

**UNFADING MEMORIES AND THEIR IMPACT ON RELATIONSHIPS
IN THE SHORT STORIES OF JHUMPA LAHIRI**

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Liminality is the characteristic of Indian diasporic experience in the west. This state is the result of the constant oscillation between conflicting conceptions of race and culture and time and space. Existence in this interstitial space makes the immigrants develop an altered consciousness as they try to retain a sense of their identity rooted in the culture of their homeland and simultaneously struggle for adjusting to the present surroundings. The term diasporic space stands for both physical and metaphorical space. It is the intersection. It is the point where cultural and psychic processes and spiritual affinities meet. It is a social space created by the members of the diasporic communities to preserve their cultural heritage and identification in the host societies. The emphasis of this Paper is to analyse the factors that exist in the diasporic space and explore their positive and negative influences on human relationships based on the selected short stories of Jhumpa Lahiri.

The story “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine” is the point of view of a 10-year old girl Lilia. Her parents, Indian immigrants from the state of West Bengal make friends with Mr. Pirzada of East Pakistan with the intention to make a cultural companionship within the diasporic space. Mr. Pirzada is on a scholarship to study the foliage of New England. Lahiri uses cultural signifiers to describe the bond between them. She employs the partial omniscience technique in this story. Lilia cannot understand despite her father's elaborate explanation why Mr. Pirzada is no more an Indian as the first language of Mr. Pirzada and her parents is Bengali and they follow the same traditions and customs. “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” (25).

By highlighting the cultural and geographical roots of Mr. Pirzada and Lilia's family, Lahiri draws the attention of the readers to the influence of culture on human relationships in the diasporic space. Mr. Pirzada tries to maintain contact with his home in Dacca psychologically by setting the time to the local time of Dacca in a strapless extra watch he carries in his pocket.

As the struggle for the liberation of East Pakistan starts, Mr. Pirzada loses all contacts with his wife and seven daughters. Lilia's parents show solidarity with him. Mr. Pirzada often

dines with them, and watches the war news clippings on TV with them. The relationship between Mr. Pirzada and Lilia's parents transcends national boundaries. Lahiri reveals this solidarity through the observations of Lilia. "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 relationship between Mr. Pirzada and Lilia's parents is explicit. More significant, wonderful and secretive relationship is that of Lilia with the family members of Mr. Pirzada. Lahiri delineates the psyche of the young girl. Lilia's power of empathy is so intense that Mr. Pirzada's anxiety over the welfare of his family becomes her anxiety too. The power of empathy is not just a human virtue, but a spiritual one too. The news clippings on the TV disturb Lilia. It is significant to note that the relationship between Mr. Pirzada and Lilia is not consanguine. Still, it does not deter her power of empathy since the continuous news clippings aggravate her nervousness and belittle her confidence in the safety of Mr. Pirzada's family. "My stomach tightened as I worried whether his wife and seven daughters were now members of the drifting, clamoring crowd that had flashed at intervals on the screen" (32).

Constant fear about the safety of Mr. Pirzada's family stirs her mind and soul and the intensity of the feeling makes her turn towards God. Under desperate conditions, she prays for the first time in her life. The identification of prayer with the chewing of the chocolates given by Mr. Pirzada is so strong that she skips to brush her teeth in the night as she fears that she will rinse the prayer out. So the prayer continues through the night subconsciously during her sleep. She re adjusts the paste and truth brush to avoid questions from her parents.

The act of eating the candy gifted by Mr. Pirzada during those hard times is strictly reserved for the prayer sessions. When she comes to know that Mr. Pirzada's family is safe, she neither continues the ritual nor simply enjoys those treats. She throws those candies away, reflecting the high quality of detachment that is expected of a sincere soul.

Lilia and her parents actively participate in the Halloween¹ festival. Through the characterization of Lilia's parents, Lahiri points out that some first generation immigrants do not shy away from participating in the community life. They have a particular affinity towards their Bengali language, food and cultural practices, and at the same time they register their presence amidst the locals with ease by participating in the community events. This is a remarkable survival technique.

The short story "Interpreter of Maladies" is the experience of an Indian origin family from New Jersey. The members of the family are on a tour in India. Lahiri explores the disharmony in human relationships through the dialogic interaction between Mrs. Das and Mr. Kapasi, the tour guide, and the imaginative escapades of Mr. Kapasi. The confession of Mrs. Das that Bobby is the son of a Punjabi friend of Mr. Das with whom she has a onetime

relationship, and the stunning reaction of Mr. Kapasi lead to several questions on the value system.

The story takes a turn when Mr. Kapasi tells the tourists that he works part time as an interpreter in a doctor's office. The job of Mr. Kapasi is assessed by different people differently depending on their perceptions.

Mr. Kapasi has dreamt of becoming an interpreter for diplomats and dignitaries, and he is forced to settle with the job in a doctor's office. His wife has no regard for his job. Mr. Das finds it interesting and responsible, whereas Mrs. Das considers it romantic. It is her way of appreciating his command over two languages- Gujarati and English and his talent in describing the ailments of patients to the doctor precisely the way they want them and in explaining the suggestions of the doctor to the patients accurately. Once she starts thinking of his talent her attitude towards him undergoes a sea change. Mr. Kapasi considers the expression "romantic" suggestive. "When Mr. Kapasi thought once again about how she had said romantic, the feeling of intoxication grew" (53).

Mrs. Das looks for an opportunity to share her life's secret with him and get some suggestion from him which will possibly relieve her from the pain, she has been putting with for eight long years. S. Robert Gnanamony points out, "The word 'terrible' is used four times in just one page that shows how much pain she had undergone because of her guilt and humiliation"(100).

The mutual interest between Mrs. Das and Mr. Kapasi though for different reasons creates a temporary contact zone, a private space between them. Lack of harmony at home with his wife, his unfulfilled career ambitions and his yearning to lead a life of his choice are some of the reasons which make him live in the world of imagination. When he comes to know that she has thought of him as a parent he thinks of a solution for her malady despite his disappointment. He believes that she should confess the truth to Mr. Das, but he does not get an opportunity to convey his belief to Mrs. Das.

There is a possibility that Mrs. Das will be free from her mental agony after the not so welcoming remark of Mr. Kapasi, bringing moral distinctions between pain and guilt. Here, Lahiri ingeniously draws the attention of the reader to the distinction. Guilt has a wider perspective. In addition to personal feeling, it is related to values. It is against the code of conduct practiced by a community or against the laws of the nation where as pain is personal and psychological in this context. Mr. Kapasi and Mrs. Das have different approaches in analyzing the extra marital relationship as their socio-cultural backgrounds differ.

Lahiri totally seals the scope for any contact between them after the tourists' return to USA as the slip of paper with Mr. Kapasi's address on it flutters away in the wind. Dr

Elizabeth P. Kurian observes, "Unburdening of her guilt to a stranger perhaps brings her some relief. And once it is done, she feels no obligation to keep Mr. Kapasi's address" (110).

At the height of the anticipated relationship with Mrs. Das, Mr. Kapasi holds on to his belief nurtured by him over years. "In those moments Mr. Kapasi used to believe that all was right with the world, that all struggles were rewarded, that all of life's mistakes made sense in the end" (Lahiri 56).

This is the most significant statement of the narrator in the story. In the inmost recess of his heart, Mr. Kapasi has a belief in the Divine dispensation. True to his belief Mr. Kapasi makes a journey inwardly. "Mr. Kapasi observed it too, knowing that this was the picture of the Das family he would preserve forever in his mind" (69).

His feelings towards Mrs. Das undergo transformation once he changes his attitude. It is a positive and powerful move on his part. Circumstances do not turn according to Mr. Kapasi's expectations, but they have a meaningful effect on him. In this story, Lahiri uses animal images. Mrs. Das's illegitimate son is associated with monkeys. A monkey stands for fickle mindedness and anxiety.

Lahiri sets the story "A Real Durwan" with the backdrop of partition of India, one of the great tragedies in human history. Boori Ma is one among those thousands and thousands of people dislocated during the partition. Deported to Calcutta, Boori Ma settles as a guard and sweeper in a flat-building. The refugee from East Bengal is a victim of circumstances twice. She has been dislocated during the aftermath of partition and later from the flat-building due to the petty jealousies between the residents of the building. The sudden and unexpected rise in the financial and social status of Dalals has become an eyesore to the other residents of the building. Mr. Dalal has generously fixed the extra wash basin on the staircase landing for the general benefit of the residents of the building. Dalals have their own wash basin in their flat, and others have to stand in queue to use the wash basin fixed on the staircase landing. The women feel humiliated further when they come to know that Dalals are planning to visit Simla for ten days.

When Dalals are in a taxi cab on their move to the railway station, the inmates of the building stay indoors and wilfully avoid wishing farewell to them. "Of all the people who lived in that particular flat- building Boori Maa was the only one who stood by the collapsible gate and wished them a safe journey" (80).

The women in the building do not hesitate to pawn or sell their valuables to improve the look of the building just to prove that they are on a par with the Dalals in every respect. Till then, despite the fact that the residents do not believe Boori Ma's claims regarding her riches back home in East Bengal they have appreciated her services, guarding the building

against intruders and keeping the staircase spotlessly clean. She has also enjoyed a standing welcome into the apartments and has the luxury of having a cup of tea offered by the residents. Her relationship with Dalals is highly cordial. Despite Boori Ma's undiplomatic utterances, Mrs. Dalal promises to bring a new bed, a sheep's hair blanket. Mr. Dalal is generous enough to say that they will bring two.

The catchy refrain “changing times” of Mr. Chatterjee, one of the old residents, is a prolepsis. Though, at that time the residents have no plans to force Boori Ma out of the building, Mr. Chatterjee drives the last nail by saying, “What a building like this needs is a real *durwan*” (82). The relationship between Mr. Chatterjee and other residents is peculiar. Lahiri ironically says, “He had neither strayed from his balcony nor opened a newspaper since independence, but in spite of this fact, or may be because of it, his opinions were always highly esteemed” (72). The most respected in the building, Mr. Chatterjee, and Boori Ma who is considered a liar have one thing in common. They load their speeches with catchy refrains.

The skeleton keys, worn at the free end of her saree, rattle as she shakes her saree and unlock her emotions and memories of her lost wealthy life style. Her lengthy descriptions of her hardships and easier times are loaded with the refrain. “Believe me, don't believe me.” Boori Ma's repeated claims about her prior riches symbolize her struggle for identity.

Boori Ma whose life savings and the skeleton keys have been stolen has another shock when she returns to the building. She is accused of informing the thieves of the wash basin on the landing of the staircase. The residents toss out Boori Ma's belongings beyond the collapsible gate into the street. Here, the modified refrain of Boori Ma, “Believe me, believe me” unravels the different layers of meaning. Whenever, she has spoken of her hard times and happy times back home in East Bengal she used to say, “Believe me, don't believe me.” It does not make any difference whether the residents believe her claims or not, as long as she is provided free lodging in the building, but it makes a lot of difference if they do not believe her innocence when she is accused of informing the thieves about the wash basin as she suddenly becomes homeless. This fact rooted in her being, either conscious or subconscious, makes her modify her refrain from “Believe me, don't believe me” to “Believe me, believe me.”

The loss of the skeleton keys symbolically suggest the change in her attitude and instead of talking about her hardships and easier times in East Bengal she may talk in the future about her services in the flat-building, the accusation of the residents, her innocence and the generosity of Dalals!

According to Mr. Chatterjee, the old resident of the building, Boori Maa may be the victim of changing times. However, an in depth analysis reveals the fact that the sixty four

year old refugee from East Bengal is the victim of the class war between Dalals and other residents though Dalals have no knowledge of the brewing resentment and jealousy. Boori Ma's social positioning has made her an easy target of the residents' ire. She represents the scores of old women who are deprived of basic amenities due to hostility.

M Dolores Herrero observes, "Lahiri's characters represent the embodiment or symbol of a fractured identity. Boori Ma does not have a name because she lost her identity in order to become functional durwan doing menial chores. She only earns the nickname, "Boori Ma", which could be said to refer to the whole lot of homeless women in a similar situation" (74).

In the short story "Mrs Sen's", the protagonist comfortably identifies herself as the wife of Mr. Sen, a university professor but suffers from isolation. The thirty year old Mrs. Sen has a cordial relationship with her husband. The other two people, with whom she has a considerable length of interaction, are eleven year old boy Eliot and his mother. Eliot and his mother have conflicting attitudes towards Mrs. Sen. Eliot is not used to Indian lifestyle, but still feels comfortable in the company of Mrs. Sen, his caretaker. He is just eleven year old and is not yet corrupted by the feelings of binary oppositions. In fact, when he observes for the first time the different objects in the university quarter of Mr. Sen, her attire, the preference of Mr and Mrs. Sen of not wearing shoes at home, he feels that it is his mother in her shorts and shoes who looks odd and not the Sens.

Critic A.K. Mukherjee in her analysis says, "Eliot's mother, an American lady has no time at her disposal to realize the delicate emotion that develops between an American child and an Indian woman who takes time to adapt herself to a foreign country" (113).

Lahiri uses images of food as a significant cultural marker. "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine" is the other story of Lahiri where food plays the role of a cultural signifier. However, in that story the elaborate description of the preparation of food and the way Mr. Pirzada, Lilia and her parents eat highlight the cultural bond between Mr. Pirzada and Lilia's parents and the cordial relationship they enjoy though they belong to two different nations. In the short story "Mrs. Sen's", images of food explore the cultural differences between Mrs. Sen and Eliot's mother, and the fissures in their relationship. Eliot's mother is reluctant to accept food, not just Indian food, any food from Mrs. Sen, even biscuits. She treats Mrs. Sen as an outsider culturally.

Irma Maini in her critical analysis says, "If food is a code to social relationships, as Mary Douglas asserts, then Eliot's mother's dismissal of Mrs. Sen's food only intensifies the cultural divide that exists between Mrs. Sen and American society" (160).

Mrs. Sen's repeated attempts to strengthen the relationship with Eliot's mother by offering food are thwarted by her in one way or the other. To avoid eating food offered by Mrs. Sen, Eliot's mother doesn't hesitate to lie that she has taken a late lunch. Contrary to her mother's behaviour, Eliot has a more positive attitude towards Mrs. Sen. "He enjoyed watching Mrs. Sen as she chopped things, seated on newspapers on the living room floor" (Lahiri 114).

The news of her grandfather's demise disturbs Mrs. Sen, and she stops cooking for a week and does not offer Eliot's mother any food, the way she used to do. When Eliot's mother questions him of the change in Mrs. Sen's behaviour, he does not reveal the facts. "He did not tell her that Mrs. Sen paced the apartment, staring at the plastic-covered lampshades as if noticing them for the first time. He did not tell her she switched on the television but never watched it, or that she made herself tea but let it grow cold on the coffee table" (128).

Eliot has a harmonious interaction with Mrs. Sen despite all the cultural differences. She shares with him the memories of her happy life back home in India and also her displeasure for leading isolated life in USA. Eliot does not feel out of place in her company. This is evident from the way he responds when his mother comes to pick him up. "It gave him a little shock to see his mother all of a sudden, in the transparent stockings and shoulder-padded suits she wore to her job, peering into the corners of Mrs. Sen's apartment" (118).

Mrs. Sen struggles in the process of getting assimilated into American culture. She suffers from liminality as she compares her present situation with that of her past in India. She feels miserable when she cannot fly back to India when she comes to know that her sister has had a baby girl. When she questions Eliot will someone respond if she screams, he says may be, but they complain of noise. Through this dialogic interaction, Lahiri throws light on the difference in social relationships in India and USA.

Once, while practicing driving, she asks Eliot whether things will improve. When Eliot says that she can go anywhere once she learns to drive, she questions him. "Could I drive all the way to Calcutta? How long would that, Eliot? Ten thousand miles, at fifty miles per hour?" (119). To Mrs. Sen things will improve only when she can reconnect to the surroundings, familiar and comfortable to her, enriched by the love of extending families, visiting relatives and neighbours, who follow the same cultural norms and have similar interests. It is the feeling of togetherness in the close-knit community she misses in USA. However, in the course of time she may cross this liminal space like some of the other successful immigrants, and adapt the lifestyle of USA with ease, and yet prevailing her cultural identity.

Critic Uma Parameswaran observes, "Some never grow past the phase of nostalgia. Romanticizing one's native land has a place, so long as it does not paralyzes one's capacity to

develop new bonds within one's adopted homeland. Nostalgia as the only sustenance can become quite toxic, vitiating the living stream into a stagnant cesspool" (32).

The story "This Blessed House" further explores the discourse on liminality and hybridity in the diasporic space and their effect on human relationships. Sanjeev, a first generation immigrant, is disturbed by the presence of the artefacts of Jesus, left by the previous occupants of the house they have bought whereas his wife Twinkle (Tamana), a second generation immigrant, takes pleasure in showcasing their find to the guests on the house warming ceremony day. Sanjeev goes to USA as a grown up man for college studies and his exposure to American culture is recent. Twinkle, the child of America is at ease with the cultural norms of America. Bahareh Bahmanpour in her analysis quotes J Kuortti:

This very temporal difference and variation in exposure to the culture of the Other makes Twinkle to be an embodiment of hybridity-a stage which is yet to come for the first-generation female immigrants like Mrs. Sen or even for the first-generation male immigrants like Twinkle's own husband, Sanjeev, who has come to America as a college student and his parents still live in Calcutta. As "a more recent immigrant" then, Sanjeev like Mrs.Sen is a manifestation of liminality and is, therefore, a stage behind Twinkle. (47)

This argument leads to the discourse on the diasporic tensions further pointing out to the different attitudes of immigrants and the stages of assimilation. Twinkle, the second generation immigrant preserves the artefacts against the will of Sanjeev not because of devotion but because of the fact that she wants to use the artefacts to impress the visitors. "Each time they had guests Twinkle would explain how she had found it, and they would admire her as they listened" (Lahiri 157). Twinkle's attitude strengthens this assumption. She shows little respect towards the statue of Virgin Mary. She uses saliva to clean the stains on the statue. She preserves the artefacts with the single most intention of getting encomia from the visitors. "Your friends adore the poster in my study..." (152).

Twinkle is successful in stealing the show on the day of the housewarming ceremony diminishing the stature of Sanjeev by her physical charm, by exhibiting the biblical menagerie and by ingeniously involving the guests in searching for more artefacts. The hunt becomes an adventure where everyone becomes a hero except Sanjeev. When Sanjeev insists that he will remove the statue of Virgin Mary from the front lawn and take it to dump she sheds tears, and he has to abandon his plan. Her attitude towards the Christian paraphernalia disturbs him and he regrets not choosing one of the brides suggested by his mother. He is not sure that Twinkle loves him.

When the guests volunteer and join Twinkle in the treasure hunt, he does not desire

to go with them. He feels isolated in his home amidst the guests invited by him. In his disgust, he creates his own world of imagination. “He wondered if the ceiling would collapse, imagined, for a split second, the sight of all the tumbling drunk perfumed bodies crashing, tangled, around him” (154). He even wants to snap the ladder on its spring back into the ceiling preventing the guests and his wife from getting down, till he clears the biblical menagerie and drive them to the dump.

Twinkle's new found interest in the artefacts symbolizes her openness towards the other religious faiths even though for the sake of impressing the guests. The trauma Sanjeev undergoes symbolizes his discomfort towards the concept of religious coexistence. He becomes the “other” in his home amidst his guests though his state is not noticed by them as it is not explicit.

However, sweeping generalizations of first- generation immigrants are wrong. In the story “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine” Lilia's parents, first generation immigrants actively participate in the Halloween festival. While Sanjeev and Twinkle are able to maintain good societal relationships in the ways opted by them, they fall short in maintaining a harmonious relationship between them. They negotiate their individual identities in the bicultural space.

Sanjeev is averse to the feeling that neighbours and visitors may think that they are followers of Christianity. He considers it a loss of identity, defacement and so he keeps on reminding Twinkle that they are not Christian. Twinkle who is vivacious and sportive does not hesitate to tease him. The conflict intensifies and he hates keeping the solid silver bust of Christ, despite its immense value. “Most of all he hated it because he knew that Twinkle loved it” (157).

In the story “The Third and Final Continent” the relationship between a young Indian immigrant and a century plus old American woman Mrs. Croft is intriguing. His first meeting with Mrs. Croft is not a pleasant one. To him her battered features and missing eye brows are rather frightening. However, later he starts admiring her, once he comes to know her endurance during tough times after the demise of her husband and the way she has tried to support the family by giving piano lessons. He adores her more as he compares her life to that of his mother who in her inability to face the challenges of life after the death of his father suffers from mental aberration.

When Mrs. Croft insists him to say “splendid” about the presence of American flag on the moon, he obliges her out of compulsion. Later he understands that to a woman born more than one century ago the news of American voyage to the moon must be beyond her comprehension and speaking about it becomes an obsession to her.

Atanu Bhattacharya observes:

For Mrs. Croft, all history is moments frozen in time that defy categorization and therefore changeability. Mrs. Croft's house thus, becomes the symbol of the 'first' arrival, the claiming of territory as important as the astronauts' claim. It is this redefinition of history-as frozen and progressive, as static and dialectic, as linear and multidirectional that America becomes the space of finality and closure, and offers a new beginning, a new identity. (148)

The story highlights the enormous gaps in the perceptions of facts between the century plus old woman and others, and the immense difference in interpreting social norms. The sixty eighty year old daughter of Mrs. Croft visits the narrator in his room. Mrs. Croft objects it and summons them. "It is improper for a lady and gentleman who are not married to one another to hold a private conversation without a chaperone!" (Lahiri 186). During the times when girls in USA are wearing miniskirts Mrs. Croft frowns at her daughter for wearing a dress so high above the ankle, and for revealing her age. Though the narrator resides just six weeks in Mrs. Croft's house before he moves to a more spacious apartment to live with his wife, Mala, he does not forget Mrs. Croft as he feels inspired by her grit and resilience at that advancing age.

The narrator's ambition makes him move from one continent to the other. He and his wife, first-generation immigrants, gradually adjust to the lifestyles and social norms of USA, but still cherish to retain Indian cultural practices and identity alive, and they worry that their son who attends Harvard may not bother about Indian traditions. "So we drive to Cambridge to visit him, or bring him home for a weekend, so that he can eat rice with us with his hands, and speak in Bengali, things we sometimes worry he will no longer do after we die" (197).

At the end, the story turns metaphysical deeply touching the conscience of the readers. "Still, they are times I am bewildered by each mile I have traveled, each meal I have eaten, each person I have known, each room in which I have slept. As ordinary as it all appears, they are times when it is beyond my imagination" (198).

Here, Lahiri's character comes out with an insightful and powerful statement. Though the narrator speaks about his life's journey at the physical plane in three continents, India, Europe and America, to fulfil his career ambitions, his observation sounds philosophical. His earthly sojourn enriched by the memories of struggles and achievements at different phases of life and the changing relationships at the time axis bewilder him. It is beyond his imagination. This statement leads the readers to self introspection, and they too feel bewildered as shifting courses of life's journey are beyond every individual's perception.

Those who pay attention to the transcendental significance of life can decipher the impact of every incident that occurs in their life, every confabulation, every experience and every relationship and then they can see the unseen and know the unknown.

Note

1. Halloween has its origin in the ancient Celtic festival of Samhain. People would wear costumes and light fires to ward off ghosts. These days it is a community based event celebrated at the onset of winter season on October 31. Children actively participate and the event is characterized by friendly activities such as trick or treat; costume parties and lighting bonfires.

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