

# PostColonial Theory

- Focuses on the **reading and writing of literature written in previously or currently colonized countries.** The literature is composed of colonizing countries that **deals with colonization or colonized peoples.**

# PostColonial Theory

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- The Postcolonial theory is a term that **refers the theoretical and critical observations of former colonies of the Western powers and how they relate to, and interact with, the rest of the world.**

# PostColonial Theory

- Greatly **interested in the cultures of the colonizer and the colonized**, postcolonial theory seeks to **critically investigate what happens when two cultures clash** and one of them ideologically fashions itself as superior and assumes dominance and control over the other.

# Places of Postcolonialism

- Latin America
- Africa
- East and Southeast Asia
- South Asia
- Carrabin
- Polynesia
- United States

- Alejo Carpentier, *The Lost Steps* (1956);
- Carlos Fuentes, *The Death of Artemio Cruz* (1964);
- Julio Cortázar, *Hopscotch* (1966);
- Mario Vargas Llosa, *The Green House* (1968);
- Gabriel García Márquez, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1970);
- Manuel Puig, *Betrayed by Rita Hayworth* (1971);
- Marta Traba, *Mothers and Shadows* (1983);
- Severo Sarduy, *Colibri* (1984);
- Isabel Allende, *House of the Spirits* (1985);
- Silviano Santiago, *Stella Manhattan* (1985);
- Diamela Eltit, *The Fourth World* (1995);
- João Gilberto Noll, *Hotel Atlantico* (1989);
- César Aira, *The Hare* (1998);
- Ricardo Piglia, *The Absent City* (2000);
- Pedro Lemebel, *My Tender Matador* (2003)

# Africa

- Amos Tutuola, *The Palm-Wine Drinkard and His Dead Palm-Wine Tapster in the Dead's Town* (1953);
- Naguib Mahfouz, *Palace Walk* (1956–1957);
- Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (1958);
- Ousmane Sembène, *God's Bits of Wood* (1962);
- Bloke Modisane, *Blame Me on History* (1963);
- Tayeb Salih, *Season of Migration to the North* (1969);
- Wole Soyinka, *Death and the King's Horseman* (1975);
- Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Petals of Blood* (1977);
- Mariama Bâ, *So Long A Letter* (1980);
- Nadine Gordimer, *July's People* (1981);
- Buchi Emecheta, *The Rape of Shavi* (1983);
- Nuruddin Farah, *Maps* (1986);
- Assia Djebar, *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade* (1989);
- Abdelkebir Khatibi, *Love in Two Languages* (1990);
- J. M. Coetzee, *Disgrace* (1999);
- Tsitsi Dangarembga, *Nervous Conditions* (1988);
- Zoë Wycombe, *David's Story* (2001);
- Tahar Ben Jelloun, *This Blinding Absence of Light* (2002)

# East and Southeast Asia

- Eileen Chang, *The Rouge of the North* (1967);
- Pramoedya Ananta Toer, *The Fugitive* (1975);
- John Okada, *No-No Boy* (1975);
- Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, *Dictée* (1982);
- Wendy Law-Yone, *The Coffin Tree* (1983);
- Amy Tan, *The Joy Luck Club* (1989);
- Jessica Tarahata Hagedorn, *Dogeaters* (1990);
- Pak Won-so, *The Naked Tree* (1995);
- Yu Miri, *Family Cinema* (1996);
- Lan Cao, *Monkey Bridge* (1997);
- Cho Chong-Rae, *Playing with Fire* (1997);
- Murakami Haruki, *The Wind-up Bird Chronicle* (1997);
- Wu Zhuoliu, *The Fig Tree: Memoirs of a Taiwanese Patriot* (2002);
- Monique Truong, *The Book of Salt* (2003)

# South Asia

- R. K. Narayan, *Swami and Friends* (1944)
- Kamala Markandaya, *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954)
- Raja Rao, *Serpent and the Rope* (1960)
- Bharati Mukherjee, *The Tiger's Daughter* (1972)
- Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* (1981)
- Hanif Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990)
- Meena Alexander, *Fault Lines: A Memoir* (1993)
- Mahasweta Devi, *Imaginary Maps* (1994)
- Jhumpa Lahiri, *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999)
- Amitav Ghosh, *The Glass Palace* (2001)
- Rohinton Mistry, *Family Matters* (2001)



# Caribbean

- George Lamming, *In the Castle of My Skin* (1953);
- V. S. Naipaul, *Mystic Masseur* (1959);
- Kamau Brathwaite, *Rights of Passage* (1967);
- Aimé Césaire, *Tempest* (1986);
- Maryse Condé, *Heremakhonon* (1976);
- Wilson Harris, *Guyana Quartet* (1985);
- Derek Walcott, *Omeros* (1990);
- Jamaica Kincaid, *Lucy* (1990);
- Erna Brodber, *Louisiana* (1994),

# Polynesia

- Albert Wendt, *Sons for the Return Home* (1973);
- Keri Hulme, *The Bone People* (1985);
- Epeli Hau'ofa, *Tales of the Tikongs* (1983);
- Witi Tami Ihimaera, *Bulibasha: King of the Gypsies* (1994);
- Haunani-Kay Trask, *Light in the Crevice Never Seen* (1994);
- Sia Figiel, *Where We Once Belonged* (1996);
- Patricia Grace, *Baby No-Eyes* (1998)

# United States

- Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (1987);
- Américo Paredes, *George Washington Gomez* (1990);
- Leslie Marmon Silko, *Almanac of the Dead* (1991);
- Sandra Cisneros, *Caramelo, or, Puro cuento* (2002)



# *Interpreter of Maladies*

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Language, Culture, Understanding

# *INTERPRETER OF MALADIES*



*by Jhumpa Lahiri*





Lahiri is a second-generation Indian-American immigrant who experienced the “psychological dislocation” of feeling both at home in India and America, and simultaneously as if she belonged nowhere.





# MALADY

noun, plural -dies.

1. any disorder or disease of the body, especially one that is chronic or deep-seated.
2. any undesirable or disordered condition: social maladies; a malady of the spirit.

# OVERVIEW

- ❖ A book's collection of nine short stories published in 1999
- ❖ Won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and the Hemingway Foundation/PEN Award
- ❖ Chosen as The New Yorker's Best Debut of the Year and is on Oprah Winfrey's Top Ten Book List.
- ❖ The stories are about the lives of Indians and Indian Americans who are caught between the culture they have inherited and the "New World."



# CULTURAL ISSUES

- ❖ The estrangement and isolation that often afflict first- and even second-generation immigrants.
- ❖ An exploration of our understanding of other people and of ourselves.
- ❖ Gender roles , class and familial issues faces in both cultures
- ❖ Disjunction between Indian and American Cultures

# AUTHOR'S BACKGROUND






# The Author: Jhumpa Lahiri

- Indian-American
- She is a relatively new author.
- Her first short story collection, *The Interpreter of Maladies*, won the Pulitzer Prize in 2000.
- She has published 4 works (2 novels and 2 story collections): *The Interpreter of Maladies*, *The Namesake*, *Unaccustomed Earth*, and *The Lowland*.
- She focuses on the following themes in her writing: culture clashes, generational divides, the immigrant experience, and alienation.



# Her Work

- “Maladies,” as a collection, focuses on characters that struggle with:
  - cultural alienation, or not feeling as though they “belong” in a new nation
  - crossing national borders
  - Finding community and longing for “home”
- In a nutshell: she examines how it feels to be a foreigner in America.



# THEMES

- ❖ Questions of Identity
- ❖ Alienation and the Plight of those who are Culturally Displaced
- ❖ Care and Neglect
- ❖ The Danger of Romanticism



# Important Concepts

- **Diaspora**: the dispersion of a culture into other nations and societies.
- **Migration**: the either willful or forced exodus to another nation.
- **Borders**: these are both the physical and symbolic lines that divide us culturally, socially, etc.
- **Alienation**: feeling as though one doesn't belong in the society they either live in or have migrated into; often one is isolated from everyone including his/her native culture.

- Born **Nilanjana Sudeshna** to Bengali Indian immigrants in London –
- **Jhumpa Lahiri** - moved to the United States
- With the family nickname, "**Jhumpa,**"
- Earned a **B.A. in English literature** from Barnard College in 1989

- M.A. in English
- M.F.A. in Creative Writing
- M.A. in Comparative Literature
- Ph.D. in Renaissance Studies
- Boston University



- In **1999** - Lahiri published - first short story collection - **Interpreter of Maladies.**
- It dealt with the **issues of Indians or Indian immigrants, including their generation gaps in understanding and values**

- **American critics praised** the short story collection-
- **Indian critics** were hot and cold
- 
- Some of them felt that the collection **represented Indians negatively**
- Interpreter of Maladies was awarded the **2000 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction** and sold 600,000 copies

- Some of the themes:
- Maladies both **accurately diagnosed** and **misinterpreted**, matters both temporary and life changing, **relationships in flux** and **unshakable**, **unexpected blessings** and **sudden calamities**, and the **powers of survival**



- Traveling from **India to New England and back again-**
- Lahiri charts the **emotional voyages of characters seeking love beyond the barriers of nations, cultures, religions, and generations**



- 
- Imbued with the sensual details of both Indian and American cultures, these **stories speak with universal eloquence and compassion to everyone** who has ever felt like an outsider



- **Like the interpreter** of the title story—selected for
- both the **O. Henry Award** and *The Best American Short Stories*—
- **Lahiri translates** between the ancient **traditions of her ancestors** and the sometimes baffling **prospects of the New World**
-

- in the words of **Frederick Busch** –
- “a writer with a steady, penetrating gaze. Lahiri
- honors the vastness and variousness of the world.”
- 
- **Amy Tan** concurs:
- “Lahiri is one of the finest short story writers I’ve read.”

- **WHAT INSPIRED THE BOOK'S TITLE?**

- The title came to me long before the book did, or, for that matter, the story to which it refers.
  
- In 1991, during my first year as a graduate student at Boston University, I bumped into an acquaintance of mine.
  
- I barely knew him, but the year before, he had very kindly helped me move to a one-bedroom apartment.



- **WHAT INSPIRED THE BOOK'S TITLE?**
- When I asked him what he was doing with himself, he said **he was working at a doctor's office, interpreting for a doctor who had a number of Russian patients who had difficulty explaining their ailments in English.**

- As I walked away from that brief conversation, I thought continuously about what a unique position it was, and by the time I'd reached my house, the phrase “*interpreter of maladies*” was planted in my head

- I told myself, One day I'll write a story with that title.
- Every now and then I struggled to find a story to suit the title.
- Nothing came to me. About five years passed.
- Then one day I jotted down a paragraph containing the bare bones of “Interpreter of Maladies” in my notebook.

- When I was putting the collection together, I knew from the beginning that this had to be the title story, because it best expresses, thematically, the predicament at the heart of the **book—the dilemma, the difficulty**, and often the **impossibility of communicating emotional pain and affliction to others**, as well as expressing it to ourselves. In some senses I view my position as a writer, insofar as I attempt to articulate these emotions, as a sort of interpreter as well.

- **SOME OF YOUR SETTINGS ARE IN INDIA, OTHERS IN THE UNITED STATES. WHY THIS COMBINATION?**
- When I began writing fiction seriously, my first attempts, for some reason, were always set in Calcutta, which is **a city I know quite well from repeated visits with my family.**

- These trips to a vast, unruly, fascinating city so different from the small New England town where I was raised shaped my perceptions of the world and of people from a very early age

- I learned that there was another side, a vastly different version to everything.
- I learned to observe things as an outsider, and yet I also knew that as different as Calcutta is from Rhode Island, I belonged there in some fundamental way, in ways I didn't seem to belong in the United States.

- .

- As I gained a bit more confidence, I began to set stories in the United States and wrote about situations closer to my own experiences. For me, that has been the greater challenge.



- What Distinguishes The Experiences Of Indian Immigrants To The United States From Those Of Their American-born Children?
- In a sense, very little.
- The **question of identity** is always a **difficult one**, but especially **for those who are culturally displaced**, as **immigrants** are, or those who grow up in two worlds simultaneously, as is the case for their children.

- The older I get, the more aware I am that **I have somehow inherited a sense of exile from my parents**, even though in many ways—superficial ones, largely—I am so much more American than they are.
- In fact, it is still very hard to think of myself as an American.

- For immigrants, the **challenges of exile, the loneliness, the constant sense of alienation, the knowledge of and longing for a lost world,** are more explicit and distressing than for their children.

- On the other hand, the **problem for the children of immigrants, those with strong ties to their country of origin**, is that **they feel neither one thing nor the other**.
- The **feeling that there was no single place to which I fully belonged bothered me growing up**. It bothers me less now.

- collection of nine short stories - explore –
- **themes of identity –**
- **the immigrant experience**
- **cultural differences**
- **love, and family**
  
- The **characters** are largely **Indian** or **Indian-American** and their stories together paint an **evocative picture of India's Diaspora**

- explores the **lives and loves of Indians** in their native land and in their adopted, Western homes
- critical and commercial success
- lauded for the **powerful storytelling** and **elegant themes**

- Lahiri **writes eloquently** about the **immigrant experience** and about the **divide between cultures**, examining both the difficulties and joys of assimilation.

- These immensely personal stories form - in one critic's opinion, a **story cycle**.
- Overarching themes and narrative styles culminate in an **exploration of the Indian and Indian-American experience-**
- through the eyes of a multitude of characters grappling with **themes of identity, ethnicity, love, and culture.**



- **The Immigrant Experience/Assimilation**
- The immigrant experience takes several forms in Interpreter of Maladies.
- For some characters the **transition to a new life is challenging but smooth.**
- The narrator looks forward to the **opportunity that the new country can afford**

- **Marriage/Love**
- Love and marriage are **complicated** in Interpreter of Maladies.
- A marriage is the beginning of a **new joint life for two people.**
- marriage is an **occasion of joy** but also of **secrets, silences, and mysteries.**

- **Communication**

- much of her writing is concerned with **communication and its absence.**

- **Miscommunication or unexpressed feelings** weigh on several characters, destroying their well-being

- **Parent/Child Relationships**
- As children grow older, the **relationship between them and their parents shift**, becoming either adversarial or enriched with understanding

- **Religion and Tradition**
- **Maintaining old traditions and customs** while **learning new ones is part of the assimilation** process for immigrants

- **Partition**

- Partition as a **historical event** and **as a metaphor** is employed by Lahiri.

- Characters are divided against others and also divided within themselves.

- Boori Ma (“A Real Durwan”) is a victim of Partition.

- **Partition**
- **Boori Ma is a refugee** who may or may not have lost her family and luxurious home in the forced exile of Hindus and Muslims from each other's territories.
- Her new life is in shambles and she lives on the fringes of society.
- Boori Ma represents the disastrous effects of the events of 1947
- (Her mornings were long... p.80)

- **Environment/Nature**
- The **environment** often reflects the **inner** turmoil of its characters.





- Awards
- 1993 – Trans Atlantic 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 Best American Short Stories

- Awards
- 2000 – Addison Metcalf Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters
- 2000 – "The Third and Final Continent" selected as one of Best American Short Stories
- 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

- Awards
- 2002 – Guggenheim Fellowship
- 2002 – "Nobody's Business" selected as one of Best American Short Stories
- 2008 – Frank O'Connor International Short Story Award for "Unaccustomed Earth“

- Awards
- 2009 – Asian American Literary Award for "Unaccustomed Earth"
- 2009 – Premio Gregor von Rezzori for foreign fiction translated into Italian for "Unaccustomed Earth" ("Una nuova terra"), translated by Federica Oddera (Guanda)
- 2014 – DSC Prize for South Asian Literature for The Lowland
- 2014 – National Humanities Medal

- Jhumpa Lahiri's Interpreter of Maladies –
- is it a **short story cycle** or simply a **collection of separate** and independent stories?

- Jhumpa Lahiri's Interpreter of Maladies –
- while it features diverse and unrelated characters, a variety of narrative styles, and no common locale – it is difficult to call

- the text even transcends national boundaries, being set in both India and the United States
- a deeper look reveals the intricate use of pattern and motif to bind the stories together —



- including the recurring themes –
- the barriers to and opportunities for human communication
- including marital
- extra-marital
- parent-child relationships
- and the dichotomy of care and neglect

- The popularity and critical success of *Maladies* in both the United States and India to the **delicate balancing of representations** the cycle as a whole.
- For example, the **cheating husbands** of the "Sexy" are balanced by the depiction of the **unfaithful Mrs. Dass** of "Interpreter of Maladies."

- Mrs. Sen's severe **homesickness** and separation from with the **adaptability** of Lilia's mother and Mala in "The Third and Final Continent."
- The balancing of the generally **negative depiction** of an Indian community in "A Real Durwan" with the generally **positive portrayal** in "The Treatment of Bibi" is yet another example
- Of Lahiri's balanced representations

- **Susan Mann** notes that **titles are key “Generic signals”** and that "collections that are not cycles have traditionally been named after a single story to which the phrase and other stories is appended... Generally placed first or last in the volume, **the title story represents what the author feels** is the best, or in some cases, the best known work.

- Scholars have noted many common themes among the stories, often focusing on the sense of displacement attached to the immigrant experience.



- In their analysis of "A Temporary Matter," **Basudeb and Angana Chakrabarti** make several claims regarding common themes in Lahiri's stories –
- for example, that "**this sense of belonging to a particular place and culture and yet at the same time being an outsider to another creates a tension in individuals** which happens to be a distinguishing feature of Lahiri's characters" and that Lahiri deals "with broken marriages"

- **Ashutosh Dubey** looks at the immigrant experience in three of the nine stories and notes that three more stories dealing with second generation Indian immigrants focus on the "**themes of emotional struggles of love, relationships, communication against the backdrop of immigrant experience**"

- In "Food Metaphor in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*"
- **Asha Choubey** traces her theme through five of the nine stories, analyzing their **representation of Indian food** and the use of food as metaphors for home and the connection between people.
- She also asserts that Lahiri's "**protagonists -all Indians- settled abroad are afflicted with a 'sense of exile'**"



- A **sense of exile** and the **potential for and frequent denial of human communication** can be found in all of Lahiri's short stories and indeed are the **defining, structuring elements of her short story cycle**
-

- Many critics have suggested **marriage as the unifying theme** for the collection, and **marriage is indeed a key element** of most of the stories.
  
- Even "A Real Durwan" has the subplot of Mr. and Mrs. Dalal's bickering and reconciliation.

- Mrs. Sen's marriage to Mr. Sen may not be the main focus of her story, but it does create an important backdrop for her homesickness and pertinent observations to child Eliot in “MRS. SEN’S”

- The one story that breaks with the theme of marriage or marital problems is “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine.”
- Although it depicts a married couple and their friend Mr. Pirzada, who is himself a married man, **the relationships at the focus of the text are those between Lilia and Mr. Pirzada and the trio that Mr. Pirzada and Lilia's parents temporarily create during East Pakistan's war of independence**

- As Lilia notes, "Most of all I remember the three of them 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"
- **Ironically** they achieve this unity as **their nations enter into the war** that will eventually allow East Pakistan to become the independent nation of Bangladesh

- Not only human connection but **human communication** is yet another important theme for the cycle which runs through this story

- all nine stories are **woven together with the frequent representations of extreme care and neglect**
- Repetitions of this dichotomy occur in a variety of communities including **whole neighborhoods, marital and extra marital relationships and between children and adults.**

- The need for “**care**” **are linked** to love, duty or responsibility, and homesickness.
- Images of neglect range from a dress that has slipped off its hanger to a car accident.
- Such images serve as augurs of the characters emotional states and process.



- "Interpreter of Maladies" similarly **focuses on a young couple with severe marital problems**, but their carelessness is most often evoked in their treatment of their three children.



- "Interpreter of Maladies" is a third-person narrative filtered through the point of view of Mr. Kapasi, the family's driver while sight-seeing in India.

- The story opens with the parents bickering over who will take their daughter to the restroom.
- Mr. Kapasi will later think that the family is "all like siblings. .. it was hard to believe [Mr. and Mrs. Das] were regularly responsible for anything other than themselves" (49).

- The first paragraph of the story notes that the mother "did not hold the little girl's hand as they walked to the restroom" (43).
- As in "A Temporary Matter," small signs of negligence add up to reveal deeper emotional difficulties and detachments.
- This otherwise unremarkable scene acts as foreshadowing for what may be called the twin climaxes of the story

- : the **attack on one of the boys by monkeys and the revelation of his illegitimate birth.**
- Notably it is the **popcorn that his mother has carelessly dropped** that draws the monkeys to her son as well as the fact that he is left unsupervised that leads to the attack.

- Mr. and Mrs. Das's lack of **carefulness in raising their children** extends to their carelessness in maintaining their marriage vows, at least on Mrs. Das's part.
- Although their driver, Mr. Kapasi, recognizes similarities between the Das's marriage and his own, he himself functions as a stark contrast to Mr. and Mrs. Das's lack of care.

- **Simon Lewis** has read this story as a rewriting and adapting of the trip to the Marabar Caves in E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India*, this time from the perspective of an Indian national, Mr. Kapasi in the role formerly held by Dr. Aziz



- Lewis's argument can be supported by by Mr. Kapasi's dream "of serving as an interpreter between nations" (Lahiri 59) which he fantasizes fulfilling through a future correspondence with Mrs. Das.





- The way in which Mr. Kapasi gives Mrs. Das his contact information is illustrative of their essential differences as characters: she hands “him a scarp of paper which she had hastily ripped from a page of her film magazine” upon which he writes “his address in clear, careful letters”. She then tosses “it into the jumble of her bag” .



- The clear differences in these two characters in their relationship to care or lack of care, specifically in relation to responsibility, makes their final disconnect inevitable.

- while they both can be seen longing for communication with others, Mrs. Das is a woman with a life of relative comfort and ease who yearns to be freed of the responsibilities of marriage and children, and Mr. Karpasi is a man who has given up his dreams to support his family and who only yearns for some recognition and interest in his life.

- By the time his address falls out of Mrs. Das's bag and is borne off by the wind, Mr. Kapasi has already let go of his fantasy of communicating across continents and between individuals.

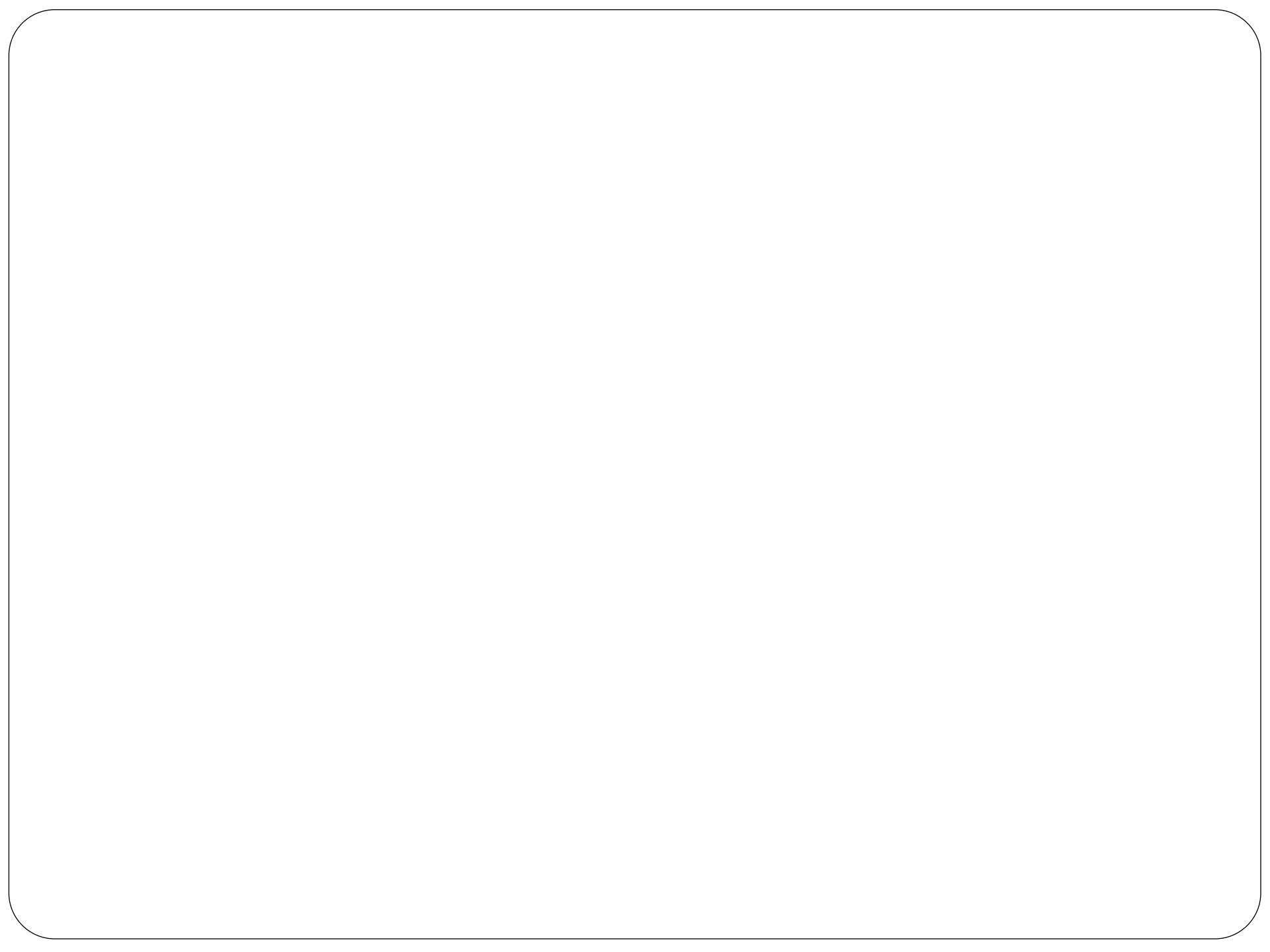
- We are given the freedom to create our own closure, and in many cases **our own judgments as to the outcomes suggested by Lahiri's narratives.**
- But with this freedom comes **our responsibility to read with care.**

- Reading the text as a short story cycle and not just a collection reveals Lahiri's careful balancing of a range of representations and her intricate use of pattern and motif.

- By reading the stories as a cycle, readers not only receive the additional layers of meaning produced by the dialogue between stories but a more diverse and nuanced interpretation of the members of the South Asian Diaspora

- “For surely it is a magical thing for a handful of words, artfully arranged, to stop time. To conjure a place, a person, a situation, in all its specificity and dimensions. To affect us and alter us, as profoundly as real people and things do.”
- —Jhumpa Lahiri





- The stories with an American setting presage a changing national cast of real and fictional characters. For instance, Mrs. Sen, the protagonist of her eponymous story, is hardly a fish out of water for feeling diminished without a daily regime of fresh halibut: at least 50,000 other immigrants from Bengal share her piscine tastes.
- 
- As for the stories set abroad, Lahiri ensures, with exquisite attention to exotic detail, that all of the cultural i's are topped by vermilion dots and their Indian t's refreshingly crossed.

- Arun Aguiar interviewed Jhumpa Lahiri on July 28, 1999 for Pif Magazine. He reports, “Searching for convenient ground led us to walk away from the conversation-filled Xando Café and Java & Jazz coffee shop in favor of an air-conditioned office kindly made available by Ann Benner of Mariner Books/ Houghton Mifflin near Union Square in Manhattan. Wearing a bare-armed black blouse, offset by brown glasses perched on her head and bracelets the color of bronze, Lahiri fielded questions with ‘If it’s Tuesday, it must be Belgium’ insouciance.”

- Arun Aguiar: If I may, I'm going to start this discussion by taking up one of the 9 stories. To set this up, will you please summarize the story titled "The Treatment of Bibi Haldar"?
- 
- Jhumpa Lahiri: It's about a misfit, a young woman, living in a rundown building in Calcutta, and she's in the care of her cousin and his wife, who run a shop. She's epileptic, and she lives a very sheltered life; so she's rather naïve. The story is basically about the town's involvement, to a greater and lesser degree, with her over her marriage and in the idea of finding her a husband.

- AA: She is a rare and unusual character, and one most people would not easily encounter. How on earth did you get to know the Bibi Haldar's of India so well?
- 
- JL: From going to India, and observing people. For that story, I took as my subject a young woman whom I got to know over the course of a couple of visits. I never saw her having any health problems – but I knew she wanted to be married. She lived in the same building as my aunt and uncle, and we struck up a friendship, not terribly deep and abiding, but a friendship, nevertheless. I learned from my aunt that she had some epileptic-like disease...
-

- The timeless Indian Tales of the Panchatantra, like Aesop's Fables, often end with a moral. Your stories primarily dwell on relationships.
- 
- JL: Relationships do not preclude issues of morality. When I sit down to write, I don't think about writing about an idea or a given message. I just try to write a story (which is hard enough). And there's obviously a message, or a moral, or something (smiles). I think that's good — but it's not something I actively think about, to be honest with you.
- 
- AA: You've read from Interpreter to Indians, to Asian American groups, and to general audiences in bookstores. Have their reactions differed?
- 
- JL: The reactions haven't differed; the concerns have been different. When I read for a predominantly Indian audience, there are more questions that are based on issues of identity and representation. That also happened in England last week. Some Indians will come up and say that a story reminded them of something very specific to their experience. Which may or may not be the case for non-Indians. But I've also been receiving incredibly touching letters from people who are not Indian, not women, but (I'm assuming) older American men commenting on the story [The Third and Final Continent] in The New Yorker's recent fiction issue about a young man's odyssey in the United States, and connecting to it in a way that I find quite remarkable.

- I have lived in the United States for almost 37 years and anticipate growing old in this country. Therefore, with the exception of my first two years in London, "Indian-American" has been a constant way to describe me. Less constant is my relationship to the term. When I was growing up in Rhode Island in the 1970s I felt neither Indian nor American

- Like many immigrant offspring I felt intense pressure to be two things, loyal to the old world and fluent in the new, approved of on either side of the hyphen. Looking back, I see that this was generally the case. But my perception as a young girl was that I fell short at both ends, shuttling between two dimensions that had nothing to do with one another.



- At home I followed the customs of my parents, speaking Bengali and eating rice and dal with my fingers. These ordinary facts seemed part of a secret, utterly alien way of life, and I took pains to hide them from my American friends. For my parents, home was not our house in Rhode Island but Calcutta, where they were raised

- I was aware that the things they lived for--the Nazrul songs they listened to on the reel-to-reel, the family they missed, the clothes my mother wore that were not available in any store in any mall--were at once as precious and as worthless as an outmoded currency.

- I also entered a world my parents had little knowledge or control of: school, books, music, television, things that seeped in and became a fundamental aspect of who I am. I spoke English without an accent, comprehending the language in a way my parents still do not. And yet there was evidence that I was not entirely American. In addition to my distinguishing name and looks, I did not attend Sunday school, did not know how to ice-skate, and disappeared to India for months at a time. Many of these friends proudly called themselves Irish-American or Italian-American. But they were several generations removed from the frequently humiliating process of immigration, so that the ethnic roots they claimed had descended underground whereas mine were still tangled and green. According to my parents I was not American, nor would I ever be no matter how hard I tried. I felt doomed by their pronouncement, misunderstood and gradually defiant. In spite of the first lessons of arithmetic, one plus one did not equal two but zero, my conflicting selves always canceling each other out.

