



## RACIALIZATION AND THE FORMATION OF IDENTITY IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S *INTERPRETER OF MALADIES*

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper focuses on how Racialization impacts the identity formation of the South Asian American characters in Jhumpa Lahiri's 'Interpreter of Maladies'. In particular, the focus is on the effects of Racialization in three of the ten stories from Interpreter of Maladies namely "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine", "Interpreter of Maladies", and "Sexy", because they encompass a variety of relationships and points of view. The analysis on three stories comprehends the complexities involved in the lives of people settled in an alien land. They find themselves "Misfits" both in their native land as well as in their living land. Colour serves as the mark of identity for the characters in Lahiri's three novels. Through her characters and their experiences, Jhumpa Lahiri has debunked the Myth that 'Race' is the determining factor of identity.*

### INTRODUCTION

'Post-Colonialism' generally suggests a range of global cultural developments that has existed since the Second World War. Post-Colonialism distinctively signifies the period in which the cultural, economic and social events constituted marked the decline of European imperialism. Theories of post-colonialism deal with a wide range of metaphysical, ethical, methodological and political concerns.

The post-colonial perspective has disruptive potential because the effects of colonialism in a curious way, foreshadowed current post structuralist views and concentrates on the

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encounters and negotiations of differential meanings and values within 'Colonial Textuality', its governmental discourse and cultural practices.

The fact, that Lahiri's work has received both critical and popular acclaims, points to her ability to convey both historical and contemporary realities of Asian-American life to a mainstream reader. Lahiri is the first South Asian to be awarded the Pulitzer Prize. Her stories weave into the lives of second generation Indians and their struggle with relationships, inter-personal communication and the challenges experienced by immigrants living in a world away from the familiar warmth and constant company of 'family, friends and neighbours in the home they left behind.

The subjects of Lahiri's writing consistently reflect racial and political experiences that are particular to South Asians in the United States. While Lahiri does not make racial discrimination as a focus of her writing, it is present nonetheless, just as it is always present in the lives of South Asian Americans. Lahiri's work reflects the impact of the history of racial politics in the United States on the formation of identity by demonstrating that racialization in the United States makes race an intrinsic and incapable part of identity for any immigrant, whose skin colour is not white.

In *Interpreter of Maladies*, Lahiri presents racial issues realistically, conveying the racial bigotry experienced by South Asian-Americans without seeming confrontational. The success and appeal of Lahiri's debut collection are in large due to her ability to evolve the "ordinaries of the immigrant existence" rather than present "exoticized or exaggerated versions of her characters" (Mannur 63). Lahiri presents the difficulties and the picture of the everyday struggles of south Asian-Americans, where the problems of the characters often remain unresolved, just as racialization in the United States remains unresolved.

In Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*, the identity formation of the South Asian-American characters has impact of racialization. The focus is on the effects of racialization in three of the ten stories from *Interpreter of Maladies* namely "When Mr. Pirzada came to dine", "Interpreter of Maladies, and "Sexy". All the three stories encompass a variety of relationships and points of view. While in each story varying misperceptions of race are shown to affect south Asian-American identity, an analysis of the stories shows that these misperceptions can be traced to the racialized history of south Asian-Americans in the United States and the ambiguity that has resulted from trying to categorize individuals on the basis of race and ethnicity.

Lahiri does not explicitly address the effects of race on South Asian-Americans; however, by demonstrating that race can function as both unifying and dividing agent. She subverts



common assumption of race as an indicator of similitude, and instead conveys that one's identity is not completely determined by race, but ethnicity, nationality, religion and culture background, among other factors, combine to create an identity.

The three stories that have been chosen for closer scrutiny differ in the narration from the perspectives of an Indian American girl, an Indian man, and a white European American woman. In addition, the ways in which race affects perceptions of identity vary among the stories. "Interpreter of Maladies" presents race as an unsuccessful basis for relationships between individuals of the same race. The next story, "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine", portrays race as an ineffective indicator of similarities within one racial group and foreigners in relation to majority racial populations. Finally, "sexy" portrays race both as a way of grouping individuals with similar racial characteristics together as 'other' in opposition to White Americans and as a means of evoking exotic fantasies of the racial "other".

"*Interpreter of Maladies*" describes the encounter, during a day trip between Mr. Kapasi, an Indian man who works for a local doctor translating patients' descriptions of their symptoms from Gujarati to Hindi and as a tour guide for English-speaking tourists, and the Das family, an Indian American family who are vacationing in India. 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 shaved, largely bare legs across the back seat" (Lahiri 43). The fact that Mr. Kapasi watches Mrs. Das through the Mirror, rather than directly, signifies the distance between them which Mr. Kapasi either fails to initially recognize or deludes himself into ignorance.

Mr. Kapasi notices that although the Das's look like Indians, they dress "as foreigners, shake hands like Americans, and use methods of par eating that are strange to Mr. Kapasi from his Indian perspective" (44-45). The connection Mr. Kapasi feels to the Das family is based on their shared race and ethnicity soon appears imaginary and one-sided; clearly the Das family sees him and all of India in a very exotic way, far removed from their American lives.

Mr. Das shows no feeling of identity or sympathy for him, but instead sees the Indian man as a world away from himself in spite of their shared race. In fact, the scene in which Mr. Kapasi takes a picture of the Indian man directly mirrors an earlier scene in which Mr. Das asks Mr. Kapasi to stop the car so that he can photograph monkeys that are wild and therefore, like the Indian man, "exotic" (47). The detached way in which Mr. Das views both the man and monkeys as foreign objects through the lens of his camera emphasizes his detachment from India as a whole.



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 and not belonging, because Bobby is "slightly paler than the other children" (Lahiri 48). His skin colour constantly reminds Mrs. Das of her 'secret' and is a Marker of shame and illegitimacy. However, the superficiality and insignificance of race are evident in that although Mr. Kapasi notices the difference in Bobby's skin colour, the distinctiveness of it is completely insignificant to everyone but Mrs. Das. None of the members of the Das family is aware of it. 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 guilt. Mr. Kapasi is eventually able to realize what the Das family already knows that shared race alone cannot bridge the gulf of misunderstanding that results from more fundamental differences.

"When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine" is set in the year 1971, in a New England College town. The narrator is Lilia, a ten year old Indian American girl, who lives with her parents. Mr. Pirzada is a Pakistani, who studies botany in the United States. His wife and daughters stay back in Dacca. Lilia's parents entertain Mr. Pirzada almost every night, sharing dinner and news of what is happening on the sub continent.

During the time in which she is acquainted with Mr. Pirzada, Lilia struggles to negotiate her own Indian-American identity in the mind of foreigners which skin colour creates. She assumes Mr. Pirzada to be Indian since, he is similar to her parents in looks and speaks the same language, Bengali. Lilia's parents differ from Mr. Pirzada in religion and nationality; they share physical and cultural similarities. So, Lilia is confused by her father's assertion: "It made no sense to me. Mr. Pirzada and my parents spoke the same language, laughed at the same jokes, and looked more or less the same" (25). Thus, although their racial similarity is not the main reason for their resemblance, the fact that Lilia initially equates shared skin colour with shared identity makes clear that it is the most immediately obvious reason.

The similarities between Lilia's parents and Mr. Pirzada shows that individuals are not defined solely by race, religion, or nationality, because their relationship points to a shared culture, which is Bengali culture that is exceeded by imagined borders signifying religious and national status. Even after this, Lilia is still unable to understand the difference. The pocket watch Mr. Pirzada has set to East Pakistani time serves as an outward indicator of his identity. While to Lilia, the watch symbolizes Mr. Pirzada's difference from her parents as non Indian. To Mr. Pirzada, the watch is a constant reminder that he does not belong to the United States because it is not his home. They are able to recognize the absurdity of the fact that these differences are often socially constructed.



In attempting to understand the implications of skin colour, Lilia exceeds imposed boundaries of American hegemony in order to learn more about an "other" person like Mr. Pirzada who is both like Lilia in race and unlike her in ethnicity, nationality, and religion. 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.

During the time in which East Pakistan and West Pakistan are at War, Mr. Pirzada and Lilia's parents watch the news on television each night in order to learn of new developments and to share their concern over the safety of Mr. Pirzada's family. Noelle Brada Williams points out, "that human concentration and human communication are themes that run through the stories in Lahiri's collection, but that these relationships are not always created by shared role" (Williams, 454-5).

Since Lilia and her parents live in a historically racialized society, their identities are racially constructed, so that to most Americans, differences in religion and nationality would not distinguish Mr. Pirzada and parents from one another. Lahiri conveys the effects of racialization on Lilia and her family in that Lilia recognizes Mr. Pirzada as racially like her parents in comparison to the white majority, but eventually learns that although race is perhaps the most visible part of one's identity, it is neither as the most significant nor the most defining, and therefore cannot be the sole basis for a meaningful relationship between people. Lahiri also demonstrates that perceptions of identity based on race often cause misconceptions so that paradoxically even while Lilia struggles to understand the effect of race on identity, she is constantly defined by the world outside her home as "other".

"Sexy" basically describes a brief adventurous relationship between, Dev, a Bengal and Miranda, a white but also includes accounts of Miranda's interactions with other south Asian-Americans, namely her Indian American co-worker, Laxmi and the Dixit family, whom she knew as a child. Miranda's relationships with south Asian-Americans throughout her life are framed by stereotypes based on race and ethnicity. Throughout the story Miranda shifts from her childhood view of south Asian-Americans as frightening to a view of Dev as desirable. She continues both to homogenize all south Asian-Americans and to view them individually as foreign and exotic.

Miranda recognizes Dev as radically and ethnically different because he does not share her own unmarked or "White" ethnic identity. Clearly, from the beginning of their relationship, racial identification greatly influences the way Miranda views Dev. Miranda's tendency to define others by racial difference is emphasized by the fact that she groups every one. She has known of the South Asian origin only on the basis of race. When Miranda starts her



relationship with Dev, she wants to share it with her friend Laxmi "only because Laxmi was Indian, too" (89). Laxmi and Dev are unacquainted. Since South Asians and Indians are so diverse, they could also differ culturally, ethnically and religiously. However, Miranda groups Dev and Laxmi together based only on the fact that they are both of Indian ancestry. Dev's racial difference from Miranda is not only feature of their relationship, by constantly emphasizing his foreigners to herself, Miranda make his race more significant that it actually is.

Race functions as a way of grouping people of south Asian descent together both as foreign in "Interpretation of Maladies" and as separate from white Americans in "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine", in "Sexy" Lahiri explores an entirely different function of race with in interpersonal relationships as a marker of the cultural and exotic 'other'. Upon first seeing Dev, Miranda finds him attractive and notices his apparent health and sophistication (86). Soon thereafter she becomes aware of his dark skin and his voice, which bears "only the hint of an accent", guessing that "he might be Spanish, or Lebanese" (87). The stories of Interpreter of Maladies directly or indirectly speak about the south Asian diasporic community and the notion of identity loss. Therefore diasporic or expatriate communities feel alienated in their host country. For this reason, they suffer some kind of identity loss or identity crisis as well. It seems 'identity' is an important factor of Postcolonial. expatriate literature and Lahiri's stories deal with identity crisis and identity losses. The notion of identity loss is not only common in Lahiri's characters, but also in the writing of other diasporic writers. The reason is most expatriates suffered or are suffering this type of identity-loss. Diasporic writers are also influenced by their sufferings or by their expatriate communities. As Salman Rushdie points out, "Exiles or emigrants or expatriates haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt" (Rushdie 9). Simon Lewis points out that in Lahiri's stories, the problem of misunderstanding is "supposed to go even deeper than race and culture", and that in exposing false connections based on racial sameness, Lahiri reveals that the maladies that separate people do not have "origins in race", and that race alone is not able to "bridge the communicative gaps that inevitability separate human beings" (Lewis, 220). In "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dines" race is shown to be only a superficial signifier of similitude between people, and to communicate foreignness to Lilia's teacher and neighbours, but not other identifying features such as nationality and religion. The experiences of the Das family and Mr. Kapasi in "Interpreter of Maladies" demonstrate that despite the common perception that race indicates other similarities, such as nationality and cultural values, individuals cannot create relationships based on shared race above. Miranda's treatment of Dev, Laxmi and the Dixits in "Sexy", demonstrates that the grouping of individuals based on shared race and the labeling of others as 'exotic' based on racial difference denies everyone's individual identities.



The functions of race as a marker of identity in "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine", "Interpreter of Maladies", and "Sexy" are indicative of the way in which Lahiri "constructs a conversation among her pieces" by bringing attention to the effects of race on South Asian-American identity (Brada Williams 453). Although Lahiri does not explicitly confront race in her works, the realities of racialization in the United States are embedded in Lahiri's narratives just as they are embedded in American history.

The three stories analyzed, enables the reader to comprehend the complexities involved in the lives of people settled in an alien land. Despite their earnest efforts to survive on a par with the natives of that country, they miserably fail in their endeavors to impress upon them so as to be treated as equals. While the settlers are inflicted with a sense of loss of belongingness, their off springs feel themselves as natives of the soil but are bewildered by the treatment received in the hands of their white counterparts. Having left their roots in their native soil, they visit their motherlands with all enthusiasm and sense of belonging only to be disappointed with a sense of loss of belonging or identity. They find themselves "misfits" both in their native land as well as in their living land.

The colour of them serves as the only mark of identity in their native land where they experience the difference in the mental makeup and quite ironically, it is again their colour of skin that distances themselves from the natives for the natives who never regard the expatriates as 'one' among them despite the various other similarities. Hence, through her characters and their experiences, Jumpha Lahiri has debunked the myth that 'race' is the determining factor of identity.

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