



# The Overlapping Of Nationality and Culture:A Study of Jhumpa Lahiri's Stories "When Mr Pirzada Came to Dine" And "The Interpreter of Maladies"

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Being an Indian by ancestry, British by birth and American by immigration, Lahiri is much interested in the large section of new generation Indian- Americans, their cultural traditions, value systems and relationships, their feelings for home and homelessness. In the narration of their social practices during birth, death, marriage and divorce, Lahiri attempts to iron out the cultural creases of the Bengali immigrants in America.

Lahiri projects the Indian immigrants of Bengali origin as economic refugees, self-chosen exiles and transnational hybrids who form a new generation of Indian- Americans in the American national culture as a separate ethnic identity and cultural 'other', they feel that their native culture is dynamic, multi-dimensional and has its onward movement. While the first generation immigrants are caught in a cultural Limbo due to the contamination with multicultural beliefs, the second generation is emotionally dislocated from their mainstream culture due to their hyphenated existence between *desh* and *pradesh*.

The first generation immigrant Bengalis have a cultural disruption and a double consciousness. But the second generation is a more conflicted lot and has a cultural eruption in 'false consciousness'. In both the cases, the ideological bonding and 'fixity of Identity' provide the essentials for their existence. Lahiri negotiates the dilemma of the cultural spaces lying across the continents with a distinct Universal appeal between two traditions- one inherited and left Behind, and the other encountered but not necessarily assimilated. She has all the praise for the Bengali identity for its Alliance with the Pan- American culture. Her characters and their survival strategies between their affiliations to two cultures. They try to negotiate with the cultural dilemma of America which provides a transnational hybridity as an unavoidable condition of emotional life. For them identity is an invention which is never complete but always in process.

The Indian immigrants do not need merely a place for refocusing but they search for a position to exercise their cultural authority. They develop a split consciousness and try to reconcile their hybridity. Heredity opposes hybridity in Indian cultural tradition but in Pan- American context this is marked by fluidity. In this context one is reminded of Homi Bhabha's postulation in *The Location of Culture*: "Cultural difference is not the acquisition or accumulation of additional cultural knowledge. It is momentous, if momentary, extinction of the recognisable object of culture in the disturbed artifice of its signification, at the age of experience".

It is a common fact that most of Lahiri's characters are Indian immigrants negotiating two cultures but the problems that the stories deal with are not culture specific rather they have a Universal appeal since they may happen to anybody in any corner of the world. Unlike other Indian -American writers, Lahiri is more concerned about human relationships and tries to focus on how interpersonal relationships develop in the new diasporic space. The stories namely "A Temporary Matter", "Interpreter of Maladies" and "That Blessed House" have second generation Indian Americans of the age group of thirty as protagonists but the crises they suffer from are of universal nature having no connection with caste, class, race and ethnicity. The other two stories that have girl narrators are primarily concerned with international relationship but the questions of identity formation and reconciliation of cultures remain as an undercurrent theme.

Jhumpa Lahiri's "When Mr Pirzada Came to Dine" takes place in 1971 in a New England college town. The narrator is Lilia, a ten years old Indian- American girl who lives with her parents in America. They often look through a University directory, call people with Indian names and invite them for dinner at their home. This way they invite Mr. Pirzada who has come to study Botany in the United States, while his wife and daughters remain back in Dacca, East Pakistan, facing a civil war. Lilia's parents entertain Mr Pirzada almost every night, sharing dinner and news of what is happening in the Indian subcontinent. Thus, he temporarily becomes a part of their family. Lilia struggles to negotiate her own Indian -American identity while constantly confronting the perceptions of foreigners that her skin colour creates. Lilia assumes that as Mr. Pirzada is outwardly similar to her parents in looks and speaks the same language- Bengali- and he must be an Indian. However, when Lilia refers to Mr Pirzada as an Indian, her father informs her that Mr Pirzada is no longer considered Indian since partition, as the country was divided in 1947. Lilia's parents differ from Mr Pirzada in religion and nationality, but they share physical and cultural similarities. Lilia gets confused by her father's assertion and it makes no sense to her. Mr Pirzada and her parents spoke the same language, looked more or less the same. They ate pickled mangoes with their meals and ate rice every night with their hands. While Lilia sees only their outward similarities and immediately identifies them as alike on the basis of their similar appearance. She does not see that race is not the binding feature of their relationship. She does not recognise that the bond between her parents and Mr Pirzada is created primarily by common cultural backgrounds that involve shared practices, and that their relationship is centred on what they do together.

While Lilia sees her parents and Mr Pirzada united because of their skin colour, her father uses colours on a map to show that they are different as they belong to two different countries. Pakistan is yellow, not Orange. Here, ironically, Lilia's father uses colour as a way of both Uniting some people as well as separating others. Pakistan is separate from India not because the people are inherently different but because of religion which is not always outwardly recognisable. India's declaration of war against Pakistan shows the

superficiality that these people, who were once of the same nationality, are divided between Pakistani and Indian and become enemies because of borders, though visible only on the maps. The similarity between Lilia's parents and Mr Pirzada shows that individuals are not defined merely by race, religion or nationality, as their relationship points to a shared culture, but by border signifying religious and national status.

However, even after being told the truth Lilia is still unable to understand how Mr Pirzada and her parents can be so similar in race and customs when they have different nationalities. As a result, she closely observes Mr Pirzada in order to ascertain visually what differentiates him from her parents. She tries to find physical indications of his Pakistani identity.

Now that I had learned Mr Pirzada was not an Indian. I began to study him with extra care, to try to figure out what made him different. I decided that the pocket watch was one of those things. (IOM p.30)

As Lilia cannot find any other physical mark of difference between Mr Pirzada and her parents, she concludes that the pocket watch Mr Pirzada has set to East Pakistan time serves as an outward indicator of his identity. However, like race, Mr Pirzada's pocket watch is only a superficial mark of difference, and it is also a misleading one because it signifies different meanings to different people. As a child, Lilia is able to see what adults often cannot -that the differences that separate people are often very superficial. Through Lilia's narration, readers have access to her innocent observations of the outward absurdity of the fact that these differences are often socially constructed.

At school, Lilia is discouraged from learning about South Asia and directed to express interest in the United States. As an American student, she is expected to take interest primarily in American history rather than in world events. Her teacher, Mrs. Kenyon, makes this clear when she tells Lilia that she sees no reason to consult the book on Pakistan she looks at in the library. But Lilia wants to learn more about what makes Mr Pirzada so different from her parents. Judith Caesar points out in his article "Beyond Culture Identity in Jhumpa Lahiri's When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine":

Mrs Kenyon apparently cannot understand why a child whose parents are Indian might want to read about the subcontinent rather than the American history. Her reprimand to Lilia for showing an interest in world affairs shows the emphasis and precedence she gives to all things. The distinction is between American and 'other'. Moreover, this distinction is not neutral as Mrs Kenyon shows a distaste for the 'other' when she holds the book on Pakistan as if it were a hair cleaning to sweater. For Mrs. Kenyon, learning about the world outside America is not important, and she expects Lilia to be immersed in American history and culture rather than showing interest in a place as far removed from America as Pakistan.

However, Rajni Srikanth points out in "Naming Jhumpa Lahiri: Canons and Controversies ":

To turn one's attention toward Pakistan does not imply a turning away from the United States, because one can certainly be American and still have connections to other parts of the world. Unfortunately, because Lilia and other South Asian Americans are often perceived as foreign, they risk, in being attentive to Nations other than the United States, being viewed as less American. In writing about the South Asian American experience,

ethnic authors like Lahiri achieve what Mrs. Kenyon is unable to imagine they engage with both the United States and other Nations, showing that to recognise the South Asian part of Once identity does not necessarily negate the American aspect. As someone who is often perceived as foreign in relation to white America, Lilia is aware of the consequentiality of race but unsure why it is important in attempting to understand the implications of skin colour.

Lilia seems to cross the boundaries of American hegemony in order to learn more about 'other' person like Mr. Pirzada. Lilia's struggle to define her own identity is complicated by the fact that she is of Indian ancestry, but that her nationality is American. Her mother takes pride in the fact that Lilia is born in America and therefore will have an easy life. But her skin colour keeps her away from being recognised as American even when Lilia's skin is pointed green, people notice her underlying colour and race and point to it as a sign of her difference.

Although Lilia, as an American citizen, is as American as her neighbours. Her race marks her as foreign to them because it is something that can be seen, unlike nationality or religion. The difference in religion and nationality would not distinguish Mr Pirzada and Lilia's parents from one another. Lahiri conveys the effects of radicalisation on Lilia and her family as Lilia recognises Mr. Pirzada as racially like her parents. But gradually Learns that although race is perhaps the most visible part of one's identity, it is neither the most significant nor the most defining, and therefore, cannot be the only basis for a meaningful relationship between people. Lahiri also demonstrates that perceptions of Identity based on race often cause misconceptions. struggling to understand the effect of race on identity, She is constantly defined by the world outside her home.

The other most important story of the collection - "Interpreter of Maladies"- describes the encounter during a day trip, between Mr Kapasi, an Indian who works for a local doctor translating patients's descriptions of their symptoms from Gujarati to Hindi and a tour guide for English speaking tourists and the Das family- an Indian- American family vacationing in India. The story explores The misconceptions that arise out of the assumption that race and ethnic Origins indicate more profound and personal human connections. Immediately after meeting them Mr Kapasi ascertains that Mr and Mrs Das and their children resemble with him physically because they all are of Indian Origin and he identifies himself with them on this very basis. Although he recognises that they are culturally different from him and learns that they do not share a nationality with him.

In the very first paragraph of the story Mr Kapasi watches through the rear view mirror as Mrs Das emerges slowly from his car dragging her saved and largely bare legs across the back seat. The fact that Mr Kapasi watches Mrs Das through the mirror, and not directly, underlines the distance between them which Mr Kapasi fails to initially recognise. He notices that although the family looks Indian , they dress as foreigners and shake hands like Americans. Because the family looks Indian, Mr Kapasi takes it for granted that they must be from India. However, when he asks Mr Das if he left India as a child, Mr Das corrects him saying that he and his wife, both were born in America. The connection Mr. Kapasi feels with the family based on their shared race and ethnicity soon appears to be shattered.

Unlike Mr Kapasi, Mr. Das does not suppose that they have anything in common with one another because of their shared race. When he says to Mr Kapasi, "in a way we have a common fate you could say, you and I", he is being polite and referring only to the fact that he takes his students on tours of museums in the U.S. while Mr Kapasi leads tours in India. Mr. Das seems aware that they are not intrinsically alike simply because of their shared race and ethnic origin. In addition to this, Mr. Das views India in an eroticized way as he takes a picture of a barefoot man with his head wrapped in a dirty turban. Mr. Das shows no feeling of identification with him, but rather sees the man as someone from another world. In fact, the scene in which Mr Das asks Mr Kapasi to stop the car so that he can take a photograph of monkeys that are wild and exotic like the Indian men, emphasises his detachment from India as a whole, and points to his tendency to reduce everything Indian, even human beings, to objects that exist only to enhance his pleasure in the exotic spectacle of the country.

Mr. Kapasi does not realise the vagueness of his fantasies until he is aware of the true nature of Mrs. Das's relation to him. In spite of their shared race, Mrs. Das shows that they will never meet again. So she feels free to tell Mr. Kapasi her secret - that one of her sons was fathered by a man other than her husband. Such a vast cultural distance exists between them that sharing her secret with Mr. Kapasi will, in no way, affect Mrs Das's life.

While Mr Kapasi views skin colour as a sign of deeper similarities that connect people, Mrs. Das's revelation shows that it can also signify disconnection. Because Bobby is slightly paler than the other children, his skin colour constantly reminds Mrs. Das of her illegitimate relations. However, the superficiality and insignificance of race are evident when Mr. Kapasi notices the difference in Bobby's skin colour. Neither the Das family nor Mr. Kapasi seems to correlate Bobby's difference in skin colour with belonging, but to Mrs. Das his skin colour is significant because it is an outward sign of her guilty conscience.

Ironically, only after the moment of Mrs. Das's confession, Mr. Kapasi sees something in Mrs. Das's eyes that makes him realise finally that common race and ethnicity cannot make up for the division caused by differences of nationality, culture and life experience. Mrs. Das confesses to Mr. Kapasi in order to share the burden of her secret as she expects some solution from him -the interpreter of Maladies. But she does not realise that what she feels is more than just pain. When Mr Kapasi suggests that she feels guilt rather than pain, she opened her mouth to say something but she stopped. Mrs. Das's reluctance to defend her action indicates her acknowledgement that they have no real connection based on race and ethnicity.

With the knowledge of the superficiality of their similarity, Mr Kapasi can watch the piece of paper on which his address is written, fly out of Mrs. Das's purse and flutter away in the wind. Only Mr Kapasi notices a scrap of paper floating away on the breeze. His last connection to the Das family drifting away symbolises both that he is unimportant to them and that his romantic notions of their similarity and future relationship have been crushed. He lets the paper, with his address, float away because he Sees it as a meaningless object, not a real connection. What becomes clear in the story is that although race is an obvious aspect of Identity, it is not indicative of meaningful connections between members of the same base race. Mr. Kapasi is eventually able to realise what the Das family already knows- that shared race alone cannot bridge the gulf of misunderstanding that results from more fundamental differences.

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