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Interpreter of Maladies: A Commonplace for Cultures

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Imagine living a double life—being pulled in all different directions, between your past and your present, your family and your friends, your two different cultures. Jhumpa Lahiri knows that double existence and shows individuals living it in her book *Interpreter of Maladies*. *Interpreter of Maladies* is a collection of short stories that focuses on Indian and American cultures and the people caught between the two. Lahiri herself is an Indian-American; her parents emigrated from India to America themselves, and she therefore is able to draw from her own personal experiences to make her stories truly come to life. She stated in an article for *Newsweek* that “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.”

Lahiri is the epitome of a civically engaged storyteller who uses her writing as a form of service to society. Civic engagement itself is a person's attempt to better his or her community through providing a service to that community. Although some may argue that telling a story isn't civic engagement because it lacks service, I tend to disagree. If a storyteller creates a story in order to better society, the act of writing that story is in fact a service because the writer has to put work into producing it. It is evident that Jhumpa Lahiri is a civically engaged storyteller because she wrote *Interpreter of Maladies* to show readers that although people come from different cultures, we are all still human beings.

Lahiri uses commonplaces in her stories to show the links that bind the human race together as one collective community. As defined by Sharon Crowley and Debra Hawhee, a commonplace is any statement or bit of knowledge that is commonly shared among a given audience or a community (430). Through commonplaces, Lahiri is able to show that different cultures have similarities despite all of their differences. For instance, Lahiri puts characters in emotional situations where they experience pain. Readers are able to identify and thus sympathize with these situations—therefore, a commonplace is made between ethnic communities. The story “A Temporary Matter” is an example of an emotional commonplace. The story focuses on an Indian couple living in America, whose marriage is failing due to the loss of their child at birth. The first few pages of the story describe the couple's relationship before and after they lose the baby. It went from a strong marriage, full of love, to a weak marriage where Shukumar and Shoba (the Indian couple) become “experts at avoiding each other” (4). They no longer speak to each other and have lost all lines of communication. Shukumar, the husband, attempts to save his marriage, but it is unsalvageable. In the end of the story, Shoba, Shukumar's wife, decides to leave Shukumar, and it breaks his heart.

Sympathizing with this story is easy because it deals with the hardships of marriage, the pain of losing a child, and the issue of divorce, which are all common emotional situations that humans face. Divorce is especially connected to American culture: in America the divorce rate is about 50% compared to the divorce rate in India of approximately 1%, which are quite different statistics (“Divorce Rate”). I found it interesting that Lahiri would have her characters divorce when it is such an uncommon Indian practice. I believe she chose for the couple to divorce to show that people are naturally influenced by the customs that surround them, regardless of the culture in which they were raised. One magazine, *Village Voice*, describes Lahiri's writing as “Subtle scenic tales about people trying to reconcile the traditions they've inherited with baffling new cultures” (opening page *Interpreter*). The Indian couple reacts in a way more common to an American couple because they reside in America. Making this connection, Lahiri shows the conflict of deciding between the culture in which one is raised and the culture in which one lives in. Immigrants from any country can identify with such inner struggles between past and present, making cultural conflict another commonplace found in *Interpreter of Maladies*.

Often, instead of choosing one culture over the other, people will try to incorporate ethnic traditions into their new community. In Lahiri's story “Mrs. Sen's” eating and preparing Indian food is what keeps the characters connected daily with their homeland of India. Mrs. Sen, an elderly Indian immigrant, has only one daily link to India while living in America, and that is to cook. She dedicates hours each day to chopping vegetables and creating elaborate Indian feasts for just her husband and herself for dinner. She even decides to

get her driver's license in America just so she is able to drive to the fish market to get the specific type of fish she needs for her recipes. Making those traditional recipes allows her to balance the two cultures she is living and to feel closer to home.

Since recipes and traditions involving food are often passed down in families throughout the years, it is not uncommon for people to celebrate their cultures through preparing their own ethnic dishes. Using food as a replacement for home and family isn't limited to Lahiri's writing, and in fact can be seen as a commonplace in many cultures in real life. My boyfriend's parents, for example, immigrated to America from Portugal about twenty-five years ago and have very much adopted an American way of life. They speak fluent English, wear clothing found at local malls, watch the New England Patriots religiously, and follow American politics. Although the Camara family has become Americanized in so many ways, Mrs. Camara refuses to cook anything but Portuguese food and insists on having a large Sunday dinner every week. It is the link to her culture and family that she does not want to give up, like Mrs. Sen. Every night of the week Mrs. Camara prepares a traditional Portuguese meal from scratch and every Sunday prepares a Portuguese feast for her family. She has even taken the initiative to teach my boyfriend to make the cultural meals himself, because it is important for her American children to have that connection with their heritage as well.

Lahiri states that she believes being a writer makes her an emotional interpreter, and the heart of *Interpreter of Maladies* is "the dilemma, the difficulty, and often the impossibility of communicating emotional pain and affliction to others, as well as expressing it to ourselves" ("A Conversation"). I tend to disagree. I don't believe that Jhumpa Lahiri is an emotional interpreter because she is a writer. I believe she is an emotional interpreter because she is able to connect human beings from all walks of life under one culture by finding the commonplaces that nestle in between them all. If civic engagement is the act of bettering one's community through service, then Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*, is a civically engaged text because it provides readers with a deeper understanding of the commonplaces that connect the human race.

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