

Questions for Discussion –

‘Temporary Matter’

1. What does Shukumar’s vision of station wagons and juice boxes represent? Why do they add to his anxiety and also act as a comfort to him?
2. How does their individual work reflect their personalities?
3. What is the anticipated trajectory of grief? Does it always work this way? How does society respond to those dealing with grief?
4. How do Shoba and Shukumar each deal with their own grief? Without knowing the final confession, why might Shukumar be finding it harder to cope?
5. Shukumar anticipates the confessions Shoba might make (page 16). What do these fears represent?
6. Make a chart of the confessions that each make. How do they compare?
7. Why might Shoba be treating the house like it was a hotel?
8. How do Shoba and Shukumar compare with their parents? What do we learn about the parents from the story?
9. What does Shoba dating the recipes tell us about her personality?
10. What is the power outage forcing Shoba and Shukumar to do?
11. Why does the would-have-been nursery soothe Shukumar and have the opposite impact on Shoba?
12. Describe Shoba and Shukumar’s life before the loss of the baby?
13. For what does Shoba’s mother condemn Shukumar? Might this explain what happened after the baby’s death?
14. Again, not knowing the second last confession, what might account for their change in attitude towards each other once the power is out?
15. What do the confessions represent for Shoba and what do they represent for Shukumar?
16. Summarise the main themes in this story in bullet point form. For each theme find 2-3 quotes that reflect it.

Topic: Lahiri’s *‘Interpreter of Maladies’* explores the paradox of disconnectedness within families that should be connected. Discuss.

'When Mr Pirzada Came to Dine

1. How does Mr Pirzada's life in the US compare with his life in Dacca? Is the value of his scholarship different in Dacca than it is in the West?
2. Why was it important for Lilia's parents to find compatriots? What do these 'like-minded' people represent?
3. What role does civil war and ethnic/ religious tension play in creating artificial barriers?
4. Why is Lilia's father so insistent that she know something of the socio-political history of India?
5. Most schools teach their own national history and national identity. In increasingly diverse societies is there a place for the study of the histories of the migrant population?
6. Explain Mr Pirzada's attention towards Lilia.
7. What is meant by Lilia's realisation "...life, I realised, was being lived in Dacca first"? How else is this common migrant experience manifested?
8. Lilia observes "I wondered if the reason he was so smartly dressed was in preparation to endure with dignity whatever news assailed him." It is common to see middle aged and older migrant men dressing more formally. What might explain this?
9. What does the carving of the pumpkin represent?
10. Explain Mr Pirzada's concern as Lilia goes tick-or-treating.
11. Lilia's memories of the 12 day war are scant. Migrant families might shelter children from news of the 'motherland' yet there remains some cultural imperative for a child to be part of what is going on out of a sense of cultural identity/ cultural loyalty. What emotions might Lilia have been feeling?
12. What allows Lilia to stop her ritual of eating candy in remembrance of Mr Pirzada's family?
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13. Summarise the main themes in this story in bullet point form. For each theme find 2-3 quotes that reflect it.

Topic: *'Interpreter of Maladies'* explores the difficulties successive generations face in finding a place of belonging.' Discuss.

'Interpreter of Maladies'

1. What are some of the stereotypes one might expect of a typical Indian family?
2. What examples of cultural disconnectedness are apparent in this story?
3. What might explain Mrs Das' disengagement with the family outing? How would you describe her attitude?
4. Mr Kapasi says :They were all like siblings." What does he mean by this?
5. Describe Mr Das' interactions with the sights he sees along the way.
6. Why might Mrs Das be so interested in Mr Kapasi's work as an interpreter? Why does she describe it as "romantic"?
7. The Das' and Mr Kapasi both have failings. What are they?
8. What does Mr Kapasi see in Mrs Das' request for his address?
9. Is Mr Das unaware or simply disinterested in the state of his marriage?
10. Why does Mrs Das confess her infidelity to Mr Kapasi? How does he interpret her confession?
11. What do we learn of how Mr and Mrs Das met and married? What challenges might this and does this present?
12. What response does Mrs Das expect from Mr Kapasi? What "talent" is she expecting him to employ?
13. What response does she get and how does she react to it?
14. Why might Lahiri have chosen this as the title story of the collection?
15. Summarise the main themes in this story in bullet point form. For each theme find 2-3 quotes that reflect it.

Topic: 'The cure for our ills can often be elusive, despite our best efforts.' Discuss.

‘A Real Durwan’

1. Why might Boori Ma recite “the details of her plight and losses”?
2. Explain the scepticism of the residents when Boori Ma tells of her life before her arrival in Calcutta?
3. Read the attached history of the partition of India. What other social problems might this partition have caused?
4. What is the response of others to Boori Ma’s lament? Is another response appropriate?
5. What does the basin represent for Mr and Mrs Dalal?
6. Explain the dynamics of the building after Mr Dalal installs the basin.
7. What causes the further displacement of Boori Ma?
8. Why might it be easier to blame Boori Ma for their “troubles”? What does this suggest about a society where a caste system is so entrenched?
9. What might become of Boori Ma after her expulsion? How might this be explained to the Dalals?
10. Summarise the main themes in this story in bullet point form. For each theme find 2-3 quotes that reflect it.

Topic: If a society is judged on how it treats its most vulnerable, how might one judge India?

'Sexy'

1. Dev doesn't bother telling Miranda the significance of where he is from, explaining it's "Nothing you'll ever need to worry about." Explain Dev's dismissiveness and Miranda saving the magazine to look at it more closely?
2. What does Miranda's shopping trip tell us of her personality?
3. Dev admits to knowing "what it's like to be lonely". Why might he be lonely? Why is Miranda lonely? Does this explain their attraction?
4. Explain what it is about Dev that attracts Miranda.
5. Why might the Mapparium be Dev's favourite spot? How is it symbolic of their relationship?
6. What does Miranda expect will happen once Dev's wife has returned? What is the reality of what happens?
7. Contrast the things Dev shared about his childhood with the questions he asks Miranda. In what ways is there a difference?
8. What is the significance of Miranda's childhood experience with her Indian neighbours?
9. Why does Miranda begin spending time with Laxmi? Explain the paradox of the parallel story line between what is happening with Miranda and what is happening to Laxmi's cousin.
10. Explain Miranda's curiosity with the appearance of Dev's wife.
11. What does Rohin help Miranda realise?
12. Summarise the main themes in this story in bullet point form. For each theme find 2-3 quotes that reflect it.

Topic: "Lahiri's stories show that our interactions with those around us are temporary."
Discuss.

'Mrs Sen's'

1. What is Mrs Sen's purpose in offering her services as a babysitter?
2. What does the state of the apartment (furnishings) say about the Sens?
3. Mrs Sen tells Eliot's mother that "Everything is there." What does she mean?
4. What does Eliot's respect of Mrs Sen's ways suggest about him? How does this contrast with his mother?
5. Why might Mrs Sen's daily chopping ritual be so important?
6. Mrs Sen wonders that if she "began to scream right now at the top of my lungs" if anyone would respond. What is she really asking?
7. Why do both Eliot and Mrs Sen feel displaced in the place where they live?
8. What does the ability to drive represent for Mrs Sen and why is it so important?
9. Eliot gives Mrs Sen strategies for merging into traffic. What is significant about this?
10. Explain the difference between the way Mrs Sen approaches the daily mail and Eliot's mother.
11. How does the news in the letter compound Mrs Sen's displacement?
12. Why does Mrs Sen weep when Mr Sen is unable to collect the fresh fish for her?
13. What impressions do Indians have of the life of those who travel to live in the West? How does this contrast with reality and what challenges does this present?
14. Explain the relationship between Mr and Mrs Sen.
15. Why might Eliot not admit he has noticed changes in Mrs Sen's behaviour?
16. What might prompt the outing to the beach and Mr Sen's engagement with Mrs Sen and Eliot? How does this brief encounter contrast with the normality of Mrs Sen's life?
17. What compels Mrs Sen to drive without her husband?
18. Summarise the main themes in this story in bullet point form. For each theme find 2-3 quotes that reflect it.

Topic: "Lahiri's stories explore characters mired in sadness and a longing for home."
Discuss.

'This Blessed House'

1. What is the reader's initial impression of Twinkle?
2. The relics "meant something to Twinkle" but nothing to Sanjeev. Explain their different views.
3. How did Sanjeev and Twinkle meet and why did they marry after only knowing each other for four months?
4. Contrast the work that Sanjeev and Twinkle do. How is this reflected in their personalities?
5. As the story progresses what do we learn about the relationships between Sanjeev and Twinkle?
6. What might explain Twinkle's obsession with the relics and Sanjeev's anger towards them?
7. Explain the dynamics of the house warming party.
8. What sense do we get from Sanjeev's perspective of the future of the relationship?
9. Summarise the main themes in this story in bullet point form. For each theme find 2-3 quotes that reflect it.

Topic: "Strangers can often be those closest to us." Discuss with reference to Lahiri's stories.

‘The Treatment of Bibi Haldar’

1. The opening paragraph describes the various treatments that have been tried to cure Bibi Haldar. What does this suggest about the society she lives in?
2. What might Bibi Haldar be suffering from and why might this be so “hard” to diagnose?
3. What is the essence of Bibi Haldar’s lament? Why might this have been her primary concern in her situation?
4. What is Haldar’s attitude towards his cousin? What might explain this?
5. What do we learn in this story about the process of Indian courtship?
6. What does this story suggest about class, poverty and social expectations?
7. Summarise the main themes in this story in bullet point form. For each theme find 2-3 quotes that reflect it.

Topic: ‘A sense of belonging can eclipse every other necessity.’ Discuss in relation to Lahiri’s stories.

‘The Third and Final Continent’

1. What is different about the narration of this story? Why is this significant?
2. What is life like for the “penniless Bengali bachelors”?
3. What is the narrator’s initial view of life in the US?
4. What function does the guidebook play in this story?
5. What do we learn of the narrator’s life before leaving India?
6. What is the narrator’s view of marriage?
7. Why is the narrator so affected by the death of Mrs Croft?
8. Summarise the main themes in this story in bullet point form. For each theme find 2-3 quotes that reflect it.

Topic: ‘To what extent is the Indian expatriate’s journey as much a mental journey as it is a physical one.’ Discuss.

Questions for Discussion – General

1. What kinds of marriage are presented in the stories? One reviewer has written that Lahiri's "subject is not love's failure, ... but the opportunity that an artful spouse (like an artful writer) can make of failure ... " Do you agree or disagree with that assessment?
2. Lahiri has said, "As a storyteller, I'm aware that there are limitations in communication." What importance in the stories do miscommunication and unexpressed feelings have?
3. In "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine," what does the ten-year-old Lilia learn about the differences between life in suburban America and life in less stable parts of the world? What does she learn about the personal consequences of those differences?
4. For Mrs. Sen, "Everything is there" (that is, in India). What instances are there in these stories of exile, estrangement, displacement, and marginality—both emotional, and cultural?
5. What characterizes the sense of community in both the stories set in India and stories set in the U.S.? What maintains that sense, and what disrupts it?
6. Another reviewer has written, "Food in these stories is a talisman, a reassuring bit of the homeland to cling to." How do food and meal preparation maintain links to the characters' homelands? What other talismans—items of clothing, for example—act as "reassuring bits of the homeland"?
7. The narrator of "The Third and Final Continent" ends his account with the statement, "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." In what ways are Lahiri's characters bewildered?
8. In "Interpreter of Maladies," Mr. Kapasi finds it hard to believe of Mr. and Mrs. Das that "they were regularly responsible for anything other than themselves." What instances of selfishness or self-centeredness do you find in these stories?
9. In "Interpreter of Maladies," visitors to Konarak find the Chandrabhaga River dried up, and they can no longer enter the Temple of the Sun, "for it had filled with rubble long ago ..." What other instances and images does Lahiri present of the collapse, deterioration, or passing of once-important cultural or spiritual values?
10. What does Mrs. Sen mean when, looking at the traffic that makes "her English falter," she says to Eliot, "Everyone, this people, too much in their world"? What circumstances of life in both America and India account for people being "too much in their world"?
11. Rather than leave his weekly rent on the piano, the narrator of "The Third and Final Continent" hands it to Mrs. Croft. What similar small acts of kindness, courtesy, concern, or compassion make a difference in people's lives?

Questions for Discussion - Themes

1. 'This Blessed House' and 'A Temporary Matter' focus on communication and relationships. What do these stories say about the role of communication in effective relationships?
2. Discuss what Lahiri shows about the impact that acceptance and rejection have on individuals in 'Interpreter of Maladies' and 'A Real Durwan.'
3. In her collection, Lahiri is very much concerned with ideas of love and loss. Comment on the development of these ideas in two of the set stories.
4. Explain how Lahiri communicates her ideas about the human experience in 'A Real Durwan' and 'Interpreter of Maladies'.
5. The contrast of one culture against another is explored in 'This Blessed House' and 'Interpreter of Maladies'. Discuss.
6. 'This Blessed House' and 'A Real Durwan' by Jhumpa Lahiri explore the themes of power and control. How is power used and abused in these stories?
7. Loneliness and isolation are communicated through the characters of 'A Temporary Matter' and 'A Real Durwan'. Discuss.
8. What message does Lahiri communicate about the importance of honesty and trust in 'A Temporary Matter' and 'A Real Durwan'?
9. 'Interpreter of Maladies' and 'A Temporary Matter' both raise questions about the importance of family, children and communication. Discuss.

Questions for Discussion - Techniques

1. Examine the means by which Lahiri establishes the setting in 'Interpreter of Maladies' and 'A Real Durwan'. Show how the particular setting and characterisation contribute to the impact of the stories.
2. Lahiri uses shifts in mood to communicate the difficulties of relationships in her stories. Explore how this is achieved in 'A Real Durwan' and 'A Temporary Matter'.
3. 'This Blessed House' and 'A Real Durwan' both rely on the author's use of symbols and language to communicate her message effectively. Discuss.
4. Jhumpa Lahiri creates powerful and dramatic stories by using expressive language as well as personal revelation from characters through dialogue. Discuss with reference to 'Interpreter of Maladies' and 'A Temporary Matter'.
5. Discuss the use of tone, language, setting and other key stylistic devices in 'This Blessed House' and 'Interpreter of Maladies'.
6. 'This Blessed House' and 'A Temporary Matter' both feature a couple struggling in their relationship. Explore the stylistic devices used by Lahiri to create these powerful stories.
7. 'A Temporary Matter' and 'This Blessed House' are realistic and sympathetic accounts of young relationships. Show how the use of setting, structure and symbolism are used to sustain the interest of the reader in these experiences.
8. Discuss the way Lahiri has used characterisation and symbolism to create dramatic impact in 'This Blessed House' and 'A Temporary Matter'.

Essay Topics

1. 'Interpreter of Maladies' explores how one culture adapts to living within another. Discuss.
2. 'Interpreter of Maladies' examines the impact of acceptance and rejection on people. Discuss.
3. **Lahiri's stories show the importance of communication in relationships. Discuss**
4. The settings of Lahiri's stories are crucial in helping us understand their key concerns. Do you agree?
5. **'Interpreter of Maladies' shows that all relationships are fraught with difficulties. To what extent do you agree?**
6. It is Lahiri's use of the smallest of details that make her stories so powerful. Do you agree?
7. The strength of this collection lies in Lahiri's exploration of the daily dramas of everyday life. Discuss.
8. Happy, fulfilled characters are impossible to find in 'Interpreter of Maladies'. Do you agree?
9. **Although many of Lahiri's characters live abroad, their connections with their place of birth cannot be broken. How is this shown in Interpreter of Maladies?**
10. Whilst all the characters in the stories carry burdens in their hearts, few are able to
11. The clash of family values between old culture and the new.....
12. Jhumpa Lahiri has said; *'The characters I'm drawn to all face some barrier of communication.'* How are communication barriers explored in the collection?
13. 'It is impossible to bridge the gap between two people.' Discuss.
14. **'Jhumpa Lahiri's stories aren't about being Indian, but about being a human.' Do you agree?**
15. 'How people react to a situation is determined by their history and culture.' Discuss.
16. 'None of the characters in these stories are at peace.' Do you agree?
17. **'Cultural differences are more difficult to resolve than personal differences.' Discuss.**
18. 'To be different is a curse.' Discuss.
19. 'While these stories are told from a character's perspective, that character is rarely the central character.' Do you agree?

20. 'The people in these stories are searching for something they are not able to find.' Do you agree?

21. 'Immigrants shed their previous cultures with ease.' Discuss.

22. 'Mr Kapasi in the story 'Interpreter of Maladies' is not able to understand the Das family.' Do you agree?

23. 'Becoming part of the new society is more important to migrants than retaining their old society.' Discuss.

24. 'The stories people tell themselves are more important than their realities.' Discuss.

25. How does the use of imagery from the natural world influence these stories?

26. 'We can never broach the space between two cultures.' Discuss.

27. 'While the characters' lives remain largely unchanged, they do undergo a transformation.' Do you agree?