

FROM THE INSTRUCTOR

The final paper of WR 098 asks students to think critically about a theme in at least three different texts, two essays from their *Globalization* anthology and the novel *The Namesake* by Jhumpa Lahiri. Their critical enquiry then leads them to formulate a conceptual problem and a well-reasoned response, allowing them to practice the kinds of rhetorical moves that they will employ in WR 100 and WR 150. WR 098 students tend to become attached to one or two themes that reappear in unique ways throughout our many readings, often establishing personal connections between the texts and their own experiences as international students and foreign language learners.

Sofia latched on to the themes of home and identity early on, but it wasn't until she read Humera Afridi's essay that the personal connection and the debate became clear. Sofia spoke with both me and her classmates about her definition of home and her views on identity, which became more problematic once she began considering the varied configurations of identity (and, specifically, cultural identity) within the many other course readings. Ultimately, Sofia's undeniable passion for the topic, her thorough engagement in each stage of the writing process, and her consistent questioning of alternate points of view led to a thought-provoking argument within the nature versus nurture debate.

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WR 098: Academic Writing for ESL Students 2

FROM THE WRITER

Writing this essay was a very challenging experience for me. I struggled a lot with thinking of an interesting topic to connect the novel and the two short narrative essays and with trying to keep my readers focused throughout the essay without forgetting the main message. Then I remembered how strongly I connected to Afridi's experience and her understanding of home and, conversely, how strongly I opposed Gogol's change of identity in *The Namesake*. I therefore decided to explore the debate of nature versus nurture, further inspired by my own experiences creating my identity based on where I am from, what I understand and feel close to my heart as home, and where and with whom I feel safe to be my true self. I had never thought about all of these issues before coming to study in the U.S., but since the first day I started my new life here, I have felt as though I am living in a fake reality away from my true home. Going through the process of creating this paper, I realized that even though I had strongly believed that nurture is what truly shapes our identities I had to acknowledge that nature does determine a part of our personalities.

SOFIA KONSTANTINIDOU is a rising sophomore and was born and raised in Athens, Greece. She has not yet chosen a major as she loves Biology but has not figured out what to specialize in. Even though she has no idea what path she is going to follow in life, she has always had two dreams: to help anyone in need and to travel the world. She just moved to the United States one year ago, so she misses her home greatly and is still adjusting to her new life in the United States. Sofia would like to dedicate her work to her WR 098 professor, Lesley Yoder, as she helped her improve her writing and created a safe and welcoming environment in class to express and talk about her fears and questions.

IDENTITY CRISIS

Identity is the mark of one's personality and it is important to explore how each one of us understands and chooses to form it through two basic factors: nature and nurture. In Julian Hill's essay "In Search of Black Identity in Uganda," the author narrates his experience when he visited Africa for the first time, wishing to find a sense of belonging. As an African-American with a long-lost connection to his African roots, he travels to Uganda to reconnect with his heritage, but once he is there he realizes that identity is not only based on race and culture. Even though Hill's realization is important in order to understand that race and nationality are not the only factors that define him, Humera Afridi in her essay "A Gentle Madness" shows how her own identity was formed by identifying as Pakistani and by being emotionally connected to Pakistan. In her essay, Afridi describes her last memory of Pakistan during the war, a memory that has haunted her whole life and defined who she is. Her narrative has been created from fragments of that old memory that have been glued together through multiple descriptions of that day. Both authors enter the debate of whether identity is based either on nature or nurture as Hill comes to understand that not only nature determines one's identity and Afridi strongly believes that nature and nurture can work together to help someone identify with an ethnic group and find a sense of belonging within it. So, based on these two views, what are the factors shaping identity and how important are ethnic and cultural roots in defining who we are? Although I agree with Afridi's view on identity being related to a nation and to her meaning of "home," I disagree with Hill's perspective of identity being primarily and entirely based on one's biological traits and race. Nature, which involves race, nationality and biological traits, is an important aspect of identity, but nurture and how identity is socially constructed by one's personal experiences and what one attaches to the meaning of "home" play a bigger part in defining one's essence. A person can choose who and what they want to identify with, whether that be the same culture they were raised in or a different one.

Identity is more defined by nurture than nature as it is connected with the shared experiences, memories, and aspirations one has with a certain group of people and the sense of belonging one feels within that group. In the essay "In Search of Black Identity in Uganda," Hill visits Africa because he believes that it is a big part of his identity and that he is entirely connected to Uganda based on his African race and heritage. Hill travels to Uganda with the mindset that he is going to be accepted by the local people and that he is going to find the sense of belonging he was looking for. His naiveté is obvious from the very beginning of his narration as he mentions that "Africa was my second home. I had never been there, though" (53). Hill is unable to understand that Uganda cannot be his home as he has never been there before and does not share experiences with that place. However, after staying some days in Africa, he realizes that the natives see him as an outsider and his perception on what "home" means changes. By staying within the local community, Hill understands that he is not a part of the community as he has not been through the economic and political struggles that the Ugandans have been through. It is only when someone shares

experiences and feelings with other people of the community that he is a member of that place and it is only through these experiences that one can find a sense of belonging.

At the end of his essay, Hill wonders whether “these Ugandans in town would think of me differently, or would see me only in passing. I knew both of these responses were possible. And truthfully, the same probably went for how I might think about them” (61). Hill comes to understand that trying to define an unfamiliar place as “home” is unrealistic and unattainable. Hill realizes that Ugandans have come together only when they have a common goal to change their lives by sharing similar life experiences and that race and culture do not necessarily make someone a part of that group. Through Hill’s observations we can assert that being a part of a group based on race and ethnicity and feeling that you are a part of a common goal by having similar experiences with the other members are two totally different things. Even though Hill makes a valid point on creating a sense of belonging within one’s racial group by having similar personal experiences and common aspirations with these people, he overlooks the fact that identity is also directly linked with what one chooses to understand as “home” and one’s emotional connection to that place. “Home” is where one feels emotionally and mentally connected to and where one is able to find a sense of belonging with the people attached to that place.

Many would probably challenge my view by insisting that “home” is always the place of one’s origins, including one’s heritage, race, and culture. Yet, is it always the case that “home” is where a person and his or her ancestors comes from, or is it more complex than that? For every person, the word “home” elicits different memories and feelings particular to a certain place. Due to these memories and feelings, an emotional connection is formed between a person and what becomes “home.” Afridi expresses the importance of nationality in creating an emotional attachment to the place one calls “home.” In her personal narrative “A Gentle Madness,” she reveals her inner feelings of pain and despair about leaving Pakistan and the way that her cultural roots have defined her, but also how being Pakistani follows her wherever she goes. Afridi reveals that her last memory of Pakistan has become the center around which her identity revolves. She emphasizes the importance of this memory through the use of metaphor, saying that the memory “thrusts into [her] days, dappling and splicing them, in a macabre ceremony of remembrance, of a place that is always elsewhere, whose heart is that excruciating space below ground where the most exquisite music trickles in, informing virtually every moment of [her] present” (52). Her bittersweet and greatly emotional words uncover her pain and show how this memory about the loss of her nation’s place of origin still haunts her. Moreover, her sudden separation from that place highlights her own feelings about the struggle to identify as a Pakistani. For Afridi, identity means embracing the place where she comes from, even if that means to constantly feel that something is missing, to not have a place to be connected to. She has formed her identity by gaining a sense of belonging in terms of upholding her nation through the shared feeling among all Pakistanis of missing “home.” Afridi emphasizes the fact that only because she feels attached to Pakistan and calls it “home” she defines herself as Pakistani, thus proving that nature but mostly nurture define someone, as emotional connections and a sense of belonging within a specific ethnic group and place are the factors that create one’s character.

While Afridi emphasizes how crucial it is to have a deep emotional connection and shared experiences to feel at “home,” Jhumpa Lahiri demonstrates in her novel *The Namesake* that one’s birthplace and shared memories do not guarantee a sense of belonging. Through the main character, Gogol Ganguli, a first-generation American with Indian immigrant parents, Lahiri presents a unique

situation in which the protagonist travels back and forth between the country of his birth, America, and the country of his parents and ancestors, India. His experiences and sense of belonging in America have mostly shaped his personality, yet he still seems lost in America. At the same time, particularly early in the novel as Gogol is growing up, he knows and understands his Indian heritage and traditions, but generally rejects them. Along with his parents, Ashoke and Ashima, Gogol visits India for long periods of time, but Gogol and his sister, Sonia, feel that “though they are home they are disconnected by the space, by the uncompromising silence that surrounds them. They still feel in transit, still disconnected from their lives” (Lahiri 87). Unlike Afridi and her Pakistani heritage, Gogol chooses to distance himself from his Bengali heritage, even though he has shared experiences with other Bengali people by knowing the language and undergoing several cultural traditions based on his parents’ persuasion. His whole life Gogol has been split between two different cultures, Bengali and American, and as a result, he never finds a place to call “home.” Although he has Bengali experiences, he does not share the same feelings with his family and doesn’t identify as Bengali. Once he is eighteen years old, Gogol, who has always despised his name, chooses to change his name to Nikhil (Nick for short), which enables him to create a new personality based on his personal experiences and the way he feels about himself. “Home” and his identity become his own invention rather than decided by birthplace or heritage. As mentioned above, both Lahiri and Afridi illustrate that nurture, defined as one’s personal experiences and feelings, is what determines one’s identity. However, Afridi shows that someone can be attached to a place based on shared experiences with other people from the same ethnic group and find a sense of belonging within that community, whereas Lahiri through Gogol opposes Afridi by presenting Gogol not sharing the same feelings with his Bengali family of calling India “home” and not being able to belong somewhere as he is constantly split between two identities. Despite the fact that the two authors may have different point of views on this issue, they both show that a person can choose either who or what they identify with, whether that may be the culture they were raised in or not.

“In Search of Black Identity in Uganda,” “A Gentle Madness,” and *The Namesake* illustrate the complex debate of whether nature or nurture determines one’s identity. In a multicultural environment, one can feel like losing one’s identity or not being able to find a sense of belonging in a group or a place. Nature is considered to be an important factor in one’s identity, but according to all authors, nurture is what mostly defines one’s whole essence. This idea is presented in Hill’s essay, but the author fails to emphasize the importance of attaching personal feelings and memories to what one calls “home”. According to Afridi, identity is directly linked to one’s feelings and what one understands and brings to mind at the sound of the word “home.” However, even in today’s world, a world filled with racism and outright rejection, those who are oppressed never give up on their identity. As Afridi presents in her narrative, she feels that her Pakistani identity follows her anywhere she goes (51). This feeling of belonging and having a place to call “home” is essential for the majority of people, but Lahiri shows us through Gogol that not everyone feels that deeply connected to a place, but rather creates an identity based on what one has experienced growing up and understands. To sum up, all authors could agree upon the fact that identity is the core of our entity, and that entity has to be attached to a sense of belonging; otherwise, we would lose ourselves and everything that represents our identity.

WORKS CITED

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