

Interpreter of maladies: lahiri's guide to forging one's identity



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In her collection of short stories entitled *Interpreter of Maladies*, Jhumpa Lahiri illustrates the difficulties that immigrants face when displaced and distanced from their culture. Each story serves as a different viewpoint on cultural experience, which allows Lahiri to bring together a detailed image of cultural displacement and the challenges it poses when forging one's identity. The importance of cultural ties is emphasized in the stories, as is the natural longing to achieve such connections. However, Lahiri shows the difficulties in doing so, especially with a younger generation that has only family ties to their culture because they have already been assimilated into American society. She also illustrates that distance is not always a disadvantage as she begins to show the reader the first steps to establishing one's identity and home. The stories in the collection *Interpreter of Maladies* illustrate the need and natural inclination people have to connect with their heritage and culture while conveying how to safely make those connections and forge one's identity.

In Lahiri's stories, there is a longing among the people of the younger generations to connect with their culture, a longing that seems impossible for those assimilated into American culture. In "Mr. Pirzada Comes to Dine," Lilia's mother declares proudly that her daughter was born in America as Lilia remarks, "She seemed genuinely proud of the fact, as if it were a reflection of my character" (Lahiri 26). However, Lilia desires to understand Mr. Pirzada and treasures the candies that he gives to her, as if eating one made a connection with her culture. As she observes him and her parents in the living room watching the news from overseas, she observes, "...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" (Lahiri 41). Lilia is an outsider among them because she is the first generation to be separated from her heritage by distance and she realizes in the end a connection with her heritage is impossible as she throws away the candy from Mr. Pirzada. In the short story "Interpreter of Maladies," Mrs. Das attempts to make a connection with Mr. Kapasi, which in turn would serve as a connection to her heritage from which she is far removed. Mr. Kapasi imagines corresponding with Mrs. Das after her return to America saying it would fulfill his dream of "serving as an interpreter between nations" (Lahiri 59). However, as his address floats away, Lahiri shows, as she did with Lilia, that a cultural connection cannot be forged when one has already become enveloped into American culture, which creates both a physical and cultural distance too great to overcome.

After her negative depiction of distance, Lahiri illustrates how distance can be used as an advantage. In "This Blessed House," Sanjeev becomes angry at Twinkle as she collects and displays the Christian paraphernalia all over the house to the point that he questions whether or not he loves her.

However, when she takes the partygoers to the attic, Sanjeev feels completely alone and distanced from her in the same way that he felt at the beginning of their relationship, when they were in a long-distance relationship. Distance allowed Sanjeev to imagine their life together and retain a romantic view of her fashioned through their phone conversations. He sees her shoes on the floor and "instead of feeling irritated, as he had ever since they'd moved into the house together, he felt a pang of anticipation at the thought of her rushing unsteadily down the winding

staircase..." (Lahiri 155). Distance forges a want to make a connection with Twinkle within Sanjeev. In "The Third and Final Continent," there is a similar occurrence. The narrator observes the world of Mrs. Croft, where she retains the pieces of America from her time that she is comfortable with and securely locks the rest of the world outside. She allots him physical distance, which allows him to create his own "country" where he can feel at home. In both cases, distance facilitates one to retreat away from reality and create a romanticized view of their world, an illusion that encourages and aids connections with others.

Alongside the positive view of distance and its usefulness, Lahiri also illustrates the dangers of forging this type of connection. In "A Real Durwan," Boori Ma creates her own identity by painting elaborate pictures of her past. In the same way that a romanticized version of reality can aid connections in the real world, Boori Ma's tales help her accept the harsh reality of her life. Those around her suspect that "she probably constructs tales as a way of mourning the loss of her family" (Lahiri 72). She grounds her identity in her savings and the keys she keeps in her sari. After these are stolen, her forged identity is shattered. She has failed as the guard to her identity and calls out for the people to believe her and her claims. However, when she shakes her sari to emphasize her point and nothing jingles, she can no longer believe herself. Similarly, Mrs. Sen attempts to keep India with her by placing rugs around the house and cooking traditional Indian food. She also continues to identify her home as India and states, "Everything is there" (Lahiri 113). However, the letters that she allows to come through shatter the illusion of being in India within her apartment because it reminds

her that home is thousands of miles away, where life is continuing without her. Boori Ma grounds her identity in concrete and insignificant things, namely the savings and keys, while Mrs. Sen continues to identify her true home as India, making both illusory coping mechanisms faulty and impossible to maintain.

In her short story collection, Jhumpa Lahiri establishes the need for a connection with one's culture and illustrates both the right and wrong way to forge such a connection. The strong longing to connect with one's culture is illustrated in Lilia and Mrs. Das as they both attempt to make unsuccessful connections with those that embody their heritage. Next, Lahiri illustrates that distance itself is not the problem by showing that it can be used to one's advantage. Distance can encourage a romantic view of the world, which aids one in making connections with others. At the end of "The Third and Final Continent," Lahiri finalizes her discussion about forging one's identity by illustrating the best way to do so. In the final lines, the narrator identifies his great accomplishment by stating, "While the astronauts, heroes forever, spent mere hours on the moon, I have remained in this new world for nearly thirty years" (Lahiri 198). He avoids the faults of Boori Ma and Mrs. Sen because he finds his cultural ties in nothing material and identifies his home as where he resides. He has forged an identity within this "third continent," which symbolizes the world he has created for himself that cannot be tainted or taken away from him. He claims, "...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" (Lahiri 198). He does not feel the displacement of being thousands of miles away from the country of his birth and yet he carries all

the miles he has traveled with him, making his identity a collection of where he has been and what he has accomplished that is grounded in himself.