

An Expansion from 'Self' to 'Other': Jhumpa Lahiri's Short Story "When Mr Pirzada Came to Dine"

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The stories of Jhumpa Lahiri's reveal the life of Indian Diaspora that keeps on navigating between its traditions and the new world that they face. The stories are set either in Bengal or Boston and the readers come across the multicultural aspect and the mingled notions of Identity.

Globalization has contracted the world and the people who migrate outside their country for various purposes of their own and settle in different corners of the world, have generated a new question regarding identity. In earlier years when men were restricted to their regional boundaries, lived a life according to the set pattern of social customs and traditions; that were relatively stable and attributed his personal identity to society, quite a few had to face the complexity of identity determination. In this migration individuals carry with them their traditions, historical experiences, social values, language and innumerable other things. They also open heartedly accept the new world they are in and practice its life style as their own in their need for survival. The amalgamation of different cultures posts a question of indeterminacy of individual identity. The short story of Jhumpa Lahiri "When Mr Pirzada came to Dine" deals with this indeterminable factor of individual identity because fixing identity would mean ruling out innumerable factors that determine this indeterminable aspect.

In the story the protagonist is a ten year old girl Lilia who is a silent observer of Mr Pirzada's regular visit to her house. The story is set in Boston and has a historical background of Indo-Pak war of 1971, when east Bengal was liberated and a new nation Bangladesh took its shape. Mr Pirzada, who belongs to Dacca, has been awarded a grant from the government of Pakistan to study foliage of New England. Educational enrichment from west is considered as a great honor, but not economically generous. The acceptance of this honor as well as the trauma he faces being away from his family at the point of this political upheaval is closely observed.

The Argentinian - British theorist Ernest Laclau in his book *The Making of Political Identities* discusses the political and states that, Politics is crucial because it provides society with the kind of determinations required for identifiable policies and agenda, at the same time its aporetic because it can never provide the 'correct determinate' (12).

It is seen that belonging to a restricted boundary of a particular nation is unable to comprehend the quest for identity; it is something more. The social structure as he says is something totally 'heterogeneous' and to constrain it externally with political decision is a reflection of sheer madness. Jacques Derrida in his famous essay "Force of Law" uses a different vocabulary and justifies political decisions saying,

All that deconstructive point of view tries to show that, since conventions, institutions and consensus are stabilizations...this means that they are stabilizations of something essentially unstable and chaotic....because stability is not natural(but constructed) it is because there is chaos that there is need for stability. If there were continual stability there would be no need for politics and it is to the extent that stability is not natural essential or substantial that politics exists (26-27)

It may be one of the reasons why world is sliced into different countries and therefore it becomes one of the various ingredients in determining an identity of an individual.

Thus belonging to a similar geographical area and search of compatriots is a decisive feature in Mr Pirzada being invited by Lilia's parents to their house because every new semester, through the columns of university directory, they circle surnames familiar to their part of the world .

Jhumpa Lahiri in her story does not present the nostalgia for native country, but her characters are able to maintain a surprising balance. Lilia's parents accept the historical past of India's partition as their own. Identifying themselves as Indians they feel that Dacca does not belong to them. They also try to make their daughter realize the 'difference' it makes when a portion of land is sliced and its every part becomes an independent territory. At the same time they are proud that their daughter is born in America ; which is an assurance of ' a safe life, an easy life, a fine education every opportunity' that their daughter would never eat ' rationed food, obey curfew or watch riots from the roof top...read during power failures by the light of kerosene lamps, the pressures , the tutors, the constant exams.' Their disinterestedness in their daughter's knowledge about Indian history shows that despite of identifying themselves as Indians they wish to avail the 'best' in their lives as well as that of their child. For them west has best to offer therefore they are in no way hesitant to accept this new world as their own. These characters are best examples of post modern society that chooses the best out of past as well as keeps an eye on future prospects. This makes us think that individual identity is a multiple factor.

If one discusses the construction of identity from relational perspective it would mean that analysis of identity is possible only if sufficient attention is paid on the social and historical contexts in which an individual is put. Dallmayr agrees with Rajeev Bhargava :

The fact of the social identities are formed to a significant extent in response to social contents especially the contexts of language and cultural beliefs however are not merely mental phenomenon but inscribed in practical ways of life or modes of conduct (25).

India was helping Bangladesh to gain its freedom. In the similar manner Lilia's parents being Indians can be seen all dedicated in solving the problem of Mr Pirzada who is a Bangladeshi. Their sense of belonging to their respective nations brings them closer to form a single identity as if they were 'a single person, sharing a single meal, a single body, a single silence and a single fear'. Their coming close in no way should be looked as the result of the social wounds that they share, but in their being together Lahiri wishes to aim at the social healing one finds in shared social relationship. This is just incomprehensible for a person who does not share a similar background; as we find in the story that nobody in the school of Lilia even mentions the war so faithfully as in her own living room. Her friend is unable to understand what does it feel like missing your own in a different country. The atmosphere at her friend's house is an unconcerned one to this happening taking place. Through such characters one gets a glimpse of ' high modern identity' that makes an individual closed not open. Such an individual remains obsessed with ' self mastery and self determination'. Lilia's teacher Mrs Kenyon snatches a book titled *Pakistan: A Land and its People* off Lilia's hands and comments " Is this book part of your report Lilia?" She wants her to concentrate only on American revolution and thinks no reason to consult such a book.

Jhumpa Lahiri here makes us think about the importance of an individual to know about other country as his own. The statement of Mrs Kenyon can also be seen in the light of European self consciousness as an advanced and superior civilization in comparison to others. Latin American thinker Enrique Dussel offers,

Europe is more developed, its civilization is superior to other...a culture abandonment of its barbarity and under development through a civilizing process (65-66)

Jhumpa Lahiri in her story insists that how a person relates his/her identity to other or others. Parents of Lilia and Pirzada belong to different countries but transcending their political barriers, they share the problem of Mr Pirzada, not only help him , rather form a single entity by merging their self with him. They show equal interest in the political scenario of East Pakistan , deplore the policies of Yahyah khan, discuss the intrigues and catastrophe, but as the news footage from Dacca becomes rare, other than political discussions, the three of them involve themselves in other leasures- they joke, tell stories, listen Kishore Kumar etc and when war breaks between India and Pak, astonishment about the situation so great and sense of insecurity so deep that they even distrust their peaceful surrounding. Lilia father warns her “ Don’t go to any of the houses you don’t know” Mr Pirzada says, “ Is there any danger?” And wants to accompany Lilia for Halloween. Their identity keeps on navigating from self to social or political.

Through the protagonist Lilia Jhumpa Lahiri gives much superior synthesis of her perception of individual identity. Her sketch of Lilia’s character affirms the view of Merleau Ponty that,

Myself and other are like two nearly concentric circles which can be distinguished only by slight mysterious slippage... what is presupposed here is the abandonment of solipsism: the aspect that identities (of self and other) are no longer unilaterally constructed and manufactured, but are seen as emerging in an open space or a shared world- although this world may be inhabited in very different ways. It is virtue of this shared being in the world that self other perception and understanding are possible. (Dallmayr 26)

The way Merleau Ponty treats the subject of identity one finds how an individual operating on level of thought, utterances, feelings expands himself to this world, which is not fixed or eternal rather consists of such a social life that keeps on reshaping.

Lilia a girl of ten born in America , quite ignorant about the life in India, Pakistan or Bangladesh, can recognize them only in the map by their sketched boundaries and difference in color; that makes no sense to her when she looks at it as any child born in America would because for him these countries are some of the thirteen colonies that are basically the same. Lilia finds no difference in the mannerisms of Mr Pirzada and her parents i.e ‘ They speak same language, looking more or less the same, ate mango pickles with their meals, ate rice every night for supper with their hands, taking off shoes before entering a room, chewed fennel seeds after meals as digestive, drank no alcohol, and for dessert dipped biscuits in successive cups of tea’ Through this character Jhumpa Lahiri tries to point out that the sense of belonging and attachment towards roots remains within a person; though being not born or being distanced

from his native place. Lilia treasures a small box of her grand mother, which is the only memento of her roots. Her keeping of Mr Pirzada chocolates in the box can be seen as her attachment towards her roots. Through that ancestral box she appears to have established a relationship with her place of belonging of which Mr Pirzada appears as an ambassador to her. She becomes really attached to Mr Pirzada's problem when one day she views Bangladesh socio-political condition on television. The concern that she develops for Mr Pirzada's family transcends the barrier of nation, culture, society in which she is born and surrounded. This sensitivity makes her share her world with Mr Pirzada.

She keeps a chocolate received from Mr Pirzada and religiously prays for his family in East Pakistan. She checks up library to get more information about the land and people of Bangladesh. Her distance from her roots makes her more sensitive towards Mr Pirzada's problem. She does not like when her parents and Mr Pirzada are bit diverted from the seriousness of the matter. Her attachment and concern is constant. She continues to pray for their well being and safety and is relieved only when she hears that he is reunited with his wife and daughters. With this concern towards Mr Pirzada, born of Indian parents, identified as Indian at Halloween, she enjoys with warmth the local festival of Halloween and Christmas.

Lilia's identity makes an equilibrium between local and global. Her character finds an expansion from self to other. After Mr Pirzada reunites with his family she feels his real absence and truly miss him; as for all these days he was a part of her world. Jhumpa Lahiri effectively presents that how without losing one's self one can establish a relationship with others. How self consciousness is no threat to the concept of 'other'. The concept of identity is an ongoing evolvement based on the dialogic relationship that one establishes with the world one encounters everyday. Jhumpa Lahiri appears to present a synthesis of various concepts regarding formation of identity. Her view is the balance of 'self' and 'other' and in this manner she through her character Lilia tries to capture the indeterminable in transit.

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