

ENGLISH TEXT SUMMARY NOTES
“Interpreter of Maladies”

Text guide by: Hannah Young

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NOTE: All page references refer to the following edition of the text:
Lahiri, Jhumpa, 2000 *Interpreter of Maladies*, Flamingo/HarperCollins, London

AUTHOR NOTES

Jhumpa Lahiri, a highly acclaimed writer, was born in London in 1967 to Bengali parents, and was raised in Rhode Island, USA. Throughout her life she has travelled many times to India to explore and experience her Indian heritage, where both of her parents were born and grew up. When she was a child, she wrote in notebooks, sometimes in collaboration with friends, and she also wrote for her school newspaper. By the time she was pursuing tertiary education, she was no longer writing fiction. She applied for several graduate English programs, but was rejected from them all, eventually taking a job as a research assistant at a not-for-profit organisation in Cambridge. She comments that ‘for the first time I had a computer of my own at my desk, and I started writing fiction again, more seriously. I used to stay late and come in to work on stories. Eventually I had enough material to apply to the creative writing program at Boston University’.

Eventually, she received an M.A in English, an M.A in Creative Writing, an M.A in Comparative Literature and the Arts, and a Ph.D in Renaissance Studies.

Her work has been recognised by the following awards:

- 1993 TransAtlantic Award from the Henfield Foundation
- 1999 O. Henry Award for short story ‘Interpreter of Maladies’
- 1999 PEN/Hemingway Award (Best Fiction Debut of the Year) for ‘Interpreter of Maladies’
- 1999 ‘Interpreter of Maladies’ selected as one of the *Best American Short Stories*
- 2000 Addison Metcalf Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters
- 2000 The New Yorker’s Best Debut of the Year for ‘Interpreter of Maladies’
- 2000 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction for her debut ‘Interpreter of Maladies’
- 2000 James Beard Foundation’s M.F.K. Fisher Distinguished Writing Award for ‘Indian takeout’ in Food & Wine Magazine.
- 2002 Guggenheim Fellowship
- 2002 ‘Nobody’s Business’ selected as one of the *Best American Short Stories*
- 2008 Frank O’Connor International Short Story Award for ‘Unaccustomed Earth’

Lahiri has been favourably likened to another American short story writer, Raymond Carver, and is regularly favourably reviewed in a range of mediums.

In addition to ‘Interpreter of Maladies’ (1999), her other published work includes ‘Unaccustomed Earth’ (2008) and ‘The Namesake’ (2003).

Lahiri currently lives in Brooklyn, New York.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

This chapter will focus on the experiences of Indians in the United States, as this is where the stories are located. However, there is certainly the potential to interpret the stories as generic among the wider Indian Diaspora, including within Australia, and the recent issues surrounding violent attacks on Indian students.

In the United States, people from the sub-continent are commonly referred to as either Indian Americans or Asian Indians, in an effort to differentiate between them and the Indigenous people. Within society, they are engineers, computer specialists, medical doctors, professors, CEO's and entrepreneurs, and they have had a significant impact on the social, economic and cultural life of the communities they choose to live in. Conversely, many Indian migrants live on or below the poverty line, and work several menial jobs in order to better their position in life and strive to offer their children new opportunities.

Although not limited to the United States, American Indians place a strong focus on higher education and, for many, this is the reason for the migration. There is an interesting demographic of American-born Indian American's who are fighting to develop their own sense of identity and belonging. They feel somewhat pressured by the tenuous ties they have to the homeland, primarily as a result of their parents, yet wish to forge their own paths in the world. Many young people now describe themselves as South Asian, and align themselves with people of Sri Lankan, Bangladeshi, Pakistani and Asian origin. Typically, the classification of an Indian is difficult, as one must take into account religion, language and, often, caste (a traditional social ranking). However, despite a desire to break free in many ways, there is still a strong and often confusing need to maintain links with Indian tradition and culture, despite its strictness.

Historically, the Indian Diaspora lies mainly in the subjugation of India by the British Empire, and the way in which Indians were forced into labour in foreign lands once the people were considered the property of the British. Over two million Indian men fought on behalf of the Empire in several conflicts including the Boer War and both World Wars. Those who survived then stayed behind to claim the land they had fought to protect as their own. In more recent times, the popularisation of Western - and particularly American - culture, the cliché 'land of opportunities', and ongoing conflict within the sub continent, have seen a surge in migrants, particularly among Indian people. This is also demonstrated by the creation of Bombay Hollywood, or 'Bollywood', as it is better known.

Among the Indian population, there are vast differences in the social and economic status, with just over half the country illiterate, which juxtaposes with the focus on higher education of migrants. Now, more than ever before, Indian people are beginning to assert their presence on the world. Lahiri's text depicts the struggle between loyalty and independence within a modern setting.