

# Children and relationships in interpreter of maladies



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In society, people view children as innocent and ignorant beings because they lack worldly experiences. As a result, the fact that children can cause and shed light on problems in adult relationships is often overlooked. Jhumpa Lahiri's collection of short stories, *Interpreter of Maladies*, discusses the factors that contribute to the success or failure of relationships. In the stories, "A Temporary Matter," "Interpreter of Maladies," and "Sexy," children directly affect the fate of each romantic relationship. Therefore, Lahiri uses children as catalysts to propel relationships towards their destinies.

First of all, in "A Temporary Matter," the death of Shoba and Shukumar's child leads to their eventual separation. At the time their child is born, the two are physically far apart—Shukumar is in Baltimore and Shoba is in Boston. They each cope with the death of their child differently, and thus, they continue to drift away from each other. For instance, though unreasonable, Shoba blames Shukumar for not being with her at the time of the incident. Her once caring attitude disappears, as shown by the fact that she stops cooking and stops dressing nicely. Meanwhile, the two put as much distance between themselves as possible while still living together. Shoba takes on extra hours at work, and Shukumar sets up his study in the nursery, "partly because the room soothed him, and partly because it was the place Shoba avoided" (Lahiri 8). When Shoba finally tells Shukumar that she is moving out, Shukumar reveals the gender of their child to solidify their separation. Lahiri states, "These were the things he had told her. He had held his son, who had known life only within her, against his chest in a darkened room in an unknown wing of the hospital. He had held him until a nurse knocked and

took him away, and he promised himself that day that he would never tell Shoba, because he still loved her then, and it was the one thing in her life that she had wanted to be a surprise" (22). Shukumar withholds information about the child in an attempt to spare Shoba and save their relationship, but when he realizes it is destined to fail, he releases the information and thus releases Shoba.

While the child in "A Temporary Matter" causes a physical separation between Shoba and Shukumar, the children in "Interpreter of Maladies" symbolize the mental separation between Mr. and Mrs. Das. The disconnect between Mr. and Mrs. Das is evident from the start—the story opens with an argument over who should take their daughter to the bathroom. When Mrs. Das loses the argument, "She did not hold the little girl's hand as they walked to the restroom" (43). Tina is the daughter of both Mr. and Mrs. Das, and their reluctance to nurture her shows that they view their relationship as more of a burden than a team effort. Meanwhile, Bobby is not Mr. Das's son, but the direct result of Mrs. Das's infidelity. He is a constant reminder of Mrs. Das's guilt, and she tells Mr. Kapasi, "I feel terrible looking at my own children, and at Raj, always terrible" (65). Because Mr. Das does not know about Mrs. Das's adultery, they have no way to fix and no reason to end the unhealthy relationship. Thus, Bobby and the other children are simultaneously holding the relationship together and destroying it internally.

Unlike the children in "Interpreter of Maladies," Rohin helps Miranda break away from her unhealthy relationship. While Rohin tries to act mature by drinking coffee and memorizing capitals, he is still a child. In his naivety, he tells Miranda that sexy means "loving someone you don't know" (107).  
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Rohin learns the word “ sexy” in the context of his father’s affair, after his father decides to move in with a stranger he meets on a plane. Like his father’s mistress, Miranda is just a girl that Dev meets at a store. As much as she wants to learn about his culture and life, she will always be an outsider in the Indian grocery store and the outsider that Dev can only see on Sunday afternoons. Thus, Rohin’s incorrect definition of “ sexy” inadvertently sheds light on the fact that Miranda needs to move on with her life. Interestingly, the name “ Rohin” means “ ascending,” and Rohin helps Miranda ascend past her relationship with Dev.

In each of these short stories, children serve the purpose of ending communication in a relationship. Often times, the lack of communication is devastating–Shoba and Shukumar’s inability to communicate pushes them apart, while the Mrs. Das’s unwillingness to share her secret holds Mr. and Mrs. Das together in a suffocating marriage. However, in Miranda’s case, the decision to end communication with Dev is empowering. Since Lahiri uses children to catalyze relationships towards their destinies, these relationships must all be destined to lack communication.