Paideia 111: Enduring Questions  
Summer Community Read  
Study Guide

This Study Guide is designed to help you prepare for your first class in Paideia 111. For the ancient Greeks, *paideia* meant education not just as “learning stuff” but education as development into full humanity. The term reflects a philosophy that education should both lead people to the knowledge needed for a full human life and should cultivate good character. *Paideia* is preparation for membership in a democracy.

By coming to Luther College, you have already committed yourself to a kind of *paideia*, since the Luther curriculum is based on the ideals of a liberal education, which similarly stress cultivating the whole person. Liberal education is committed to broad intellectual development rather than narrow career training. In the liberal arts, students use multiple approaches to a subject in order to reach a deeper understanding of themselves and the world. Our version of *paideia* begins with Paideia 111 and 112 that lay the groundwork for a liberal education by helping you develop skills of careful analysis and well-reasoned, articulate response. We hope this will help you develop the skills to read and understand challenging texts, and express your views in a way that others will respect. Further, Paideia 111 and 112 invite you to seek wisdom in community by joining with others to explore enduring questions and to share your ideas through discussion and writing.

Paideia 111 is the required Fall Semester foundational course for all incoming first-year students at Luther College. The title of the course, “Enduring Questions,” illuminates our organizational framework for your first year of study. The faculty teaching the course have selected important works that have embedded within them potential answers to the kinds of big questions humans have confronted in many times and many places. During each semester we will use these questions to focus our discussion of the assigned works.

Our first questions this year are: “Who are we? What does it mean to be human?” This seems deceptively simple, but consider the questions a bit. Does being human mean belonging to a specific species with certain physical characteristics? Might we be biologically a member of that species and not be “human”? To what extent is being human the result of nature or nurture? Are we, unlike other beings, “made in the image and likeness of God?” Are some of the people who are like us both physically and sociologically less than human? How would we judge that? What about those who follow different social and religious practices than we do? You might note that this litany of sub-questions reveals that our query can be answered biologically, cosmologically, and sociologically/psychologically.

Your examination of this question begins before you come to campus with your exploration of the Luther community summer reading text. This year we have selected Thrity Umrigar’s novel, *The Space Between Us* as the text to begin our study together. Umrigar is a consummate storyteller. She knew she wanted to write from an early age. She began her professional writing career as a journalist in Mumbai. The novel’s detailed sense of the life of the city comes from her seventeen years of reporting on the ethnic and class bound worlds of that place. She is the author of a number of novels and currently serves as Professor of creative writing and journalism at Case Western Reserve University. She will be the convocation speaker at your opening convocation in September.

Most of the action in the novel takes place in modern Mumbai, a city in somewhat the middle of the west coast of the Indian peninsula. Mumbai is one of the largest cities in the world in terms of population: the 2011 census gives the city’s population as between twelve and eighteen million people, with a density of 68,500 persons per square mile. Mumbai is the most important financial center in India, with the headquarters of the Reserve Bank of India and the country’s most important stock exchange. It is also an important national center for the production of manufactures, entertainment media, and news and publications. It is, in many and varied ways, comparable to New York and its economic, political, and cultural position in the United States.

The long and varied history of the city is embedded within the novel. So understanding the broad outline of the history of the region should inform your reading of the novel. Mumbai originated as a
fishing village on one of several small islands well south of the historically more important port city of Surat, at the mouth of the Tapti River. For centuries, Surat had provided Arabian Sea merchants access to the manufactures of northern and central India, particularly cotton textiles, which were exported everywhere along the western Indian Ocean littoral. This made Surat an entry point for the cash and bullion that fueled north Indian economies (and states), and also made it attractive to Europeans seeking a share of the trade in textiles and other commodities.

Mumbai’s share of the Indian Ocean trade was comparatively small, but significant enough to attract the attention of the Portuguese at the beginning of the sixteenth century, and to whom the island was ceded in 1534. The Portuguese, in turn, gifted the island as part of the dowry of Catherine of Braganza upon her marriage to the British king Charles II in 1661. Though the British East India Company began to construct a fort and commercial buildings after 1668, Indian merchants became interested in the colony primarily in the eighteenth century, as the Tapti River valley (and much of north and central India) became a political football, disrupting the certainty of Surat’s access to manufacturing sites and financial markets, especially in wealthy Bengal. A series of political and military victories between 1757 and 1765 by the British in Bengal meant that the west coast’s link to Bengal would now be forged by sea on East India Company boats, and merchants soon began to build trading-houses, store-houses, and manufactories.

The Portuguese called the island “Bom Bahia” (“good bay”). The British corrupted this to “Bombay” and the name was used officially until about 1980. Within the British East India Company’s administration, Bombay quickly became elevated to rank among the most important of the British colonial administrative cities, which included Madras and Calcutta. Bombay’s access to the cotton-growing country of central India made it the focal point for supplying Britain’s textile mills during the blockade of American cotton during the American Civil War (1861-65). Though the re-entry of American cotton caused Bombay’s cotton bubble to burst, the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 dramatically reduced travel time between Britain and India and made Bombay truly the gateway to India. All kinds of India’s commodities began finding their way to Bombay, and all kinds of businessmen and laborers followed.

This economic cosmopolitanism made Bombay a prime site for Indian nationalism, from the founding of the Indian National Congress in 1885 to the mutiny of Royal Indian Navy sailors in 1946. It is a culturally diverse city. In the 2011 census over 64% of the residents reported they were religiously Hindu, with another 69% in the city’s suburbs. Twenty-two percent of city residents report being Muslims, with Muslims making up 17% of the suburban population. Buddhists make up 5% of both the urban and the suburban population. Even though Christianity (the fourth largest religious group) hovers around 3% in the city and 4% in the suburbs, because of the size of the population this means there are over 446,000 Christians living in the metropolitan area. Although it is not home to any major religious sites, Mumbai’s diversity has made it a battleground for religious violence, notably in 1992 and 2002, and its sheer size made it a target for terrorism in November 2008. On November 2, 2008 orchestrated attacks at important cultural sites such as the Taj Mahal left 164 dead and 308 wounded.

Bombay’s economic relevance continued after national Independence in 1947, and the city’s ability to attract capital and labor meant that the built environment was unable to keep pace with population growth. Over the course of British rule, many public works projects linked the several islands together to form a single Bombay island, including many portions that sit below sea level on drained land. The older parts of the city, at the southernmost end of the island, tend to be taken up by government and business edifices, and some residences of families with old money. Going north, the general rule is that the city becomes newer, denser, and poorer, though the nouveaux riches have transformed parts of some neighborhoods. The middle and lower working classes often live in chawls. Originally built for the industrial workforce of the early twentieth century, these buildings have three to five stories, between ten and twenty one-room flats, and shared latrines. Privacy is minimal, but balconies and other shared spaces can promote supportive relationships across the population’s many lines of diversity. Bombay’s poorest classes inhabit shantytowns, many of which have acquired trappings of permanent settlements, despite
their technically illegal status. This has caused some problems when illegally-occupied land has been required for public works and other projects, such as the expansion of the Mumbai airport.

*The Space Between Us* is a novel that traces the parallel lives and complicated relationship of Sera Dubash, a middle-class housewife, and Bhima Gopal, her downtrodden, illiterate servant. Sera, a widow who endured abuse in her married life, lives with her pregnant daughter and son-in-law in modern Bombay (also called Mumbai in the novel). Bhima, abandoned by a husband who absconded with the couple’s son, lives in a Mumbai slum first with her daughter and then with her pregnant seventeen-year-old granddaughter. Employer and servant form a bond made all the stronger by shared domestic routine, shared heartbreak, and shared hope for their progeny. But while the two women enjoy daily tea and conversation together, Sera sits at a table while Bhima squats on the floor. Convention and bigotry work against the women’s friendship constantly. Divided by class, money, religion, geography, and politics, the two women manage for decades to maintain a friendship that defies the odds. This friendship is eventually doomed when competing family interests ultimately reveal the limit of their bond.

You will meet with your Paideia section during orientation to discuss these and other questions raised by *The Space Between Us*. Because orientation will be a very busy time, you need to complete your reading of *The Space Between Us* before you arrive on campus Saturday, August 31. The book should provide a provocative summer reading experience and stimulate good conversations about our humanity. The Paideia faculty looks forward to talking to you about your response to Umrigar’s story.

Below you will find questions that are based on the specific text of the novel. These questions are intended to help you focus on what might be discussed regarding the book. You are NOT expected to write out answers to all of these questions. They are intended to help you direct your reading and guide your thinking about the work. The best way to use these questions is to read them before you read the book. While you are reading keep the questions in the back of your mind. You might (based on the questions) underline key phrases in the narrative. You might jot a brief note to yourself either at the end of a chapter or in the margin of the text.

**Questions for the whole book:**

1. In this novel there is a consistent theme regarding people’s faces and expressions. In some cases it seems that the face reveals something about the person, in other cases the facial expressions serve to mask the person’s real nature or feelings. Pay attention to these instances as they occur. What do they communicate to us as readers about human relationships and interactions?
2. Pay attention to the relationships between people of the same generation and those of different generations. How do these people connect across social divides of class, religion, age, family ties and gender? And how do these social categorizations create “space between” them?
3. How do the parent’s and grandparent’s wishes for their children and grandchildren reveal the difficulties they have faced in life? How does the younger generation’s behavior reflect either an acceptance or rejection of their elders’ lives?

**Prologue:**

4. What clues does the prologue give us about what is to come in the novel? What question is the woman trying to answer?

**Chapter 1:**

5. What do we find out about Bhima’s life and character in the first chapter?
6. Why is Bhima angry and how does her anger affect her relationship with her granddaughter? Her actions? What other emotions affect her actions? Continue to pay attention to Bhima’s anger over the course of the book.
Chapter 2-4:
7. What do we learn in these chapters about Sera’s character, life and the Dubash family in general? How would you describe each character to whom we are introduced?
8. How do the perceptions of Dinaz’s pregnancy compare to those regarding Maya’s condition? What does this tell us about socio-economic values regarding human worth?
9. What do we learn about the relationship between Sera and Bhima? How do we learn this?
10. Bhima visits Maya’s college to uncover the truth about her condition. What does this visit show us about class, religion, relations among generations, and gender in Bombay/Mumbai? In what ways are these experiences similar to/different from yours coming to a new college in the U.S.?

Chapter 5-6
11. When she visits her mother-in-law Sera thinks about ghosts. Who are the ghosts that are featured in the story? What role do these specters of the past play in each character’s current life?
12. What does the interaction between Freddy and Feroz reveal about father/son relationships?
13. Sera thinks of her mother-in-law as “the monster,” why? What other monstrous (fearful, awful, non-human??) interactions do we see in these chapters? Who else acts monstrous in the novel as a whole?
14. Pay attention to the use of similes that compare people to animals in the novel. For example, Bhima thinks that her nosy neighbor is reminiscent “of the cobra at Mahalati temple.” Or she thinks “rumors are flying around the slum like black kites” (a kite is a bird). What do these similes reveal to us about human nature or about particular characters?
15. Why does Maya insist that Sera take her to the abortion clinic instead of her grandmother? What does this choice tell us about their relationship? About the role of social class in Indian society?
16. What do we learn about Bhima’s husband in her reverie about the past? How does this affect your sense of who he is as a person? How does it affect Bhima’s sense of herself and her attitude toward Maya? Pay attention to all the memories characters recall in the remainder of the novel, how do these influence your thinking about people and events in the novel?

Chapters 7-8
17. Chapters 7 and 8 revolve around the roles of men and women in creating good or bad marriages. When and where do we see positive images of marriage and married life? Who and what disrupts those images of marriage?
18. Female sexuality is also a significant issue in chapters 7 and 8. The characters explore questions of purity, chastity, legitimate and illegitimate sexual expression for women. Who receives support for representing the ideal of female sexual expression? Who is condemned? What are the differences between what is seen as legitimate and what is condemned?
19. What do you make of Viraf? What kind of guy is he as presented in chapters 7 and 8?
20. What do we learn about cultural interaction from the scenes in the market? Who is the balloon seller and what does he represent for Bhima at this point in the story?

Chapters 9-11
21. At the beginning of Chapter 9 Sera contemplates her body or the body in general. What does she think about the relationship between the human “self” and the body? How is her effort to comprehend this affected by Maya’s needs and by her own past?
22. Compare Sera’s reflection on Maya’s pregnancy to her own memories of physical and emotional abuse. In what ways are there parallels between the two circumstances?
23. What insight do we get into the source of the strong connection between Sera and Bhima? How does this connection, forged in pain, tie them together? Are there hints about the limits of this connection in the chapters?
24. Read carefully the story of the abortion. What are Sera and Bhima’s concerns? How do they compare to the concerns expressed by other characters? When and why do certain characters
flinch when the subject of the abortion comes up? How might this story be different if it were told from Maya’s perspective?

Chapters 12-13
25. Bhima thinks of herself as a machine. What makes her like a machine? How does this affect her hopes for Maya?
26. In the first part of Book 2 we learn about what Bhima sees as the curse on her family. What is that curse? Why does Bhima feel responsible for it?
27. Who is Hyder and what does his character teach us about human relations?
28. Human bodies once again occupy center stage in this section of the book. What new sense of the body do we get here? How do characters in the book react differently to the various bodies they encounter?
29. What do we learn about the human capacity for survival and for dealing with grief in this section of the book? What motivates the characters to go on despite the pain they have suffered?
30. How do the doctors in the narrative interact with different characters? What is the author trying to illustrate by her depiction of those we might expect to care deeply about the needs of others?

Chapters 14-15
31. Sera at the engagement party sits thinking, “She has heard some variation of this conversation her entire life.” What is the conversation? How does she feel about the nature of the dialogue? About those involved in the discussion? Is this a kind of conversation you have heard in your life?
32. Sera thinks she would like to trade her life for Aban’s? Why? And why might society be surprised by her desire to switch places?
33. Why doesn't Sera leave her husband when she realizes her life is filled with hate? Why doesn’t she allow her parents to help her? Is it just that she is convinced by Freddy papas claim that Feroz is a changed man?

Chapters 16-17
34. Bhima recalls a conversation with the Pathan balloon seller in which he talks about the Gods of Jealousy. How does she see this as applying to her own life?
35. How does what we learn about Gopal in this section affect your understanding of Bhima’s life and their marriage? What role do Sera and Feroz play in this story and what does that reveal about society and who counts?
36. Pay attention to people’s emotional states in this section. What kind of thrill do Feroz and Gopal seem to get out of their interactions with others? What do you think we ought to make of this? Are they malicious by nature or nurture?
37. In this section we finally meet Amit, Gopal and Bhima’s son, how does he fit into the story? What kind of person is he when we first meet him? How does he change and why?
38. Sera and other employers of domestic help in the story often give chocolate to their servants to take home to children and others? What does the chocolate represent? Is it an act of kindness and if so how? If not, why not?
39. Chowpatty Beach on the following map is inside the crook of the large bay at the bottom of the peninsula. The slum where Bhima lives for most of the novel is a few miles northeast of the beach. What does the seaside represent in the novel? How does it affect Bhima?
40. Who is the foreman and what role does he play in the story?
Chapters 18-19
41. What does the incident with the broom represent in the course of Bhima and Gopal’s marriage? What purpose does it serve in the narrative and plot? How does Gopal’s reaction compare to Feroz’s behavior earlier in the novel regarding Sera embarrassing him? Does Umrigar seem to be implying that all men are at heart violent? Or as one member of the Luther community asked about this book, are there any good men? What makes someone a good man in this work?
42. How does the narration’s moving back in forth from the present to the past affect your understanding of the characters and the circumstances of their lives? What does Bhima have to say about the place of the past in the present? What do you think about this?
43. What is in the letter and how does it destroy? How is its effect altered by the fact that Bhima herself cannot read it and Gopal could not write? How does the letter affect your understanding of Gopal? Who is at fault for what happened?

Chapters 20-23
44. What picture do we get of Feroz in this section? Is this just “the etiquette of grief”? (262)
45. What picture do we get of Viraf in this section? What picture do we get of Maya? How would you characterize their encounter at the beach, in the monster’s home? Or perhaps, who is the real monster in the story now?
46. What comparisons does this section draw between Dinaz’s pregnancy and Maya’s?
47. How does the text challenge us to think about bodies again within the context of birth and death?
48. How do these chapters ask us to rethink who is a saint and who is a sinner?

Chapters 24-25
49. The author has claimed this as a story about our need for “grace.” At the end of the novel who needs grace and who gets it? Who is free and who is imprisoned?
50. What picture do we get of Bhima and Sera at the end of the novel? How does the conflict over Viraf and Maya show us the limits of their relationship?
51. Look again for metaphors and similes that incorporate animals. Who are the beasts and who are the humans at the end of the story?
52. What do you think about the end of the book? What is up with the balloons? Is it a satisfying conclusion to this story? What does it seem to imply about human nature?
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