

# Literary Characters Analysis Essay: Interpreter of Maladies by Jhumpa Lahiri

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## Interpreter of Maladies

*Interpreter of Maladies* is a collection of nine short stories created by Jhumpa Lahiri. The book explores different themes and the characters largely paint an evocative picture of the Indian diaspora in the US. Lahiri writes about the immigrant experience, the division of cultures as well as examines both joy and difficulties of the process of assimilation. Combining the narrative styles with the themes ends in an exploration of the Indian as well as Indian-American experience shown through the eyes of many characters dealing with the culture, communication, marriage as well as gender role reversal.

Communication is the central theme in the stories and the author makes this aspect a representation and illustration of the difficulties that may wait for the immigrants. Problems arising in the process of communication belong both to the sphere of interpersonal communication and relations between the individual and the society, which are also represented by Lahiri as a certain conversation that may be very ineffective due to the “noise” present in the communication. Mr. and Mrs. Das in *Interpreter of Maladies* fail to communicate not because of the language barrier, but because of Mrs. Das being profoundly selfish and self-absorbed. With the help of this character Lahiri shows that listening and sincerity are among the most important prerequisites of successful communication. To make the communication successful, the parties, first of all, should not lie to themselves, so Mr. Kapasi’s question “Is it really pain you feel, Mrs. Das or is it guilt?” can be seen as an opportunity for communication to turn into an effective channel, but unfortunately it fails (Lahiri, 1999). The same failures in communication are described in *Temporary Matter*, where Shukumar and Shoba’s grief for the lost child makes them cease to communicate with each other. However, in this case, the situation brings some positive changes as they stop deluding themselves that their marriage is still workable. On the contrary, in *This Blessed House* Twinkle and Sanjeev have diverse outlooks on life, which causes an initial disagreement between the newlyweds. All these characters in the stories illustrate the theme of communicational breakdown, but at the same time they offer some hints and clues for making communication effective even under difficult and distressing circumstances of immigration and painful adaptation to a new culture.

Marriage and love are also very important themes in Lahiri’s collection of stories. Twinkle and Sanjeev’s marriage in *This Blessed House* is depicted by the author as a thing that may be of significant help in building a harmonious life in an environment that differs from the one the characters were raised in. Twinkle and Sanjeev have many arguments because of the different Christian icons and objects, which reflects the clash of cultures almost all immigrants face. However, Lahiri implicitly highlights that their love and respect may be the key to a harmonious future. Moreover, she points out that the dialogue these characters are at least trying to start can be seen as an effective method of maintaining love in marriage. In *Temporary Matter*, the death of Shukumar and Shoba’s child alters their marriage; they are

not the same people as they were when they met. In *Interpreter of Maladies* Mr. and Mrs. Das are openly hostile toward each other, which leads Mrs. Das to an attempt to unburden herself by telling Mr. Kapasi the secrets of Bobby's conception. However, she misses that Mr. Kapasi is not fit for such a role. He says, "She does not notice that he is uncomfortable with personal revelations and presses him for help even when he explicitly tells her that he cannot give it to her" (Lahiri, 1999). This story focuses on absence of the dialogue between people, which is certain to significantly damage their relations. In all these texts Lahiri explores different aspects of love and marriage, but she is consistent in her assumption about the importance of respect and dialogue between the partners.

Symbolism is a theme that is recurrent in *Interpreter of Maladies*. Lahiri focuses on the inner meaning and symbolism of certain objects highlighting the fact that life mostly consists not of ethical, philosophical and immaterial concepts, but of real things that make up the everyday basis of human life. In *Interpreter of Maladies*, Lahiri studies what a house in America may symbolize to an immigrant or a person from a foreign culture. Sanjeev found a house prior to the wedding. He was impressed by "the elegant curved staircases with wrought iron banisters" and other decorations (Lahiri, 1999). This focus on architectural elements of the house proves that Sanjeev, as well as many other characters from this collection of short stories, is in desperate need of some material proof of his dreams and ambitions. In *Temporary Matter*, the discussion between Shukumar and Shoba when there was a blackout filled with the image of India blackouts, is a symbol of emotional commitment experienced by them. Moreover, there is a symbol of "game" looming largely on Shukumar upon hearing what Shoba wants to do in her life. "It sickened Shukumar to know that she had spent these past evenings preparing for a life without him. He was relieved and also sickened. This was the point of the game" (Lahiri, 1999). The game was a symbol of emotional and manipulation severance. In *Interpreter of Maladies*, the sunglasses that Mrs. Das wears are a symbol of the status she wants to have and her contemptuous attitude toward other people. "She was wearing large dark brown sunglasses with a pinkish tint to them" (Lahiri, 1999). The symbols Lahiri uses in the above-mentioned texts are of different nature, but they perfectly reflect the inner psychological world of the characters and function as powerful elements in the process of analyzing the major themes of the stories.

Gender roles reversal is another theme in *Interpreter of Maladies*. The roles of husbands and wives are often challenged or reversed, which can be understood as a consequence of their passing from their native culture into a new one. Mrs. Das behaves unlike typical Indian women do; she is cold toward her own kids. She stereotypically embodies American flaws such as disrespect for culture, poorly behaved children, etc. Moreover, she is deliberately honest while speaking with Mr. Kapasi about her infidelity. She says "Bobby was conceived in the afternoon on a sofa littered with rubber teething toys" (Lahiri, 1999). Her behavior would be obviously condemned in the traditional Indian culture. In *Temporary Matter*, Shukumar, Shoba's husband, takes on the female role of domestic chores since he is a student, and Shoba carries the rest, including the financial aspects. In *This Blessed House*, Sanjeev argues with his spouse over some Christian objects in their Hindu house. Twinkle reassures Sanjeev that they still are "good little Hindus" despite her affection for Christian iconography (Lahiri, 1999). This situation goes against the Hindu gender role scenario, where a husband should reassure the wife and not vice versa. By highlighting the changes in gender roles, which are almost sure to occur when people move from one culture to another,

Lahiri wants to highlight that people should not fear them. She states that ways to assimilate into a new society and continue to respect the traditions of the homeland certainly exist.

To conclude, the characters in *This Blessed House*, *Interpreter of Maladies*, as well as in *Temporary Matter* have been used to illustrate different themes in the book. These themes are communicational breakdown, marriage and love, gender roles, and symbolism of material objects. These aspects of immigrants' life in a new environment were thoroughly analyzed in the stories. The author used these concepts as building blocks in the process of constructing her narrative.

## References

Lahiri, J. (1999). *Interpreter of Maladies: Stories*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.  
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