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***Interpreter of Maladies*: A Rhetorical Practice Transmitting Cultural Knowledge**

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According to Robert Connors (1984) in Essays on *Classical Rhetoric and Modern Discourse*, "The traditional function of rhetoric in western culture has been to provide a theory of composition and communication for oral and written discourse" (p. 89). Classical rhetoric was understood as a technique of persuasion through oral, visual, and written language; however, contemporary rhetoric includes the analysis of written and visual texts. Contemporary rhetoric is influenced not only by ancient rhetorical theory, but also by the behavioral sciences and theories of literary criticism. This broadening of the field of rhetoric has allowed theorists to understand more fully the phenomenon of human communication and allowed predictive analyses of human behavior. Since human behavior and communication is strongly influenced by culture and environment, many contemporary theorists situate a rhetoric within the particular culture it is practiced, making comparisons among rhetorics to deepen our understanding of human communication across time. Or as George Kennedy (1998) states, "Comparative rhetoric is the cross-cultural study of rhetorical traditions as they exist or have existed in different societies around the world" (p. 1). These comparisons are important because they not only illustrate how communication varies within cultural settings, but they also reveal the nature of the conjectures that underlie the communication.

Through exploring various rhetorical practices across culture and time, Kennedy delivers a more expansive understanding of the motives and aims that direct these practices. He does not believe that rhetoric is an abstract concept, but rather a natural instinct within the human mind to preserve the genetic line (p. 4). If we accept Kennedy's premise, then we could claim that in literature authors may or may not overtly intend to persuade their audiences and that their rhetorical aim emerges naturally as a sign of cultural difference. Wayne Booth (1983), author of *Rhetoric of Fiction*, similarly argues that literary narrative is a form of rhetoric, an argument by the author in defense of certain cultural values. He further explains that due to this underlying purpose it is impossible to analyze a text without speaking of its author, because the being of the text is solely dependent on the existence of the author. Together with Kennedy's belief that rhetoric is the instinctual transmission of cultural values, and Booth's theory that authors are shaped by their cultural background, we could argue that the rhetorical aim of a literary text is to communicate an author's cultural situatedness.

Take, for instance, *Interpreter of Maladies* by Jhumpa Lahiri, a text whose cross-cultural themes create a natural opportunity to compare the presence of juxtaposed cultural values. First, Jhumpa Lahiri was born in England to Indian emigrants. She was raised in Rhode Island primarily as an Indian and not an American. Her father worked as a librarian and her mother a teacher; therefore, literature became a "natural" calling. Through *Interpreter of Maladies*, Lahiri recounts the lives of Indians and Indian Americans who are caught between the culture they inherited and the world in which they now find themselves. Lahiri herself struggles to understand Indian culture; for instance, she admits, "I'm lucky that I'm between two worlds…I don't really know what a distinct South Asian identity means. I don't think about that when I write, I just try to bring a

person to life" (Farnsworth, 2000). Lahiri uses her cultural background as an Indian American to create plots and characters that express the juxtaposition in her own life. She builds a balanced representation of her cultural group. She openly admits that *Interpreter of Maladies* is a reflection of her own experiences as well as those of her parents and their Indian immigrant friends (Farnsworth, 2000). Her remark brings to mind Kennedy's statement that "The origin of rhetoric in nature is that instinct for self-preservation and the preservation of the genetic line, the family, and the social group of which the individual is a member" (p. 4). However, since Lahiri is a member of two social groups she uses her collection of stories to represent both societies in order to transcend cultural boundaries. Lahiri's rhetorical aim is not to debate or to convince her readers which society is superior, but to provide them with a new cultural outlook that will allow them to transform their cultural perspective. As Wayne Booth suggests, the narrative is satiated with her "various commitments, secret or overt, that determine our response to the work" (p. 71).

This essay will illustrate how Lahiri utilizes her cultural underpinning to creatively juxtapose various elements within her short story collection, *Interpreter of Maladies*, in order to offer a balanced representation of her modern social group, the Indian diaspora within America. *Interpreter of Maladies* is used as an example of how cultural knowledge may be transmitted through literature-as-rhetoric whether or not an author is conscious of cultural influence.

Interpreter of Maladies is a collection of short stories comprised of characters of Indian descent living in the United States, particularly New England. There is a variety of plots within the collection that depicts a diverse society of immigrants. For instance, the stories' characters range from children trying to make sense of their home lives versus their school lives, to young adults unsure of being American and their connection to their heritage, and finally older adults who continually struggle to accept their new lives and forget their old. These characters react quite differently to their family, friends, and enemies, comprising an unbiased illustration of how varied Indian immigrants' personalities are despite their common ethnic background. It attempts to shatter previous stereotypes, by focusing on many different characters, places, and plots within the same historical and cultural context. Jhumpa Lahiri could not escape her inheritance, because it is within her genetic material, and she subconsciously constructs a short story collection that juxtaposes her two social groups literarily, symbolically, and rhetorically.
To show how this short story collection operates across these discourse categories, this essay examines the juxtaposition of the phrase 'interpreter of maladies.' For instance, 'interpreter of maladies' is both the book title, a particular story title, and also may be considered as a title for Jhumpa Lahiri herself. Furthermore, the book encompasses an intricate use of pattern and motif to bring the stories together; therefore, it may be analyzed as a short story cycle that is comprised of stories that are both carefully balanced and contrasted to create a universal representation.

The expression 'interpreter of maladies' may be translated to 'interpreter of troubles' and in reference to this text it is used to describe many things. First and foremost, it is the title of the book as a whole. For instance, the nine stories within the book are examples of

various aspects of Indian immigrants' lives in America. Each story interprets the characters' sacrifices, struggles, and triumphs—consequently, the trouble they separately undergo to survive. On the other hand, 'interpreter of maladies' is the title of a particular story in the book causing it to have multiple meanings within the text. For instance, the story focuses on Mr. Kapasi, whose occupation is to interpret patients' ailments in a hospital where little Gujarai is spoken. Within the story he is giving a tour to a family whose parents' marriage is failing. The wife/mother, Mrs. Das confides that one of their sons is not her husband's child and asks Mr. Kapasi for his help with this malady, her secret. He admits, however, that he is only an interpreter of languages, not of her guilt.

Finally, 'interpreter of maladies' may also be a title of Jhumpa Lahiri as an author. For instance, she stated that "I always say that I feel that I've inherited a sense of that loss from my parents because it was so palpable all the whole time I was growing up, the sense of what my parents had sacrificed in moving to the United States, and in so many ways, and yet at the same time, remaining here and building a life here and all that entailed" (Farnsworth, 2000). Therefore, Lahiri feels it is her obligation to interpret the troubling stories whether triumphant or not, of her parents and those similar to them. 'Interpreter of maladies' represents the theme of universality within the book and is represented literarily, symbolically, and rhetorically.

Further analysis of the juxtaposition within the book is revealed through analyzing how the stories are balanced to form a cohesive short story cycle. First, the short story cycle is a difficult genre to define, because the cycle form is indefinable. For instance, Forrest L. Ingram (1971) points out that a short story cycle is "similar to the moving parts of a mobile where the interconnected parts seem to shift their positions with relation to the other parts and as the cycle moves forward, the shifting internal relationships continually alter the originally perceived pattern of the whole cycle" (p. 17). Traditionally, a short story cycle includes independent stories with similar characters and locations that lead the reader through the book. However, *Interpreter of Maladies*, features independent and diverse characters, different narrative points of view, and various locales, thereby challenging the classical short story cycle structure.

Furthermore, readers commonly have difficulty comprehending part and whole transitions due to the overshadowing of their own personal values; however, this difficulty works to the advantage of a short story cycle (Brada-Williams, 2004, p. 1). For example, *Interpreter of Maladies* attempts to successfully represent an entire community within the limitation of a single work and Lahiri succeeds by harmonizing a variety of depictions instead of offering only a single representation as many novels or single short stories do. However, through these contrasting elements, Lahiri creates a balanced representation of Indian immigrant culture. For instance, she uses the stories to illustrate the many parts of the society and places these parts delicately to juxtapose them with one another and create a universal whole. This balance is shown through the cheating husbands in 'Sexy' and the cheating Mrs. Das of 'Interpreter of Maladies.' Also, Lilia of 'When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine' participates with relative ease in American childhood and this is balanced by the separation of the Dixit children in 'Sexy.' Finally, the first and last stories of the book, 'A Temporary Matter' and 'The Third and Final Continent' most

clearly suggest a balancing discourse through the parallelism of their basic plots. For instance, the first story 'A Temporary Matter' describes the death of a son and a destructive marriage; however, the last story 'The Third and Final Continent' tells a tale of the survival of both the parents' marriage and their son (Brada-Williams, 2004, p. 7). Consequently, Jhumpa Lahiri carefully places 'A Temporary Manner' first in order to illustrate the possible failure and the heroism needed for the characters in 'The Third and Final Continent' to succeed.

The beauty of *Interpreter of Maladies* is that Jhumpa Lahiri leaves the closure up to the reader and creates discourse in their sub-consciousness. By utilizing literature as a vehicle to transmit her cultural identity, Lahiri makes *Interpreter of Maladies* a symbol of her own existence along with others of the Indian immigrant social group. She unreservedly gives interpretative freedom, because she has placed each story carefully to provide the reader with a new cultural perspective that allows them to absorb a balanced representation of the society she feels obligated and pleased to narrate. Lahiri trusts they will read with care and gain a diverse and subtle outlook of her two social groups living within each other.

This analysis of *Interpreter of Maladies* substantiates Kennedy's argument that rhetorical practices, including literature, transmit cultural human knowledge. All authors are members of particular cultural niches that shape their existence and behavior; therefore, their literature naturally communicates their cultural values. In order to reveal the context and purpose of a literary work, one must first understand the author. This understanding will allow a reader to appreciate the societal differences of a text through the perspective of its creators, a culture and the author it shaped.

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