
The Language of Driving in Jhumpa Lahiri's Interpreter of Maladies

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Abstract

This essay examines the ways that language and driving intersect in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* to chart cultural conflict, either between immigrant and host culture, or tourist and local culture. In "Mrs. Sen's," an Indian woman's alienation from her new-found surroundings in California are told through the perspective of the child she babysits, Eliot. While Mrs. Sen is fluent in English, key moments where she fails to adapt, such as by driving a car, correspond to her decreased linguistic proficiency. The story charts her failure and rejection of US host culture primarily through her inability to drive, a crucial sign of belonging in US culture. In the title story of her collection, "Interpreter of Maladies," Lahiri examines the immigrant return, as the Das family visits their parents' homeland in India. They are fully assimilated to American culture with respect to dress, manners, and language. Their Indian tour guide and chauffeur, Mr. Kapasi, also works as a translator, but he ironically completely misinterprets Mrs. Das's words and actions. Throughout the story, his desire to read Mrs. Das' intentions occur through the rearview mirror of the car that he drives. Like the car that shelters the Das family from an encounter with the India outside it, the mirror distorts Kapasi's perception of Mrs. Das. The essay concludes by comparing how language and driving, both ostensibly tools to navigate cultural difference, can actually reinforce this difference.

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