fully in love, I like to think of the months that followed as a honeymoon of sorts” (196).

“We drive to Cambridge to visit [our son at Harvard University], or bring him home for a weekend, so that he can eat rice with us with his hands, and speak in Bengali, things we sometimes worry he will no longer do after we die” (197).

“Whenever [our son] is discouraged, I tell him that if I can survive on three continents, then there is no obstacle he cannot conquer. While the astronauts, heroes forever, spent mere hours on the moon, I have remained in this new world for nearly thirty years. I know that my achievement is quite ordinary. I am not the only man to seek his fortune far from home, and certainly I am not the first. Still there are times I am bewildered by each mile I have traveled, 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” (197-198).