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ENG 336
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Assignment #2

Same Race, Different Cultures

In "The Interpreter of Maladies," Jhumpa Lahiri shows that even though people may be the same race, where and how they are raised is more prevalent in how they act. Through the contrasting characters of Mr. and Mrs. Das and Mr. Kapasi, Lahiri proves this postmodernist belief.

The similarities between the Das family and Mr. Kapasi are quite outweighed by their differences. Although the family is of Indian race, being raised in America has led them to default to the American culture. Mr. Kapasi notices this in the family almost immediately. He notices "the family looked Indian but dressed as foreigners did" (42). Tina has a "doll with yellow hair" (43) and Mr. Das acts like the atypical American tourist with his tour guide book and camera around his neck. Mr. Das tries to relate to Mr. Kapasi, saying that their jobs are similar, he as a teacher and Kapasi as a tour guide; but a short trip to a museum, where there are few original pieces is quite different than taking people around in the original home of the natural history Mr. Das teaches his children. Lahiri here is showing that physically, the Das family is a product of their culture. They may look Indian in features, but that is as Indian as the Das family gets.

The Das family's relationship towards each other goes against an Indian cultural belief of the family. In the Indian family, it is expected that parents take care of their children, children respect their parents, and the head of the household takes responsibility for his family. Mr. Kapasi notices almost instantly that the Das family dynamic is quite different than what he is used to, especially since the children have almost no discipline. Bobby, the youngest Das son, bluntly tells his parents, "I don't feel like it," when asked to do something (43). When Tina is playing with the car controls, Mr. Kapasi notices that "Mrs. Das said nothing to her" (44). Both of these reactions, the child disobeying the parent and the parent not trying to discipline go against the Das' racial beliefs, but not necessarily their cultural beliefs, as American parenting is quite similar to these reactions.

Mr. Kapasi's hope that he can overcome the cultural differences and reach out to Mrs. Das is dashed when he realizes that cultural differences can completely overshadow and similarities. Mr. Kapasi relates to Mrs. Das, seeing her as different from her touristy family. He notices the things she says and sees her less as a tourist and more as a close confidant. He sees similarities in their marriages and their outlooks on life, but when Mrs. Das reveals more of her life to Mr. Kapasi, it "depressed him" and he feels "insulted that Mrs. Das should ask him to interpret her common, trivial little secret" (58). Her confession bursts Mr. Kapasi's hope and leaves him hoping that he hadn't tried to seek a relationship with her, and he sees that their cultural beliefs are too starkly different.

Although people may seem to be the same, physically and racially, where they come from and the culture they have been raised in is more dominant when it comes to their behavior and outlooks on life. Lahiri's characters display this postmodernist opinion as they are compared and contrasted to show that being Indian can mean two completely different things.

Discussion questions:

1. How do we see the opposite of this in America? (being from the same country but having different cultural beliefs)
2. How do the Das' family reflect their Indian ignorance in the story?