

Quest For Identity And Cultural Hybridity In Lahiri

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Abstract

In today's global scenario, identity and cultural hybridity have become most sought-after, much discussed concept. The question of identity is always a difficult one. It has been a matter of discussion so far as immigrants are concerned. Immigrants grow up in two worlds; they pine for a well-defined identity. In search of identity, they make compromises, negotiations. In this light, the proposed research intends to explore the concept of identity and cultural hybridity in the works of Jhumpa Lahiri. Being one of the most celebrated diasporic writers of contemporary age, Jhumpa Lahiri offers her readers a real world which they can cherish. Her works project realities of human existence in a beautiful manner. The paper takes up two representative story of Lahiri to substantiate the fact that her stories are real saga of humanity, hybridity and harmony. In spite of being in a constant struggle of confusing identity, and dilemma between two worlds, the protagonists of the story strive towards a happier world full of zeal and zest. The story under analysis is 'When Mr Pirzada Came to Dine'. The analysis finds that the protagonists of Lahiri play remarkably while setting a new tone of hybridity and competence.

Introduction

Diaspora is associated with various assumption and images. Quest for identity, alienation, displacement have been various prominent issues related to diaspora. It can be the positive site of achieving an individual identity, or, a negative site of fear and anxiety of losing one's identity. While defining identity, Lustig and Koester (2003) perceive that, 'cultural, social, and personal identities build an individual's identity or self-concept. In fact, there are many different factors that contribute to one's identity including family, culture, friends, education and surrounding environments. Diaspora gets affected by various aspect of modern life such as: culture, space, time, language, histories, people and place. Identity has been a major focus of discussion in almost all the works of Lahiri. Her works raise question of the role of identity in the life of people who live in exile, who shift their location to a different land. The major theme of her short stories is theme are no doubt a question of the "self". One can notice the role of cultural factors in the quest for the identity and self, especially for immigrants. JolaSkulj notices that 'the problem of cultural identity involves the question of the self and of culture'. This paper intends to explain and highlight the identity crisis of immigrants; it shows how they begin their life as parasite and gradually, transform their life into an amicable world. They constantly make effort for a cultural settlement and assimilation; they struggle their way for a cultural hybridity. Their sincere effort, their longing for companion in a foreign land motivate them to mingle with different people, different cultures, make negotiations and understandings. An eminent Indo-American writer, Lahiri herself is a child of immigration and multiculturalism which enables her to portray the characters both in the light of native and alien culture. The current thesis intends to discuss JhumpaLahiri as a diasporic writer; it explores how the Pulitzer winner projects the dilemma, frustration, and confusion of diasporas, how they struggle for their identity in a foreign land, how they negotiate their own values, culture while creating a cultural hybridity.

For analysis, the paper takes up 'When Mr Pirzada Came to Dine' where one can find protagonists undergoing constant fear of lost identity, alienation, loneliness. However, the most prominent thing one can find in the stories are that the protagonists are always in an acceptance mode. Though they are caught between two worlds, caught between constant dilemma, they nurture an openness towards their fellow-beings.

Literature Review

A plethora of studies have been conducted on the works of Jhumpa Lahiri. The studies have examined various angles of her stories such as nostalgia, alienation, sorrows of detachment, culture clash. As the study accounts, Lahiri once in her interview with Jeffrey Brown shares her painful experience of being caught between two worlds. As she recounts, "It's what my world is, and I've always been aware of my parents came from Calcutta. I have found myself sort of caught between the worlds of left behind and still clung to, and also the world that surrounded me at school and everywhere else, as soon as I set foot out of the door" (pbs, 2008). Specifically, the study seeks to explore following issues:

1. To examine the issues of identity in selected short stories of Jhumpa Lahiri
2. To discuss the importance of cultural hybridity in diaspora

Data Analysis

The story "When Mr Pirzada Came to Dine" is based during a time of war in 1971 between India and Pakistan. Basically from Calcutta, Lilia's family moves to the United States for a better, prosperous life in connection with job of Lilia's father. In US, they meet Mr Pirzada, a professor from Bangladesh, who is on a study grant from the US Government. The story accounts for the friendship between these characters while sidelining their dilemma and insecurities that have been created as a result of their staying away from homeland. When their respective countries are at war with each other, these people, in an alien land strive for solidarity and companionship. The growing bond between the characters is observed by Lilia in the following way:

'Mr. Pirzada and my parents spoke the same language, laughed at the same jokes, looked more or less the same. They ate pickled mangoes with their meals, ate rice every night for supper with their hands.' (*IoM* 17)

Mr Pirzada is a regular visitor to Lilia's family and Lilia grows accustomed to his presence in their family. When she learns from her father that he is not an Indian and he belongs to a different nation, she finds it difficult to understand in what respect he can be different. Lilia's difficulty lies in what she observes:

Mr Pirzada and my parents spoke the same language, laughed at the same jokes, looked more or less the same. They ate

pickled mangoes with their meals, ate rice every night for supper with their hands. Like my parents, Mr Pirzada took off his shoes before entering a room, chewed fennel seeds after meals as a digestive, drank no alcohol, for dessert dipped austere biscuits into successive cups of tea. (*IoM* 25)

This shows that a child, who does not understand the political complications, realizes the strength of the emotional bond that exists in interpersonal relations. In this sense, we can say that the child, consciously or unconsciously, can perceive a growing bond between the two parties.

In another instance yet, while noticing Mr Pirzada in a state of fear and anxiety for his family and daughters in the time of war, Lilia observes him as if he is 'in a preparation to endure with dignity whatever news assailed him, perhaps even to attend a funeral at a moment's notice' (*IoM* 31). We wish to highlight the least possible step that Lilia, being a child, takes for the safety of Mr Pirzada's family which is reflected in her prayer:

I prayed that Mr Pirzada's family was safe and sound. I had never prayed for anything before, had never been taught or told to, but I decided, given the circumstances, that it was something I should do. That night when I went to the bathroom I only pretended to brush my teeth, for I feared that I would somehow rinse the prayer out as well. I wet the brush and rearranged the tube of paste to prevent my parents from asking any questions and fell asleep with sugar on my tongue (*IoM* 33).

It is noticed that even the child here by visualizing the traumatic condition of Mr Pirzada extends her silent support through her prayer. We find evidence of polite intent towards Mr Pirzada on the part of Lilia's parents as well. They have remained alert and attentive towards the mental stress of Mr Pirzada when he is away from his family. We observe that their polite intent gets reflected flawlessly in their hospitality, in their support they extend towards him. It can be understood that in this situation, Lilia's father is the host and he is in a better position going by the developments of the war. Time to time this is reflected in Mr Pirzada's expression when he refers to himself as "Dacca's refugee" (29). Being in a more secured position than Mr Pirzada, Lilia's father understands the face loss of the former in the form of alienation and insecurity in the time of war. The war has brought fear and insecurities in the

mind of Mr Pirzada. Though he does his best to hide the fear, it gets reflected in his utterances.

In our investigation, we find evidence of polite intent on the part of Mr Pirzada as well. He shows his acknowledgement and gratitude towards the care and concern provided by Lilia's family in the form of hospitality. As a note of gratitude, he kept aside his own fear and frustration and actively involves himself in the arrangement of Halloween. As observed by Lilia:

Mr Pirzada draped his jacket over the chair behind him, removing a pair of opal cuff links, and rolled up the starched sleeves of his shirt. ... He made an initial incision and drew the knife around. When he had come full circle he lifted the cap by the stem ... My mother gave him a long metal spoon with which he gutted the interior ... My father, meanwhile, separated the seeds from the pulp ... I drew two triangles against the ridged surface for the eyes. (*IoM* 35)

The child narrator Lilia observes that the negative effect of the war, differences, the animosity makes no sense to her parents and Mr Pirzada: "Most of all I remember the three of them operating during that time as if they were a single person, sharing a single meal, a single body, a single silence, and a single fear" (41). The story ends with an amicable note. When the war subsides, Mr Pirzada leaves for his country after completing his assignment.

Conclusion

A careful analysis of the data reveals that the stories of Lahiri delineate a real picture of diasporic struggle; protagonists in the story display a high level of sensitivity towards, cultural identity, cultural hybridity and intercultural awareness. The story is full of enthuse, energy and zeal towards a better, peaceful, quieter world with full of love, harmony and fellow-feeling. While the story is based on a visible theme of cultural alienation, loss of identity, they offer a base for reconstructed identity, integration and cultural assimilation. Lahiri's protagonists are immigrants who undergo tremendous cultural struggle, confusion and conflict. They are in constant struggle between two cultures, two selves and multiple identities.

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