



Interpreter of Maladies (1999), by Jhumpa Lahiri Refutation and Response Activity

What distinguishes argument-centered instruction, more than any other pedagogical feature, is the weight it places on engaging with, responding to, and in many instances refuting alternative or opposing points of view. It is in the clash of ideas that your critical thinking is activated, practiced, developed, and tested. If you're arguing by yourself in a vacuum, you are not considering the most well-supported, powerful arguments that can be made opposing your position. When you consider those arguments, you are required to think hard about what evidence and reasoning supports them, evaluating the support for those arguments (from the Greek root of "critical," *kritikos*) and comparing it to the support for your arguments. Sometimes this necessarily means strategically conceding an argument opposing your own – accepting its validity, at least to an extent, while explaining how it is that you can still maintain your original position. Responding to and often refuting arguments is the *essence* of argument-centered teaching and learning. Responding to and often refuting arguments is quintessential critical thinking.

This Refutation and Response Activity asks you to think critically about arguments interpreting Jhumpa Lahiri's 1999 story collection *Interpreter of Maladies*, and to respond to and refute them so that a posited original position can be maintained. For each argument, you will make two responses, one in each of the two categories into which all counter-arguments or refutation arguments can be placed: the critical and the independent. The critical response critiques the evidence and reasoning in the original argument. Sometimes this means that it teases out and surfaces assumptions being made in the argument, assumptions which may be dubious. The critical response homes in on the most important flaw or flaws in the original argument. The independent response builds a full argument, with its own evidence and reasoning, to answer the opposing argument. It is termed "independent" because its focus is on producing new backing in response to the argument, rather than critiquing the opposing argument's backing.

All of positions and arguments below come out of the five debatable issues that we have been using to organize our study of Lahiri's collection of stories.

Take a close look at the model. Then for each of the questions, assume you are taking the posited interpretive position, and that you are responding to the argument provided to support an opposing position. You should produce the two strongest responses to the argument that you can, one critical and one independent. The order of the two types of responses is up to you; think through what is the more logical or intuitive ordering. You can include strategic concession in your response, but be sure that you maintain your originally posited position. Attempt to use different transition words or phrases in each one of your responses.

Model

Your position: Lahiri’s story collection *Interpreter of Maladies* depicts the alluring but ultimately unachievable aspiration of the immigrant to integrate and satisfyingly blend their native and mainstream American cultural heritages.

Opposing argument: The Indian-Americans in *Interpreter of Maladies* are generally highly successful people, an important societal metric for cultural adaptation. Sanjeev in “This Blessed House” is an upwardly-mobile professional, a new homeowner with other signs too of his and his wife Twinkle’s achievements. “‘You have enough money in the bank to raise three families,’ his mother reminded him when they spoke at the start of each month on the phone. ‘You need a wife to look after and love.’ Now he had one: a pretty one, from a suitably high caste, who would soon have a master’s degree. What was there not to love?” (148). The narrator, too, in the collection’s final story, “The Third and Final Continent,” rises from a lowly position as a poor immigrant in Boston to a highly successful engineer, over the story’s three decades. These characters have professional success that is far higher than the average level of success in this country. The final story’s narrator’s son is even admitted to Harvard University. In the United States, a person’s material, professional success is generally viewed as a proxy for their status in our culture; for this reason, most of the Indian-Americans in Lahiri’s fiction are symbols of an effective immigrant merging into the mainstream America. Through the indicators of some of the leading characters in *Interpreter of Maladies*, Lahiri seems to imply that Indian-Americans, despite their universally human problems, are exemplars of the American immigrant process of bringing together their prior and current cultural worlds.

First response (either critical or independent – circle one):

Transition/counter-claim: It is true that some of Lahiri’s leading characters are materially successful, but this doesn’t necessarily mean that they have been successful in blending their native culture with mainstream American culture.

Backing: Sanjeev, for instance, is affluent, but he is noticeably unhappy and socially awkward. His wife, Twinkle, is better able to blend with common American behaviors and norms, but that only serves to separate her from Sanjeev through the course of “This Blessed House.” And the end of the passage above – “What was there not to love?” – is likely intended ironically. The two should be in love, but Sanjeev hasn’t been able to adapt to his surroundings and his Americanized wife. Similarly, the narrator in the collection’s final story experiences interactions with Bostonians that leave both sides fairly perplexed. This country does value material success, but wealth isn’t equivalent to cultural integration, which is something more like feeling at home, at ease, comfortable, contented. Sanjeev, the final story’s narrator, and other

Indian-Americans in this work are successful in certain important ways, but they don't seem to feel at home, comfortable and content.

Second response (either critical or independent – circle one):

Transition/counter-claim: Additionally, there are Indian-American characters in *Interpreter of Maladies* that are more upfront about their being fractured between cultures.

Backing: In “Mrs. Sen,” for instance, the title character is a kind of symbol of the cultural awkwardness and disjointedness of the immigrant. Talking to the white American boy she is caring for, she asks a question with metaphoric cultural resonance for her. “‘Eliot, if I began to scream right now at the top of my lungs, would someone come?’ . . . Eliot shrugged. ‘Maybe.’ ‘At home that is all you have to do. Not everybody has a telephone. But just raise your voice a bit, or express grief or joy of any kind, and one whole neighborhood and half of another has come to share the news, to help with arrangements.’ By then Eliot understood that when Mrs. Sen said home, she meant India” (116). Mrs. Sen continues to call India home, despite being in America for years. She reveals to the boy Eliot one important reason for that in this passage: in India there is a greater sense of community, while America is much more individualistic. For Ms. Sen, and for other characters in Lahiri’s work, what they value most deeply is what divides them from their new residence in America, which is why it can never really feel like home to them.

1

Position: Jhumpa Lahiri, in *Interpreter of Maladies*, has a surprisingly skeptical, dark, disbelieving view of marriage.

Opposing Argument: While certain marriages in Lahiri’s story collection have their difficulties, older couples in the stories are generally models of mutual love and support. The narrator and his wife Mala, in “The Third and Final Continent,” have a sturdy and loving relationship, for instance. This is despite their being matched by their parents, not by their own selection. In Boston the narrator sees Mala clearly for the first time, and the way he would see her thereafter. “Mala laughed then. Her voice was full of kindness, her eyes bright with amusement. . . . Mala rose to her feet, adjusting the end of her sari over her head and holding it to her chest, and, for the first time since her arrival, I felt sympathy. . . . As strange as it seemed, I knew in my hart that one day her death would affect me, and stranger still, that mine would affect her” (195). Mrs. Sen and her husband have a similarly supportive marriage, and are of the same generation. The narrator’s observation of his wife’s features is distinctively affectionate. That these older, and by certain criteria wiser, couples have romantic marriages suggest that Lahiri views a more ideal and successful marriage as within our grasp. Their marital happiness would seem to lead us as readers to look for specific character flaws in spouses who are trapped in unhappy marriages in the stories.

First response (either critical or independent – circle one):

Transition/counter-claim:

Backing:

Second response (either critical or independent – circle one):

Transition/counter-claim:

Backing:

2

Position: Jhumpa Lahiri's depiction of Indian-Americans is overall and on balance positive, even admiring.

Opposing argument: Lahiri’s Indian-American characters are often characterized as distinctly selfish, self-interested individuals. For instance, the Indian-American couple in the title story are described as being too self-absorbed to be good parents. After Mrs. Das tells her daughter to “leave me alone” (48), the narrator’s free indirect discourse reveals: “Mr. and Mrs. Das behaved like an older brother and sister, not parents. It seemed that they were in charge of the children only for the day; it was hard to believe they were regularly responsible for anything other than themselves” (49). It is revealing that these characters are unable to take seriously anyone other than themselves, even their own children. There is something similar at work in the story “Sexy.” Dev is an attractive, successful Indian-American man, but his affair with Miranda is quite evidently self-gratifying and self-serving. Miranda begins to feel that after she and Dev make love, Dev is absent, he is no longer interested in her in any meaningful way (94). These characters’ self-absorption undermines the admirable traits that they have: the Das’ family togetherness rings hollow because they cannot truly think or care about others; Dev’s success rings hollow as a result of his vanity and egotism. These young and otherwise attractive Indian-Americans leave the reader with a bad taste because of their selfishness, and convey Lahiri’s critical appraisal of her ethnic peers.

First response (either critical or independent – circle one):

Transition/counter-claim:

Backing:

Second response (either critical or independent – circle one):

Transition/counter-claim:

Backing:

3

Position: Although many of the stories of *Interpreter of Maladies* are often read as having ambiguous endings, closer and more careful readings remove most of this ambiguity and suggest fairly fixed plot outcomes and thematic meanings.

Opposing argument: One method Lahiri uses to end her stories ambiguously is to have the story’s protagonist look out at the horizon blankly, without revealing their thoughts or feelings. In the story “Mrs. Sen’s,” the 11 year old boy Eliot (who may not be the story’s protagonist, but he is obviously a main character) has been taken by his mother from Mrs. Sen’s home, despite their growing close. The story concludes: “The first day, just as he was taking off his coat, the phone rang. It was his mother calling from her office. ‘You’re a big boy now, Eliot,’ she told him. ‘You okay?’ Eliot looked out the kitchen window, at gray waves receding from the shore, and said that he was fine” (135). The reader is not sure here whether Eliot is really fine, or whether he feels that something more profound has been lost in his removal from Mrs. Sen’s care. In “Sexy,” Miranda breaks up with Dev at the end of the story. “It was cold but sunny, and so [Miranda] walked all the way down Commonwealth Avenue, past the restaurants where Dev had kissed her, and then she walked all the way to the Christian Science Center. The Mapparium was closed, but she bought a cup of coffee nearby and sat on one of the benches in the plaza outside the church, gazing at its giant pillars and its massive dome, and at the clear-blue sky spread over the city” (110). This ending deprives the reader of the satisfaction of an emotional resolution. It isn’t clear how hurt or angry or regretful Miranda is here at the ending of her affair with Dev, or even how she understands the experience she has had with him. Lahiri’s stories that end with a kind of blank observation of the landscape make it plain that she is committed to the literary purpose and value of the ambiguous ending. The stories’ ambiguity mirrors the ambiguous thoughts and feelings of their lead characters.



First response (either critical or independent – circle one):

Transition/counter-claim:

Backing:

Second response (either critical or independent – circle one):

Transition/counter-claim:

Backing: