



Immigration- A Radical Field of Openness: Overcoming the Cultural Differences in Jhumpa Lahiri's

“When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine”

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Abstract

Since times immemorial immigration has been associated with negative connotations - nostalgia, fractured identity and insecurity. However, this is not the case in Lahiri's work. In her work the characters are particularly powerfully affected by the multi-ethnic environment of the cities they migrate to, and overcome the cultural differences, otherwise difficult to negotiate in their home country. The present article focuses on this aspect of immigration through Jhumpa Lahiri's short story in her Pulitzer-Prize winning collection *Interpreter of Maladies* i.e., “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine”.

Key Words: Immigration, nostalgia, identity, multiethnic.

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Forming the second story of the collection *Interpreter of Maladies*, “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine” focuses on the couple's friendship with Mr. Pirzada in the few months before and during the twelve days of East Pakistan's war of independence. Lilia, their child and the story's narrator, observes the interesting friendship that is created between her Indian parents and Mr. Pirzada, a Pakistani from Dacca: “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” (*IOM* 41). Though across the globe their nations are in opposite camps and prepare to enter the war, they achieve unity in a house in America and succeed to erase borders delineated by maps. As Avtar Brah would put it, “the construction of a common ‘we’” (184) is more important to them.

Lahiri based this tale on a man from Dacca, now the capital of Bangladesh, back then a city which belonged to Pakistan, who used to come to visit her parents in the autumn of 1971. She was four at the time, so she actually does not have any memories of him, but heard through her parents about his situation, and was so impressed that years later she wrote this story about that period in her parents' life. During those months, the subcontinent was torn by civil war and Lahiri's characters watched American television broadcast the conflict unfolding. In Dacca "Mr. Pirzada had a three-story home, a lectureship in botany at the university, a wife of twenty years, and seven daughters between the ages of six and sixteen whose names all began with the letter A" (*IOM* 23). The names were chosen by Mr. Pirzada's wife, and he jokes about having difficulty distinguishing among Ayesha, Amira, Amina, or Aziza. However, every week he sends comic books to each of his seven daughters alongside letters to his wife. He spends the year in America, studying the foliage of New England on a grant awarded by the Pakistani government, so he cannot return to his homeland before he finishes writing a book about his discoveries. Since he has not heard from his family in six months, Mr. Pirzada is worried that they are among the estimated nine million refugees, or even that something worse might have happened to them. His daughters are absent, but as opposed to the parents from the previous story, he does not have the certainty that they are harmed or dead

Mr. Pirzada lives in a graduate dormitory where he does not have a stove or a television set. So he comes to this Bengali family to dine, as the title of the short story prefigures, and watch the news. They eat in the living-room, the plates perched on the edge of their knees, so that they can have an unobstructed view of the television. Sharing food is an important ritual which links Indian diasporic communities abroad. Although only ten years old, Lilia realizes how attached her parents still are to their homeland and how they nurture connections with Indians in America. Their homesickness and the big cultural differences they have to get used to are underlined by the use of negatives in the following paragraph:

It was a small campus, with narrow brick walkways and white pillared buildings, located on the fringes of what seemed to be an even smaller town. The supermarket did not carry mustard oil, doctors did not make house calls, neighbors never dropped by without an invitation, and of these things, every so often, my parents complained. In search of compatriots, they used to trail their fingers, at the start of each new semester, through the columns of the university directory, circling surnames familiar to their part of the world. (*IOM* 24)

Lilia's parents are so estranged in America that they call literal strangers (albeit Indians) and invite them over to their house. This is how they come in contact with Mr. Pirzada, who becomes a regular guest. He enters the house joking that he is "another refugee [...] on Indian territory" (*IOM* 28). He is always "impeccably suited and scarved" (*IOM* 27), and wears "a black fez made of wool of Persian lambs, secured by bobby pins" (*IOM* 28). He is very fond of Lilia (who inevitably reminds him of his daughters), and brings her sweets every time he visits. This is described by Lilia as an awkward moment, one which she awaits in part with dread, in part

with delight, although it makes her feel like a stranger in her own home: “It had become our ritual, and for several weeks, before we grew more comfortable with one another, it was the only time he spoke to me directly” (*IOM* 29).

Once she expresses her thanks for a spectacular lollipop she receives, but Mr. Pirzada does not know how to interpret the simple phrase ‘thank you’: “What is this thank-you? The lady at the bank thanks me, the cashier at the shop thanks me, the librarian thanks me when I return an overdue book, the overseas operator thanks me as she tries to connect me to Dacca and fails. If I am buried in this country, I will be thanked, no doubt, at my funeral”(*IOM* 29). This outburst reveals a cultural disconnection: the child narrator is born and bred in the United States, so to her it is common sense to express gratitude by saying ‘thank you’. Their guest is new to this country and its mores; however, he somewhat surprisingly envisions the possibility of being buried here one day.

Lilia thinks it is inappropriate to eat the ‘treats’ from Mr. Pirzada in a casual manner; therefore, she covets the candy as she would a jewel and keeps it in a little ‘treasure box’ which used to belong to her grandmother. The small keepsake box is made of carved sandalwood and it represents Lilia’s only link with a grandmother whom she has never met. She senses that their guest is also connected to her Indian heritage and honors this fact by placing the gifts she receives from him in the Indian box. When she does consume the sweets, the girl invents a private ritual. Thus, she treats the candy like an offering in her prayers for Mr. Pirzada’s family:

Eventually I took a square of white chocolate out of the box, and unwrapped it, and then I did something I had never done before. I put the chocolate in my mouth, letting it soften until the last possible moment, and then as I chewed it slowly, 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* 32)

Lilia dedicates a ‘sweet’ personal prayer for the safety of Mr. Pirzada’s wife and daughters, although her parents are not religious and have not taught their girl any prayers. In their world religious differences do not matter (as they do in India and Pakistan), so they receive a Muslim into their house because they focus on the similarities. They share a culture and that is more important for them in America. Growing up in this family, the girl is sincerely worried about their guest’s family so she invokes a universal deity to keep them free from harm. In the safe and intimate space of her room, Lilia ruminates on the events of the day, and decides that a spiritual exercise is something she ‘should’ do.

One night when she is setting the table, Lilia asks her father to hand her a glass “for the Indian man”. Her father informs her that Mr. Pirzada is not coming over that night and adds: “More importantly, Mr. Pirzada is no longer considered Indian. (...) Not since Partition. Our country was divided. 1947”(IOM 25). Lilia is confused because she is only aware that 1947 is the year of India’s independence from Britain, and has no knowledge of the territorial separation between Hindus and Muslims. Her father explains that “Dacca no longer belongs to us” (IOM 25), and adds that during Partition, Hindus and Muslims set fire to each other’s homes. For many the idea of eating in the other’s company is still unthinkable. All of this makes no sense to Lilia since to her mind Mr. Pirzada and her parents speak the same language, laugh at the same jokes, and look 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). The girl describes these traditions as somewhat foreign to her, which is why she only identifies her parents with Mr. Pirzada and uses the pronoun ‘they’ instead of ‘we’. Nevertheless, she enumerates the similarities between them and is able to spot no difference.

But her father takes her to a map of India they display in the house and explains that Mr. Pirzada has not been Indian since 1947, although he still is Bengali. Because he is a Muslim, their guest lives in East Pakistan, but by the end of the story he is going to be a Bangladeshi. His complex identity epitomizes ‘in-betweenness’, and Lilia’s father tries to clarify some of these confusing differences on the map:

His finger trailed across the Atlantic, through Europe, the Mediterranean, the Middle East, and finally to the sprawling orange diamond that my mother once told me resembled a woman wearing a sari with her left arm extended. Various cities had been circled with lines drawn between them to indicate my parents’ travels, and the place of their birth, Calcutta, was signified by a small silver star. I had been there only once and had no memory of the trip. (IOM 26)

His finger thus trails across the map, symbolically recreating their migration path, this time backwards (from the United States to their homeland). Pakistan is a different country, colored in yellow, not orange, on the map. Lilia notices that there are “two distinct parts to it, one much larger than the other, separated by an expanse of Indian territory; it was as if California and Connecticut constituted a nation apart from the U.S.” (IOM 26). The map of the United States is more familiar to her and she reconfigures its topography in her mind in order to understand the issue of partition in South Asia.

Her father is intrigued that Lilia does not know these geographical facts, but her mother astutely points out that she has plenty to learn at school and continues: “We live here now, she was born here” (IOM 26). They articulate two contrasting ways of forging an Indian-American identity. In the mother’s opinion, immigration requires distancing oneself from the past and the country they come from. The father, on the other hand, desires for his daughter an education that stretches beyond national borders. Moreover, he wants

her to know that there are other places in the world, particularly those from which her own family has migrated not long before. His wife insists that in America their daughter is assured a safe and easy life, a fine formal education, and more opportunities. She can live the American dream, instead of having to “eat rationed food, or obey curfews, or watch riots from [the] rooftop, or hide neighbors in water tanks to prevent them from being shot” (*IOM* 26-7), as they had. After cataloguing these Indian realities, Lilia’s mother addresses her husband directly: “Imagine having to place her in a decent school. Imagine her having to read during power failures by the light of kerosene lamps. Imagine the pressures, the tutors, the constant exams. (...) How can you possibly expect her to know about Partition?” (*IOM* 27) She works as a bank teller and is less nostalgic or homesick than her spouse. Although she compares India’s shape with a woman in a sari, most probably she does not wear a sari herself. What is more, she is not a typical Indian woman at all. In general émigrés struggle to preserve strong bonds with an idealized homeland. On the contrary, Lilia’s mother is very radical in her depiction of her homeland and too lenient perhaps in portraying the new world. Riots and shootings happen in America, too.

In school, Lilia is studying American history and geography, learning about the American War of Independence (which took place two hundred years before the one unfolding in the subcontinent), and going on trips to Plymouth Rock, to walk the Freedom Trail and climb to the top of the Bunker Hill Monument. During tests she is given blank maps of the thirteen colonies, and asked to fill in names, dates, capitals. “I could do it with my eyes closed” (*IOM* 27), Lilia says. But the American formal schooling system does not recognize what is happening on the other side of the world, or the solidarity between Bengalis that is formed in Lilia’s living room. So the girl begins to understand that she has to grow up negotiating three almost parallel worlds: one is the outside American world in which she is being educated, the other is the intimate world created in their living room between them and Mr. Pirzada, and the last one is far away but brought into their house by television channels.

After learning that Mr. Pirzada is ‘not Indian’, Lilia begins “to study him with extra care” (*IOM* 30), trying to figure out what makes him different. Every evening before eating, he performs a ritual which is perceived by Lilia as curious and which, she decides, is “one of those things” that mark his difference. Thus, he always carefully winds his pocket watch and sets it to the local time in Dacca, eleven hours ahead. For the duration of the meal he keeps this watch on the coffee table, although he never seems to consult it. Yet he comments that “[o]ne can only hope (...) Dacca’s refugees are as heartily fed” (*IOM* 29) as he is, so he does think of his fellow countrymen throughout the dinner. A state of “uneasiness” possesses the young narrator when she realizes this man keeps multiple times and lives in multiple locations at once. She puts herself in the shoes of his daughters, understanding that life could have been so different had her parents not immigrated to the United States. She imagines Mr. Pirzada’s daughters “rising from sleep, tying ribbons in their hair, anticipating breakfast, preparing for school” (*IOM* 30-1). More importantly, perhaps, she notices that their meals and actions “were only a shadow of what had already happened there, a lagging ghost of where Mr. Pirzada really belonged” (*IOM* 31). Even though he physically lives in the United States, for him life happens

in Dacca. As they hear news about refugees fleeing from East Pakistan and about General Yahyah Khan's policies, Lilia empathizes with Mr. Pirzada's and his people and, as a result, she can no longer eat.

After spotting the 'difference' between her Indian parents and Mr. Pirzada, Lilia also grasps the difference between herself and her American schoolmates: "No one at school talked about the war followed so faithfully in my living room" (*IOM* 32). Instead, they continue to memorize passages from the Declaration of Independence. Their teacher, Mrs. Kenyon, frequently points to another map, one that charts the route of the *Mayflower*, or shows the location of the Philadelphia Liberty Bell. For one of Mrs. Kenyon's classes, Lilia is sent to the library with her friend Dora to prepare a presentation on the surrender at Yorktown. Lilia cannot concentrate on the task at hand, but goes to the shelves labeled "Asia" and picks up a book called *Pakistan: A Land and Its People*. As she is browsing it, the teacher appears on the aisle and lifts the book disdainfully "by the tip of its spine as if it were a hair clinging to my sweater" (*IOM* 33). She reprimands Lilia for consulting a book that is not connected to her American history project. The girl identifies with her 'Asian' heritage, as she refuses to separate the civil war going on in her parents' homeland from her history lessons, thus delimitating herself from the 'official' history she learns in school.

A parallel history is being written in South Asia, and the family continues to watch the news over leisurely meals with Mr. Pirzada. After the television is turned off they joke, comment on the peculiar eating habits of her mother's American coworkers at the bank, and play Scrabble. During the game they laugh and argue about the spellings of English words, and around midnight Mr. Pirzada walks back to his dormitory. Lilia is upstairs in her room by then, but each night as she falls asleep she hears them "anticipating the birth of a nation on the other side of the world" (*IOM* 34). Their shared Bengaliness keeps them together, despite the rigid territorial reality shown by maps and the violence that goes on between the separate nation-states of India, Pakistan and soon-to-be Bangladesh. In the privacy of her American room, the child allows the three worlds to merge. She draws meaning from all of them and negotiates her identity with surprising balance and wisdom in a fluid, borderless space.

Around Halloween Mr. Pirzada asks about the "large orange vegetables on people's doorsteps" (*IOM* 34) and his Indian-American hosts clarify the purpose of jack-o'-lanterns. The next day he helps Lilia carve a ten-pound pumpkin, leaving the television on. While carving the smile they hear the news about the imminent start of a war between India and Pakistan, and Mr. Pirzada slips the knife and makes a gash dipping towards the base of the pumpkin. He apologizes and offers to buy another one, but Lilia's father intervenes and carves out the gash: "What resulted was a disproportionately large hole the size of a lemon, so that our jack-o'-lantern wore an expression of placid astonishment, the eyebrows no longer fierce, floating in frozen surprise above a vacant, geometric gaze" (*IOM* 36), mirroring their emotions upon hearing the distressing news.

On Halloween, Lilia and her friend Dora dress like witches and are allowed, for the first time, to roam the neighborhood unattended. The first treats come from Mr. Pirzada, as usual, although nothing else occurs as usual during that night. For instance, the guest takes off his shoes but does not place them where he normally did, and Lilia does not take his coat because Dora calls from the bathroom saying she needs help drawing a mole. Mr. Pirzada and Lilia's father do not go to the living room right away, but they hover in the

foyer, waiting for the girls to leave. Mr. Pirzada offers to accompany them, his eyes containing a panic Lilia has never seen before, a deep concern that something bad might happen to her. He is unable to protect the family he left behind in Dacca, but he is willing to do everything he can to protect Lilia. Her parents explain that there is no real danger since this is an American tradition and all the children are out this evening. Lilia herself utters the words “Don’t worry” for the first time, although she has tried to say these two simple words for weeks. When the girls finally leave, Lilia spots Mr. Pirzada’s short figure standing in the doorframe between her parents, as if he were part of the family.

Dora, an American child most probably growing up in a mono-cultural world, wants to know why “that man” offered to come with them. “His daughters are missing” (*IOM* 39), Lilia replies but immediately regrets it because she feels that just by saying it out loud “made it true, that Mr. Pirzada’s daughters really were missing, and that he would never see them again” (*IOM* 39). Her nightly prayers are performed silently in the ‘sacred’ space of her room, so it must sound frightening to little Lilia to hear herself utter such serious things in the middle of the street. Dora then asks if they were kidnapped from a park because she obviously does not have the slightest idea about the war refugees from Pakistan. The word ‘missing’ can only be associated in her mind with a kidnapping, like the ones happening in American cities. Lilia sees the opportunity and dismisses what she has previously said as a mere language mistake: “I don’t mean they were missing. I meant he misses them. They live in a different country and he hasn’t seen them for a while, that’s all” (*IOM* 39).

As the girls go from house to house, performing the Halloween ritual, several people comment that they have never seen an Indian witch before. Neighbors appropriate this ritual as American, stressing Lilia’s otherness. When they reach Dora’s house, more differences emerge. Lilia notices that the television is not on and that her friend’s father is lying on the couch with a glass of wine, reading a magazine while saxophone music is playing on the stereo. Lilia and Dora divide the ‘loot’ and then Dora’s mother drives Lilia back to her house. Here the pumpkin has been shattered, as have the hearts of those inside: India and Pakistan are getting closer to war, and Mr. Pirzada has his head in his hands: “The United States was siding with West Pakistan, the Soviet Union with India and what was soon to be Bangladesh. War was declared officially on December 4, and twelve days later, the Pakistani army, weakened by having to fight three thousand miles from their source of supplies, surrendered in Dacca” (*IOM* 40). Symbolically, during the twelve days of war Mr. Pirzada stops bringing candy, Lilia’s father does not ask her to watch the news with them anymore, and even her mother refuses to serve anything more elaborate than boiled eggs with rice for dinner. Mr. Pirzada starts sleeping on their couch and they call relatives in Calcutta to learn firsthand details about the situation.

In January, Mr. Pirzada finishes his book and flies back home, while millions of refugees are returning from India to Bangladesh. In the United States dinners continue as usual, the only difference being that Mr. Pirzada and his extra watch showing the time in Dacca are not there anymore. Every now and then Lilia glances at her father’s map, outdated by then (space is always in a process of becoming), and pictures Mr. Pirzada “on that small patch of yellow, perspiring heavily (...) in one of his suits, searching for his family” (*IOM* 41). Several months later they receive a card commemorating the Muslim New Year and a letter

from him announcing that he was happily reunited with his wife and daughters. Despite the dramatic historical and territorial changes, they survived the events apparently unharmed, and although the girls are a bit taller, Mr. Pirzada still teases that he cannot keep their names in order. He thanks Lilia's family for their hospitality, showing that he now understands the meaning of the phrase 'thank you', but adding that it still is not enough to express his gratitude. To celebrate the good news, Lilia's mother prepares a special meal that evening. But the girl does not feel like celebrating. Although she understands he is now back where he belongs, Lilia has come to know what 'missing' someone who is so far in space and time means. Upon hearing the news that they are fine she abruptly stops her prayers, and throws the candy away, thus marking her own symbolic partition' from Mr. Pirzada.

Mr. Pirzada's brief presence in their house has opened up several coexisting worlds for the young narrator. So when she throws the sweets away, Lilia has made sense of the fact that different cultures coexist in her life, and has forged for herself an identity that combines the best parts from all. Maybe she is too young to be called 'mature', but her encounter with Mr. Pirzada has definitely contributed to her growth. Lahiri's child protagonist develops as she translates between cultures. These processes happen mainly in the space of her room, a mirror of her subjectivity. In fact, many times and spaces come together here and Lilia has the impressive capacity to filter and rearticulate all of them and negotiate a transnational identity. In the end she emerges as an empathic human being. As an adult narrator, she is able to reflect and report on this development.

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