

Hybridity and Harmony: Exploring Identity Construction in Jhumpa Lahiri's "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine" and "Mrs. Sen's"

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Abstract

This research paper explores the complexities of identity construction in the works of Jhumpa Lahiri, a renowned Indo-American writer known for her insightful portrayals of diasporic experiences. Focusing on two of Lahiri's captivating short stories, "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine" and "Mrs. Sen's," this study discusses the challenges faced by individuals straddling two worlds. Through a comparative analysis of Lilia and Eliot, the child characters in these stories, the study delves into their reception and reaction to multicultural experiences, revealing the ongoing process of identity construction within a multicultural context. The research paper examines the concepts of cultural hybridity and the third space, drawing on Homi K Bhabha's theories. Cultural hybridity is explored as a means of maintaining a sense of balance between different cultural practices, values, and customs, while the third space is presented as a virtual non-biased cultural space that moves away from binary oppositions and allows for the emergence of alternative positions. Through an in-depth analysis of Lahiri's works and the exploration of cultural hybridity and the third space, this research paper offers valuable insights into the complexities of cultural identity construction and the challenges faced by individuals straddling multiple cultural worlds.

Keywords: Cultural Identity, Hybridity, Third Space, Multiculturalism and Harmony

Introduction

The immigrant identity is one of the burning issues in this global context. Jhumpa Lahiri has been considered as an important voice and an expatriate writer who searches for the meaning of identity in the case of immigrants. Her "Interpreter of Maladies" is a well-written collection of short stories where the immigrant characters are caught in the quest of their identity. The stories especially deal with the cultural issues faced by Asian immigrant families who are settled in America. As a child of immigration and multiculturalism, once in an interview, Lahiri shared her experience of being caught between two worlds. She recounts, that "I have found myself sort of caught between the worlds of left behind and still clung to..." (Mishra 81). Further, the following personal experience exposes the complexities of her identity:

I am referred to: as an American author, as an Indian American author, as a British-born author, as an Anglo-Indian author, as an NRI (non-

resident Indian) author, as an ABCD author (ABCD representing American born confused "desi" – "desi" meaning Indian - an acronym used by Indians to describe culturally challenged second-generation Indians raised in the U.S.). Indian academics label my work as "Diaspora fiction," while in the U.S., it is called "immigrant fiction" (Pourgharib 18)

Thus, she also openly admits that "Interpreter of Maladies" is a reflection of her own experiences as well as those of her parents and their Indian immigrant friends (Bushra 4).

The focus of this research is two selected short stories, "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine" and "Mrs. Sen's." These two short stories depict the cultural conflict between the immigrant adults and the native-born children and expose the challenges in constructing cultural identity. "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine" portrays a young girl Lilia's cultural encounter with Mr. Pirzada, a visiting scholar from

Pakistan, during the backdrop of the Bangladesh Liberation War that took place between March 26, 1971 – December 16, 1971. Through their regular dinner meetings, Lilia learns about Mr. Pirzada's family and the hardships they face back home, leading to a poignant exploration of cultural differences, identity, and connection. Further, "Mrs. Sen's," revolves around the cultural experiences of Mrs. Sen, an Indian immigrant in the United States. Through her interactions with an American boy named Eliot, the story delves into themes of the complexities of identity that challenge the construction of identity. The characters in these short stories reflect various diasporic consciousness.

Many researches have been conducted on the works of Lahiri from the perspectives of nostalgia, alienation, sorrows of detachment, and cultural clash. However, there is a limited number of studies conducted on children characters and their identity struggles. The previous research on "Childhood and Maturity" suggests that "the twofold view juxtaposes the newness of childhood and the experience of adulthood, recognizes the ability of youth to teach their elders, and often shows the gaps and overlaps between the experiences of being young and being old" (Park 8). Similarly, another research observes that those young children somehow possess an "awareness of the immigrant world in juxtaposition to the particulars of an American childhood" and are thus able to provide a "largely judgment-free perspective" on the world around them (Cox 121). This approach to Lahiri's short stories from the perspective of cultural conflict between the immigrant adults and the native-born children challenges the traditional notion of cultural conflict as binary opposites between the American and immigrant Asians. Thus, Kelly Cynthia Park argues that "the boundaries Lahiri crosses, then, are those of youth

and age, immaturity and maturity, and wisdom and ignorance" (55).

However, a close and comparative reading of these two short stories reveals Lahiri's different approaches in the portrayal of Lilia and Eliot, particularly insofar as the climaxes of these stories are completely opposite. Lilia is a native-born American child from Indian immigrant parents, whereas Eliot is a native-born American child from American parents. By portraying Lilia and Eliot and their exposure to multicultural experiences, Lahiri is trying to depict the construction of identity of the children rather than questioning the "maturity" of the the immigrant adult as argued by the previous research. Lahiri's Lilia and Eliot, as children from different families and cultural backgrounds are exposed to various cultural experiences, and their reception and reaction reveal the "construction of identity." Therefore, the research question is how Lahiri's depiction of Lilia and Eliot concerning identity construction compare and contrast within a multicultural context. By utilizing Homi Bhabha's theoretical framework of "Hybridization" and "Third Space", this research explores the dynamics of cultural identity formation of Lilia and Eliot in order to shed light on the process of cultural identity construction.

Cultural Hybridity and Third Space

Homi K Bhabha uses the term 'cultural hybridity' to explain cultural identity in terms of literary translations and cultural exchange in this globalized context (*The Location of Culture*, 70). 'Cultural hybridity' used by Bhabha is to constitute the effort to maintain a sense of balance among practices, values, and customs of two are more different cultures (78). He formulates that "cultural hybridization" takes place in the "third space of enunciation" and so he argues that in the third space, 'the international or transnational

encounter is possible and postcolonial binaries can be surpassed' (Bhabha "Cultural Diversity and Cultural Differences" 157). The importance of the third space lies in disposing of binaries in order to open the enunciative practice and it is also a space of opportunity, where ideas and attitudes are questioned as it allows the renegotiation of old representations and stereotypes (Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 32, 177-8). Therefore, Bhabha's theory of third space foregrounds Lilia and Eliot's cultural encounter with the other cultures. Bhabha's theory, as well as Lahiri's literary piece, urges the necessity for moving away from the traditional understanding of cultural identity as a fixed entity and the categorical notion of cultural identity as binary opposites.

Lilia and Eliot: Identity Construction

In Lahiri's portrayal of Lilia and Eliot in their respected short stories, a thought-provoking exploration of ongoing identity construction unfolds. Lilia, a ten-year-old girl, experiences a significant encounter with Mr. Pirzada from Dacca, which starkly highlights the cultural disparities between her and the adult immigrants from Asia. Initially, she perceives Mr. Pirzada as "Indian," but her father's revelation that "Pirzada is no longer considered Indian... our country was divided in 1947" (Lahiri 34) shatters her preconceived notions. She, however, mistakenly believed that 1947 marked India's independence from Britain, and her father clarifies it as the partition of "Hindus here, Muslims there" (34). Lilia's initial confusion stems from her observation that "Mr. Pirzada and her parents spoke the same language, laughed at the same jokes, looked more or less the same" (34). Nevertheless, her father insists that she grasp "the difference" (47). Consequently, Lilia embarks on a journey to discern these differences,

remarking, "I began to study him with extra care, to try to figure out what made him different" (39).

Lahiri's portrayal of Lilia as a child who embraces these differences serves as a critique of the tendency to categorize identity based on similarity, a practice that can be problematic. Instead, Lahiri encourages readers to perceive differences in others as something positive and constructive. As the narrative unfolds, Lilia's fascination with understanding distant histories intensifies, despite her already extensive knowledge of American history and geography. This curiosity is exemplified when she mentions, "I found a book titled Pakistan: A Land and Its People" (42).

Similarly, the encounter of eleven-year-old Eliot with Mrs. Sen profoundly exposes him to the cultural differences between them. Inside the house, he takes note of a detail: "neither Mr. nor Mrs. Sen wore shoes" (121), a practice reminiscent of Lilia's observation that "Mr. Pirzada took off his shoes before entering a room" (34). Eliot also becomes aware of dissimilar food habits as he observes that "they ate pickled mangoes with their meals, ate rice every night for supper with their hands, chewed fennel seeds after meals as a digestive," (34).

For Eliot, one of the sources of Mrs. Sen's happiness is "fish from the seaside" (132), and he witnesses her dedicating an entire day to preparing a delightful meal. Mrs. Sen also shares memories of wedding celebrations back in India, where "they sit in an enormous circle on the roof of our building, laughing and gossiping and slicing fifty kilos of vegetables through the night" (124). Through Mrs. Sen's narratives and sharing, Eliot comes to understand that Indian culture which thrives in close-knit, extended family structures, where care, support, and shared joys and sorrows are integral. The culture also values communal food sharing and festive celebrations as cherished aspects of its rich heritage.

The cultural contrasts also manifest as contradictions, creating a complex tapestry that Lilia and Eliot must navigate. These young characters are introduced to these cultural paradoxes in their lives. For instance, Lilia observes a stark contrast when visiting her friend Dora's house: "Dora's father was lying on the couch, reading a magazine, with a glass of wine on the coffee table, and there was saxophone music playing on the stereo" (48). This depiction of an alcohol-laden and solitary lifestyle sharply contradicts the culture in her own home, where her father and Mr. Pirzada "drank no alcohol" (34).

Similarly, Eliot's experience at Mrs. Sen's home presents a stark contradiction to his own household and neighbors. He witnesses the liveliness of his neighbors, who "were piled on the deck, eating, drinking, the sound of their laughter rising above the weary sigh of the waves," while he and his mother were excluded from the festivities (125). Moreover, his interaction with Mrs. Sen diverges from that of his mother, who "sat at the table as he ate, drinking more wine ... she went to the deck to smoke a cigarette, leaving Eliot to wrap up the leftovers" (127). Through these encounters with cultural disparities that seem to contradict one another, Lahiri skillfully explores the process of constructing cultural identity in what can be considered a "third space." This narrative allows the young characters to make choices about adapting to these new cultures, highlighting the complexities and nuances of identity formation in a diverse world.

Towards the conclusion of the story, Eliot exhibits a sense of self-sufficiency, capable of "feeding and entertaining himself" (120). He now only requires someone's presence for emergencies, giving the impression of a maturity beyond his years. Interestingly, he appears more mature than Mrs. Sen, who acknowledges this by remarking, "You are wiser than that, Eliot... You already taste the way things must be" (132). This contrast stems from his Western

upbringing, where maturity often implies independence and individuality. Eliot's exposure to diverse individuals and their cultures, including Mrs. Sen, university student Abby, an elderly woman, and Mrs. Lindon, hasn't significantly shaped his identity, primarily because he already exhibits a sense of self-reliant maturity. His self-centered brand of maturity becomes evident when Mrs. Sen asks him, "Will you put your mother in a nursing home when she is old?" to which he responds, "Maybe" (140). This response highlights his resistance to the enriching family-oriented culture exemplified by Mrs. Sen. Finally, his mother gives him a key, which he wears on a string around his neck, signifying her acknowledgment of his growing independence. She tells him, "You're a big boy now, Eliot. You okay?" (144). Lahiri intentionally concludes the narrative by underscoring his "maturity" that this form of maturity may hinder his ability to adapt to new cultures. He becomes entrenched in his own culture of independence and individualism, leading to a sense of isolation and loneliness.

In contrast, Lilia's journey towards identity construction is a gradual and evolving process. Over time, her engagement in observing and comprehending cultural differences becomes deeply emotional. For instance, when her father remarks, "See, children of your age, what they do to survive" (40), she gazes at the television screen, witnessing the plight of East Pakistani refugees fleeing to safety across the Indian border (40). Lilia also becomes attuned to how events happening thousands of miles away profoundly affect the people in her own household, uniting them as if they were "a single person, sharing a single meal, a single body, a single silence, and a single fear" (50). This emotional involvement in understanding differences equips her with the maturity to accept and respond positively to cultural distinctions. She prays for his family's safety (41),

expresses a deep desire to console him (43), and eventually comforts him by saying, "Don't worry" (47). Her maturity is characterized by empathetic acceptance of other cultures and a willingness to embrace differences.

For Lahiri and her characters, the process of maturing signifies the ability to bridge gaps, view the world with fresh perspectives, and foster a sense of cultural harmony (Park 5). Another scholar aptly notes that the characters in "Maladies of Interpreter" "learn and grow from the experience of each other" (Dubey 23). Consequently, Lahiri emphasizes Lilia's identity construction as a journey toward maturity marked by empathy. Lilia remains open to new cultures and evolves alongside them, reflecting Lahiri's own perspective. Lilia's humble act of serving the stranger, Mr. Pirzada, such as hanging his coat, reflects her commitment to respecting others. She acquires the cultural practice of missing someone through her interactions with Mr. Pirzada, as evident in her words: "I knew what it meant to miss someone" (51). She further confesses, "Though I had not seen him for months, it was only then that I felt Mr. Pirzada's absence" (51). Simultaneously, she does not disregard her own cultural heritage in which she was born and raised. When her mother declares, "We live here now, she was born here," Lilia acknowledges that "she seemed genuinely proud of the fact, as if it were a reflection of my character" (35). This blend of humility, openness to learning, and pride in one's roots represents the maturity essential for constructing identity. Therefore, Lahiri's portrayal of Lilia underscores the idea that identity construction progresses positively when one is receptive to new cultures and willing to learn from their differences.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Jhumpa Lahiri's short stories "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine" and "Mrs. Sen's" offer profound insights into the complexities of identity construction and the challenges individuals straddling multiple cultural worlds face. Through the characters of Lilia and Eliot, Lahiri tries to explore the interplay between cultural hybridity, the concept of the third space, and the fluid nature of identity formation. Lahiri's narratives serve as powerful vehicles for examining the convergence of diverse cultural traditions and the struggles associated with assimilation. By analyzing these stories, we gain a deeper understanding of the multifaceted process of identity construction and its significance in multicultural societies. In fact, her exploration of hybridity and the third space challenges traditional notions of fixed cultural identities, emphasizing the ongoing negotiation and construction of identity within a complex and dynamic world.

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