

Shifting Identity of a Diasporic Subject: Jhumpa Lahiri's *Lilia*

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Abstract

The paper attempts an intensive reading of Jhumpa Lahiri's story, "When Mr. Pirzada came to Dine" with a view to placing its central character, Lilia, against the two forms of 'mottled background', not in a 'harmonizing' relation, but in a process of 'becoming mottled'. It seeks to unearth the unstable nature of Lilia's diasporic identity that characterizes, albeit differently, her parents as well. The essence of her identity is shattered by her shifting between the two forms or identities that coalesce in her without any balancing oppositions. The first refers to India which emerged as an independent nation along with Pakistan following the 1947 Partition of the sub-continent by the Raj. The second involves the United States where she is physically, culturally, linguistically and economically set. The unstable nature is sought not in the subject's different positionalities in terms of race, gender and class but in the single sphere of race in order to show how the idea of the true or real identity of the diasporic subject keeps shifting in that single sphere, unsettling the basis of her identity.

The persistent urge of the diasporic self to connect itself with its homeland is a feature of diasporic writing. But, with concepts like globalization, hybridity, and multi-ethnicity holding the centre stage in our 'postcolonial neocolonized world' previous ideas of nation/nationhood/homeland are being constantly challenged and redefined. This further unsettles the already vulnerable and problematic status of the diasporic subject (DS) that Jhumpa Lahiri (1999) textualizes in her story "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine". Collected in *Interpreter of Maladies*, the story presents Lilia, whose diasporic consciousness makes her feel at one with her 'Indian Man', Pirzada in the United States in his days of utter worry and

frustration because he, like her parents, "speak(s) the same language, laughed at the same jokes, looked more or less the same" (p. 25)

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Set against the backdrop of the liberation war of Bangladesh in 1971, "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine" begins in the US with the adult Lilia's introduction of Mr Pirzada who assumes that one of his qualities was that he was not there to pursue the much vaunted 'American Dream' but "to study the foliage of New England" for which he had received a research grant "from the government of Pakistan". (p. 24) The adult narrator details precisely Pirzada's vulnerable state of mind while his family was living a nightmarish life in East Pakistan in face of (West) Pakistan's military violence in the Eastern part of the country, "where Dacca was located". (p. 23) The narration of the adult Lilia is hyphenated by her use of a flashback in a matter-of-fact manner when young Lilia intervenes first in the third paragraph: "at first I knew nothing of the reasons for his visits. I was ten years old". (p. 24) This is how the 'looking glass', as Spivak (1992) would call it, of the ten-year old Lilia is initiated. The two voices overlap in narration so often that at times they become hardly separable. Many of young Lilia's details are maneuvered as consciously as the adult's (though not in a matter-of-fact tone), like the way young Lilia draws our attention to the above-mentioned event, calling Pirzada 'the Indian Man' who shook the whole of her consciousness by giving her the lesson that he possessed an identity quite different from that of her family. This event also brings two other voices into play: that of her parents, (and her father in particular) who are already diasporic Indians, not struggling cope with a foreign culture, but settled in their adopted country, unlike Pirzada. Her father explains the reasons why Pirzada is no more an Indian following the 1947 Partition of the sub-continent on religious grounds. That is to say, Pirzada's religion, Islam, gives him a different identity, "a different country, a different colour". (p. 26) Her father's voice and role are to be bracketed in contrast to another voice, that of Mrs Kenyon's, which tends to suppress Lilia's efforts to learn sub-continental histories, while her father's insistence on knowing about her learning curriculum at school forms an antithesis to hers:

"What exactly do they teach you at school? Do you study history? Geography?"
(p. 26)

Or, more directly,

"What is she learning?" (p. 27)

More importantly, her father brings a recurring trope to the fore through the metaphor of a map, the illustration of which is again set antithetically to Mrs Kenyon, as we shall see.

Significantly, Lilia's first lesson constitutes her maiden confrontation with the 'mottled background' of realities. She wonders how realities (based on shared cultural practices) are contrasted to historically constructed ones, Pirzada presents himself in Lilia's eyes as culturally one with her parents, but historically at odds with them. And that is why her father makes it a point to let her know that Pirzada should not be called an Indian:

...my father insisted that I understand the difference, and he led me to a map of the world taped to the wall over his desk. (p. 25)

Lilia's father's explanation implies how his own cultural realities are distorted by the illusive image of a 'homogeneous' nationhood constituted on the basis of religious grouping:

"...One moment we were free and then we were sliced up", he explained, drawing an X with his finger on the countertop, "like a pie. Hindus here, Muslims there. Dacca no longer belongs to us." (p. 25)

Gradually, Lilia gets emotionally attached to Pirzada and to his family although she had not seen them; this involvement is best expressed in her following thought:

...an uneasiness possessed me; life, I realized, was being lived in Dacca first. I imagined Mr. Pirzada's daughters rising from sleep, tying ribbons in their hair, anticipating breakfast, preparing for school. Our meals, our actions, were only a shadow of what had already happened there, a lagging ghost of where Mr Pirzada really belonged. (p. 25)

The more she is emotionally involved, the more she is drawn to the 'mottled background' that defines them as Indians and Pirzada as Pakistani, and later on as Bangladeshi. Such a difference always appears to be a problem that we could call the *imaginary construction* of Lilia that she does not resolve imaginatively until the last days of the war.

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But I did feel, looking at these strange creatures now—the Indians—that in some way these were my people, and that I'd spent my life denying or avoiding the fact.

I felt ashamed and incomplete at the same, as if half of me were missing, and as if I'd been colluding with my enemies, those whites who wanted Indians to be like them. Partly I blamed Dad for this...He preferred England in every way...He wasn't proud of his past, but he wasn't unproud of it either; it just existed and there wasn't any point in fetishizing it, as some liberals and Asian radicals like to do. So if I wanted the additional personality bonus of an Indian past, I would have to create it. (*Kureshi, The Buddha of Suburbia*, Childs & Williams, 1997, p. 173-74)

Young Lilia extends the answer to her father's question ("What is she learning?") through her plain yet ironic narration by enacting the process that tends to unsettle the subject-position of diasporic Indians. This enactment gives Lilia her second crucial lesson and is perceived as an effect of practices constituting her confrontation with the second form of 'mottled background' epitomized here by the working of, what Spivak (1997) calls, the 'teaching machine.' (Childs & Williams, p. 173) By way of plainly describing that enactment at school, she ironically highlights what was happening to her own indigenous culture and to its effect on Pirzada, and her ignorance of the whole issue. Failing to resist the temptation of knowing about her native histories and violating Mrs Kenyon's instruction to collect data "on a particular aspect of the Revolution" (p. 33) associated with America's colonizing status—a status that is deeply embedded into the ideological state apparatuses (ISAs) like the boys' game of "redcoats against the colonies," she approaches the "blond-wood shelves" "labeled 'Asia'" (ibid) and is then drawn to a chapter about Dhaka in a book on Pakistan. Eventually her encounter with Mrs Kenyon reveals the most significant part and thereby the key process of both forming and deforming diasporic identity.

This encounter can well be understood in terms of Lacanian psychoanalysis: Mrs Kenyon hypostatizes what Lacan calls the 'Symbolic Order' (SO) with its inviolable 'no' to the child's real desire while Lilia's urge for exploring the indigenous histories stands for the child's ever unfulfilled wish creating a perpetual sense of a 'lack-of-being' as an outcome of the process whereby the real desire (for his/her initial object) is to be repressed (Rivkin & Ryan, 1998, p.123). With the naming of objects or signifiers, one sacrifices one's desire (like Lilia's sacrifice of her mother tongue) since any utterance can be made insofar as it is permissible to the SO—the language and cultural system of any given society. In this framework, Mrs Kenyon or 'the teaching machine' executes the writings of the SO, forcibly stifling all efforts concerned with

histories of any nation *ex-centric* to American modernity in particular. Lilia's spontaneous urge, on the other hand, exhibits her attempt to construct the ego, predicated on the 'child's original symbiotic relationship with the mother' (ibid p.124) through which she seeks an imaginary fulfillment of being. But the imaginary fulfillment of being is here superseded by Lilia's mother tongue and parental culture that she learns to repress for the SO's. 'no', as if she has violated the norms of the incest taboo. Nevertheless, the authenticated role of the SO is nullified by the splits and displacements in the nature of "mimicry", Bhabha's problematic of colonial discourse. (Bhabha, 1992, p. 381) And yet, The SO identifies Lilia as Indian (she is called 'Indian witch' though endearingly), corresponding to the difference and essence of her own language and culture (the Indian SO), and to establish contact with that is the right of every individual. But her presence in American society makes that right a mockery since her attempt at initiating such contact is denied and rendered incestuous. Unlike Americans enjoying identities as Americans validated by that order, she is called an Indian, though contradictorily denied that right or reality and forced (in this instance, at least) to internalize with the linguistic and social roles of American society. Yet she is not to be considered an American with equal status as was also the case with the young actor Karim in Hanif Kureshi's novel, who finds out that he is not allowed to be 'English' and is asked instead to play 'Indian' characters, demonstrating Bhabha's insightful formulation of mimicry: 'almost the same, but not quite' (ibid). The SO places the minority groups not as Americans but rather as Indians, Arabs, and Mexicans; or there are more homogenizing categories like Asians, Africans, Latin Americans, or at its extreme, labels like the "third world" or "developing countries". Paradoxically, it displaces and invalidates that essence or reality of their native identity by making them subject to another essence, the internalizing/socializing process of American language and social roles, a process which neither allows them to be American, nor gives them the opportunity to establish any real contact with the indigenous culture. Against this 'mottled background', occurs the process of 'becoming mottled', of exactly sharing Karim's 'lack-of-being', 'as if, half of me were missing'.

Mimicry positions a DS as 'the other' showing its limit to which the American SO neither excludes the other, nor fully accommodates. This process has its effect in destabilizing the identity of a DS, setting him/her in a position of being nowhere like that of Lilia's, or for that matter, Karim's, against which the colonizer's position or identity is made stable. But, the SO, we have seen, resists coherent formulation and this results in the DS's strategic or unruly resistance

that also unsettles and questions the authority of colonial discourse. This is because the process of internalization/socialization on the DS's part is not only an act of compliance with the *SO*, but also an act of repressing and retrieving a desire for the now lost and endured, the half-present identity, since s/he can never establish a real contact with that origin except in a language that is not his/hers and that transforms all his/her desired metaphors into metonymies, signifiers whose signifieds, though never entirely lost, have only a '*partial presence*'. (*ibid*, p.383.) Such acts of repression and retrieval are often manifested as a partial presence, as any explicit act of resistance, like Lilia's disobedience of Mrs Kenyon's order, is never permissible to the *SO*.

3

Lilia's narration frequently draws our attention to common practices, codes and concerns of Pirzada and her parents that the history distorts. Such a focal point turns out to be Lilia's implicit standard in matters of assigning identity based on common linguistic and cultural codes:

Most of the time I remember the three of them operating during that time as if they were a single person, sharing a single meal, a single silence, a single fear. (p.41)

This 'grouping', constituted as it is on the basis of a shared linguistic and cultural bond in the adopted land, is what renders it almost impassable for Lilia, who is keen at pointing inconsistencies to isolate Pirzada from her parents. To her it is a disturbing fact that they ought to be treated as citizens belonging to two different nationalities—"It made no sense to me." (p.25) More importantly, Lilia does not have any critical overview of that 'mottled background' as it remains for young Lilia "a remote mystery with haphazard clues." (p.40) Her inaccessibility to her 'native' culture has been conditioned not only by the *SO* of American society, but also by her parents' hegemonized notions and practices like her mother's protest against her father's insistence on knowing sub-continental histories, "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". (p.27)

Lilia's own participation in the Halloween—a celebration by children who dress as ghosts, witches, etc.-- brings another facet of her consciousness to light. It enacts her socialization process, her successful internalization with the customs and conventions authorized by the American *SO* that permits her access to Nora's

house and to American society. This process differs from Mrs Kenyon's direct intervention in that it remains unnoticed by Lilia though it upholds the same principle and strategies of reminding her that she is an 'Other', an "Indian witch" that they welcome, marking one of the desires of mimicry as in Karim's articulation, 'those whites who wanted Indians to be like them.' The socialization/internalization process, facilitated by her parents' hegemonized state, disengages her of her own culture, making it a 'remote mystery' that differentiates Pirzada from theirs. Her inaccessibility to 'that remote mystery' is accompanied by her undecidability regarding Pirzada's identity. As noticed already, she eludes critical understanding of the sub-continental *SO*, its tendency towards religion-based national identity. She evades Pirzada's difference, observing and focusing frequently how he and her parents appear to be sharing a single concern, 'a single body, a single silence, a single fear.' (p.41) This evasion of Pirzada's difference with regard to common cultural grounds is not crucial since such an approach requires physical, social and psychological accessibility to the concerned 'Order' that she has been denied. Even the adult Lilia has to demystify 'that remote mystery' by reading histories paradoxically written certainly by European or American historians.

Lilia imaginatively constructs an image of 'a single body' by metamorphosing two, three, or more separate identities. The metamorphosis imagines them to be Bangalees since this new construction is based on common linguistic and cultural codes involving an uncontrolled questioning of their Indian self. The imaginative process of constructing undifferentiated metamorphosis, then, involves an ungovernable critique of the sub-continental *Symbolic Order*. In so critiquing she seeks the foregrounding of a 'narcissistic sense of unity' or stability in her ego or self that is denied, distorted and divided against itself by the American *Symbolic Order* that mockingly makes her subject-position unstable or disunited. This process of retrieving the repressed desire for an indigenous culture is sought through an image that alters its real referent into an undifferentiated body.

4

Lilia furthers the process of metonymic resistance which is illustrated best in her attempt at an imaginative or metonymic construction that is half-missing, unruly and perpetual. Young Lilia's narration strategically focuses on her identifying herself with Pirzada by setting him differently in her world, involving herself emotionally with him every now and then, and finally letting herself make different imaginary and surreal constructions concerning him. However, Pirzada

never appeared to be a real referent for her constructions except in some metonymic traces like his ironic treatment of the (Eurocentric) modern code of giving thanks, his ever-present sense of being a refugee in India, particularly in Kolkata, and his constant worries about Lilia's security in American society. These traces give Pirzada a more spacious, distinctive (not stereotypical) and outstanding voice. It also denotes distinctiveness to the combined voice achieved by her identification with him.

The first and third of this series of metonymic traces set Pirzada almost on the other side of Lilia's parents who have successfully coped with the American *Symbolic Order*. In sharp contrast, Pirzada's questioning of that formal code, and at its extreme, his challenging of Lilia's safety in that *Symbolic Order* do not put him merely as the epitome of a personality untainted by Eurocentric modernism. These two constructions, firstly, represent Pirzada (not directly in Lilia's eyes, but in the readers') as someone menacing to that *Symbolic Order's* modern or colonial status. In corresponding to these traces Lilia develops an image of a person who endures all like a mother, even the ravages of his own nation and its movement towards an 'unknown destination' with an 'immovable expression'. Besides, it is only he who thinks of that American *Symbolic Order* as a threat to Lilia's existence:

"Perhaps I should accompany them?" Mr.Pirzada suggested. He looked suddenly tired and small... and his eyes contained a panic I had never seen before."
 (emphasis added, p. 38)

Association of this image with a motherly figure enacts the metamorphosis even of Pirzada's sexual identity, let alone other bearings of that real referent. That all these are imaginary constructs can be seen from Lilia's assertion that there is no difference between them whereas the meticulous details devoted to recording Pirzada's activities, speeches, attitudes and reactions disclose a number of differences that remain unnoticed to young Lilia; yet that pose an attraction she cannot resist and formulate. Some of the differences can be detailed graphically as follows:

- (a) The uncontaminated status of Pirzada in opposition to Lilia's parents.
- (b) His finding of resemblance with his refugee compatriots.
- (c) His implicit questioning of the American SO, his concern about Lilia's safety and how he himself poses a potential threat to that order unlike Lilia and her parents.

It is also interesting to note that all the metonymic traces turn out to be points of differences and then resistance. The second trace, more conspicuously than others, positions him antithetically to Lilia's parents, an opposition that is not to be synthesized or an ideological space of war enacted in the colonizer's (as opposed to the colonized) land—where her parents may at times feel deeply disappointed at the cultural difficulties they face—"doctors did not make house calls, neighbors never dropped by without an invitation, and of these things, every so often, my parents complained". (p. 24) Yet they do not obviously pose any threat to the concerned *Symbolic Order* through disavowal or questioning of that order as Pirzada does. Pirzada's sense of being a refugee in Lilia's house, like his countrymen in Kolkata, the other Bengal that is part of India, "Another refugee, I am afraid, on Indian territory" (p.28), corresponds critically to his own difference from those Bengalis whose position is settled as well as secure in the colonizer's land and does not pose any real threat to the colonizer's Order. It can be perceived as his showing of an overt disavowal to that order, exactly like his yet-to-be born country, Bangladesh, that directly defied the surrogate colonizer's (West Pakistani's) machination.

With all these metonymic traces, Lilia corresponds neither critically nor directly; instead, through her imaginative correspondence she forms an image that also defines the unsettling nature of her own subject-position:

"As he watched he had an immovable expression on his face, composed but alert, as if someone were giving him directions to *an unknown destination*." (p. 31, emphasis added)

By corresponding thus, she constructs another metonymy, an image with which she develops a false sense of unity in a ritualistic manner—"I did not feel the ceremonious satisfaction I normally did" (p.32)—meditated by the image of her grandmother's 'small keepsake box' in which her 'father's mother used to store the ground areca nuts she ate after her morning bath' (p.29). Conversely, Pirzada might be said to have meditated between Lilia and her real desire:

"It was my only memento of a grandmother I had never known, and until Mr. Pirzada came to our lives I could find nothing to put inside it". (p. 30)

Pirzada does not merely reintroduce her desire; he is entangled in the constructions of images through which Lilia aims at an imaginary fullness of

being in her very act of retrieving her real repressed desire. The metonymic traces, for Pirzada mean resistance and defiance, all of which become potential metonymies in Lilia's conceptual frame. This process hints precisely at the working of Lilia's metonymic resistance, a process of identifying with Pirzada, whose existence, as has been already suggested, is menacing to the American SO, an unruly process which is not fully in her control and hence is sought in part through imaginative constructions.

But the process further complicates Lilia's subject-position which ought to be preceded by her parents' difference from her position and Mrs Kenyon's. As we have seen, the voice of Mrs Kenyon is set in contrast to that of Lilia's father. His question ("What is she learning?") and role with the metaphor of a map form an antithesis to that of Mrs Kenyon who with the map is only interested in imparting lessons on American geography and history. In spite of his resistance, their successful entry into that Order demands from them the kind of hegemonic participation that they have to succumb to.

Unlike her parents, Lilia goes through a double pressure; firstly, alienation from the physical setting of her objects of desire and, secondly, the counter-pressure of the American SO she has to affiliate with. But as this counter-pressure takes over, her consciousness makes her repress the real desire through metonymies of resistance. She endeavours to retrieve it, although it is neither temporal nor conscious like her father's. Lilia's subject-position nurtures the co-existence of a thesis (maintenance of that Order) and an antithesis (construction of metonymic resistance that variously challenges the authority and the authenticity of that Order). Her parents' diasporic position, acting in most cases as representative of that American Order, is precisely justified against Pirzada, who is simultaneously the other and a threat to the stability of that Order because of his unyielding attitudes towards it. Both these roles, that of her parents and of Pirzada's, coalesce in her, creating a quite different subject-position, a position that nourishes within an ever-absent repressed desire an ever-present retrieval attempt through metonymic constructions which are always half-missing.

In "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine" Jhumpa Lahiri thus addresses the key issues of diasporic literature—'displacement, migration and the notion of home'. The dislocation of the characters has been presented simultaneously from the perspectives of Lilia's parents who are 'settled' in their adopted country, of Pirzada who 'feels the pangs of exile away from his homeland', and of the narrator whose diasporic experiences places her 'between two cultures'. Karim (2006)

highlights the nature of her characters as follows: '(they) interact with people of different backgrounds, from relationships, and discover their complex, hyphenated identity;' (in Alam, 210) Unraveling the complex identity of the diasporic subject is the unifying theme of the stories collected in Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* as well as her *The Namesake* in which the protagonist, Gogol Ganguly 'remains captive to his conflicted identity—is he Indian or American?'. In fact the tensions and agonies of the diasporic subject is a marked feature of the South Asian diaspora which also includes Bangladeshi diasporic writers like Abid Khan, Syed Manzurul Islam and Zadie Smith.

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