

As a young girl, I was not always fond of reading. Frankly, I found it boring, though I was very good at it. It wasn't the reading itself that bored me, but rather the mundane storylines with the usual characters. I craved to see a protagonist on the cover page who allowed my darker, South Indian features, to find their literary counterparts. I longed for a character to eat the same *Dal Tadka* that I ate at home. But instead, I was met with protagonists who felt very different than myself. One day, at the Upper Saddle River library, I asked the librarian for a book, a book that was different from what I was used to reading. She led me to a book titled *Raja's Pet Camel*. On the cover was a character, confident and poised, whose features, to my surprise, reminded me of my own—dark skin, dark hair. I felt the love for reading grow within me, the love for seeing someone who reminded me of myself. Now, as a page for the Upper Saddle River Library, I spend my Saturday mornings in the quiet comfort of books. I love the seemingly insignificant and overlooked parts of my routine. When I am shelving a book in the Adult Fiction section of the library, there is still a gap in the shelves from where the book was when it was last taken out. When a young child comes up to me, encouraged by her father, to ask me if I can locate picture books about dogs. Sometimes, a group of loud children comes running through the library through the parts of the library that are designated for adults. In those instances, I can't help but envision them reenacting scenes from their beloved books, seeking a tangible connection to the characters within the pages.

Although libraries are meant to be quiet, I believe they are one of the loudest places in the world. Not because of the screaming children who frequent the library, but rather because of the unspoken conversations that are had while reading. In many ways, the paradoxical loudness of the library has taught me about my own identity, specifically as it relates to my culture. Through reading and exploring

public libraries, I have been introduced to a variety of perspectives, many that deviate from my own. In my AP English Literature and Composition course, I was introduced to the Interpreter of *Maladies*. As I turned the pages of Lahiri's stories, I found echoes of my own struggles and triumphs, moments of recognition that illuminated facets of my identity previously obscured. Through their experiences, I confronted my own sense of self within the realm of my cultural heritage. The library became a sanctuary where I could engage in silent dialogue with authors who spoke to the heart of my cultural experience, fostering a deeper understanding of myself and the world around me. With each book I borrowed, each narrative I absorbed, the library echoed with the resonance of unspoken conversations.

As I reflect on my journey, it is clear that my affinity for the library grew steadily over time. What started as occasional visits soon became regular, almost daily occurrences. As I spent more time there, surrounded by the comforting scent and feel of old books and the quiet hum of activity, I knew that I wanted to be a part of it in a more meaningful way. The thought of working there began to take root in my mind, and before long, I found myself eagerly seeking out opportunities to join the library staff. As a shelver, I find joy in giving back to the library, helping readers in the same way I was once, and continue to be, assisted.