

Neither Here nor There: The Cultural Hybridity of Second-Generation Immigrants in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*

Introduction

Jhumpa Lahiri's Pulitzer Prize-winning short story collection, *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) delves into the complexities of cultural identity, displacement, and the lived experiences of Indian and Indian-American characters. Although the characters show similarity in their shared cultural history, they exhibit various manifestations of hybrid identities, which raises the question whether there is more to these identities than the tragedy of not belonging to either side of the hybrid self, and whether cultural hybridity has different interpretations which put more emphasis on its potential rather than its drawbacks.

Focusing on three short stories from Lahiri's collection – “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine,” “Sexy,” and “A Temporary Matter” – this paper aims to explore and understand the spectrum of cultural hybridity. By examining the short stories in progression, the analysis traces the development, the flourishing potential, and the challenges of hybrid identity, showcasing its complex role in shaping individual agency and relationships. Highlighting the formative stages of cultural hybridity, the analysis examines “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine”, showing how exposure to diverse cultural influences contribute to the development of the hybrid self, depicting the potential strength and adaptability of second-generation immigrants. Moving to “Sexy” the paper also shifts to the analysis of how hybridity can be consciously leveraged, showing that while it grants agency of self-definition, creating a sense of empowerment, it can also be manipulated for personal gain, exposing its double-edged nature. Finally, in “A Temporary Matter” the analysis will focus on hybridity's ability to serve as both a bridge and a barrier, connecting individuals to their shared heritage while simultaneously isolating them from one another.

While cultural belonging is not primarily in the foreground in these works, the theme is intricately woven into their narratives, forming a subtext underlyingly shaping the characters' experiences. According to Pasopati et al., in modern literary criticism, texts are analyzed through two lenses: intrinsically, by examining the structure and language, and extrinsically, by exploring its broader cultural, historical, and social implications, which showcases the duality the subtext creates within the text (211-212). In this context, Lahiri's use of subtext not only highlights this

duality but also mirrors the dual identity of second-generation immigrants. The hybridity of their identities is steeped into the narrative, generating a similar sense of duality within the text itself, as explicit themes, such as the relationships of the characters, are interwoven with the underlying tensions of cultural hybridity. Through the integration of this duality into her storytelling, Lahiri offers nuanced insights into her characters' experiences and provides the reader with a deeper understanding of cultural hybridity. Therefore, this paper aims to analyze the presence and impact of this sub-narrative; the struggle of the characters integrating their cultural heritage with their adopted American identity, and how self-perception is influenced by blending these two cultures. By portraying the struggles and triumphs of the diaspora community, Lahiri invites readers to reflect on their own identities and biases. Through this reflective process it becomes clear that examining the agency and moral complexities of cultural hybridity is paramount, as it prompts important questions about authenticity, belonging, and ethical responsibility.

Despite the majority of diaspora-literature's emphasis centering on the drawbacks of the hybrid identity and dual marginalization faced by second-generation immigrants, this analysis seeks to shift the focus to the potential that lies in these identities, specifically, the positive attributes that individuals may gain from being a second-generation immigrant, while also acknowledging the ethical complexities of the newfound agency which can turn into a morally grey zone. According to Grossberg, cultural studies concentrates on how society constructs and marginalizes identities, particularly those of minority groups which often leads to a sense of exclusion or oppression (6). Grossberg further states that this notion aligns with Jim Clifford's idea that diaspora, as a concept, is frequently linked to the struggle of creating a distinct community or sense of place in the context of displacement (9). Even though such perspectives underscore the difficulties of cultural hybridity, they also establish a foundation for comprehending how second-generation immigrants, despite facing these challenges, can cultivate a unique sense of self that draws resilience from transcending numerous cultural identities. Consequently, diaspora literature's emphasis on hybridity also needs to examine how these identities provide strength and opportunities for both personal and collective growth.

To better understand the cultural hybridity of the characters in the selected short stories, the study relies on Homi K. Bhaba's principles from his book titled *The Location of Culture* (1994). His ideas provide a framework for examining hybridity and its implications. The term cultural

hybridity reflects one of the central ideas in Bhabha's theory, which is also one of the key concepts for analyzing Lahiri's characters and their experiences as well. Bhabha describes how cultures meet, combine and blend to create new cultural identities and cultural forms, often framed through the lens of literary interpretations and cultural exchange. Furthermore, he explains how hybridity overall involves a continuous effort to balance the behaviors, values, and customs of distinct cultures, creating dynamic and multifaceted identities (Bhabha 29-33).

Another substantial idea that Bhabha presents is the third space, which serves as a negotiating ground for hybrid identities to emerge. This place is not bound by any culture, since it is marked by a dynamic interplay and change. Third space also offers the opportunity to question and challenge existing ideas and norms, allowing for the redefinition of previous representations and stereotypes (Bhabha 66-69). The concept of mimicry is also essential for the analysis of Lahiri's work as it offers a deeper insight into how cultural hybridity manifests in adult characters. Mimicry originates in the context of colonialism, particularly highlighted through the colonizer-colonized relationship, where the colonizer seeks to "improve" the colonized by shaping them to resemble themselves, yet still making sure that a clear distinction remains between them. In this relationship, the colonized Other becomes "almost the same" as the colonizer, but never fully integrates into the dominant cultural or political systems. Bhabha further argues that for mimicry to function well, it must retain an element of difference, which he refers to as ambivalence (Bhabha 120-125). Ultimately, the term ambivalence highlights the duality of colonial discourse, where power and identity are simultaneously asserted and undermined. It arises from the interplay of colonizer and colonized, creating a relationship that is not defined by absolute dominance or submission, but rather by mutual dependency and tension. Ambivalence suggests that such identities are split, partially mirroring one another, which leaves them perpetually intertwined and disrupted (131-137). This gives rise for hybrid identities to emerge, creating an environment where these identities are continuously renegotiated and reshaped in response to shifting cultural and social contexts, as seen throughout Lahiri's short stories.

The Development of the Hybrid Self in "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine"

"When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine" is a story about cultural exchange, empathy, and identity, told from the perspective of a young girl named Lilia, growing up in 1970s suburban America. Set against the backdrop of the 1971 India-Pakistan war (Deb 123), the story intertwines personal and

political tensions. Lilia's family regularly hosts Mr. Pirzada, a scholar from Pakistan, who has come to Boston to do his research project at the local university. As Mr. Pirzada shares meals with the family, Lilia observes his quiet distress over the political turmoil in his homeland and the separation from his wife and daughters. Through her interactions with Mr. Pirzada, Lilia becomes increasingly aware of cultural and political differences, as well as the nuances of identity. She learns to empathize with Mr. Pirzada's pain while also grappling with her own limited understanding of her family's Indian heritage, which results in her slowly becoming aware of her own hybridity.

Using a child's perspective to investigate the tensions and transformations inherent to Homi K. Bhabha's idea of the third space, a space which represents the intersection of vast cultural differences, and where ambivalence and hybridity form a new identity, "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine" offers an insightful portrayal of the development of second-generation immigrant identity. Lilia's journey is a great reflection of this as she reconciles her American upbringing with her parents' Indian heritage, which is primarily invoked by her interactions with Mr. Pirzada and her growing awareness of cultural and political complexities of their dual identities. Kilbert notes that both Bhabha's theoretical framework and Lahiri's narrative challenge conventional notions of cultural identity as static and deny the binary oppositions that have historically defined it (9). This perspective aligns with Stuart Hall's claim that "cultural identity is not a fixed essence at all, lying unchanged outside history and culture" (226), but something that is subject to constant transformation.

At the story's outset, Lilia's identity is firmly rooted in her American environment, which leaves her detached from her parents' cultural history. Furthermore, her parents' attitude towards her dual identity shows signs of "splitting" (Bhabha 64-65), which can be read in the context of Bhabha's idea of ambivalence, describing the tension between continuity and transformation. Her mother, being the more progressive, is proud of Lilia's American birth as it grants her opportunities, which makes her assimilation into the American environment easier. Therefore, she represents the transformation in Bhabha's idea of "splitting" (64-65), as she is more open to their inevitable adaptation of American identity, resulting in their identities also slowly becoming hybrid. On the other hand, Lilia's father is concerned about her lack of awareness about her cultural heritage, and

consequently of the erasure of cultural knowledge, making him the symbol of the continuity of tradition.

Lilia's cultural awakening begins when Mr. Pirzada unexpectedly turns up in her life. His presence serves as a bridge across cultures and generations, offering an insight into the historical and political realities that form both his and Lilia's parents' identities. Lilia first finds it difficult to understand the importance of Mr. Pirzada's past; however, this superficial understanding begins to shift when she learns about Partition. Her father explains: "One moment we were free and then we were sliced up, like a pie. Hindus here, Muslims there. Dacca no longer belongs to us... For many, the idea of eating in the other's company was still unthinkable" (Lahiri 25). Lahiri's use of food imagery is notable, being a recurring theme in her works as a marker of cultural identity and shared experience, as also shown in "A Temporary Matter". Here, the pie metaphor serves to illustrate Partition's brutality in terms even a young child, like Lilia can understand. As Deb notes, the imagery not only represents the geographical "slicing up" of India, but also the "slicing up" of the families and communities that this historical event imposed upon them (123). But despite her father's emphasis on the religious divide that separates Mr. Pirzada from their family, Lilia focuses instead on their shared humanity. Observing their common tastes and dining habits, she questions the rationale behind such religious intolerance, that would forbid them to eat at the same table (Deb 124):

It made no sense to me. 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... Like my parents, Mr. Pirzada took off his shoes before entering a room, chewed fennel seeds after meals as a digestive, drank no alcohol. (Lahiri 25)

For Lilia, who was never directly subjected to the permanent consequences of Partition and who lacks the historical knowledge to fully comprehend the divisions it created; people around her are simply just different individuals. This highlights the innocence of a child's perspective, untainted by the weight of historical tragedy that Mr. Pirzada and her parents must carry. To Lilia, the world is not a rigid construct "like the structure of a map" (Deb 124) but an open, ever-shifting space where she can form connections with both the Pakistani Mr. Pirzada and her American

schoolmates. As Deb notes, for her “the idea of eating food in each other’s company was very much plausible” (124).

Nevertheless, historical context is essential for Lilia to deepen her understanding of her cultural background, as up until this point she solely perceived Partition as India’s independence from the British rule (Kilbert 9). It is only after her father’s explanation that she begins to grasp the multilayered implications of Partition, and begins to realize why Mr. Pirzada is regarded as different. She comes to understand that Mr. Pirzada’s identity is shaped not only by Partition but also by the ongoing India-Pakistan war, which unfolds parallel to Mr. Pirzada’s time in America. Lilia’s initial perception of him as simply an “Indian man” is therefore disrupted. Observing this through the lens of Bhabha’s terms, this moment represents the “enunciation” of cultural difference, where identity is destabilized and redefined (67). Mr. Pirzada is no longer just an Indian man but an embodiment of a culturally diverse and unique individual, whose multidimensional identity opens up Lilia’s perspective, prompting her to redefine her own identity as well.

This change corresponds to Stuart Hall’s claim that cultural identities are “not an essence but a positioning” (226), influenced by the accounts of history and culture. Hall emphasizes that identity is fundamentally unstable and subject to change, shaped by a “politics of position” rather than any superior or fixed origin (226). Hence, both Mr. Pirzada’s identity and Lilia’s growing awareness show how cultural identity is dynamic and fluid within intersecting historical and cultural conditions.

As Lilia becomes more aware of Mr. Pirzada’s circumstances, her observations reflect a deeper engagement with cultural hybridity and the ambivalence of identity. She notices his nightly ritual of winding his pocket watch, imagining its connection to his family in Dacca:

I began to study him with extra care, to try to figure out what made him different. I decided that the pocket watch was one of those things. When I saw it that night... 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... Our meals, our actions, were only a shadow of what had already happened there, a lagging ghost of where Mr. Pirzada really belonged. (Lahiri 30-31)

Lilia’s realization that their life in America is a “lagging ghost” of life in Dacca can be interpreted through Bhabha’s notion of “nonsynchronous temporality” (267), where global and

national cultures do not always align or move at the same pace. From this perspective, diasporic life does not simply mirror life in the homeland; rather, it reflects it in an inconsistent way, which results in a temporal lag. The pocket watch, symbolizing Mr. Pirzada's connection to his family in Dacca, is a tangible marker of this temporal and cultural divide. Lilia views it as a reflection of the simultaneous yet isolated aspects of diasporic life: the reality of Mr. Pirzada's being in America is grounded in, but fragmented from the rhythms of his hometown, showing the multitemporal essence of diasporic identity.

Stuart Hall offers a profound insight to this temporal conflict through his model of cultural identity and argues that "[c]ultural identity...is a matter of 'becoming' as well of 'being'" (225), emphasizing that identity is not only shaped by the past but by the present and future. Mr. Pirzada's identity, for instance, is continuously shaped by the ongoing events in his homeland, even as he is currently residing in America. Similarly, Lilia's family's identity is also under constant reconstruction, heavily influenced by their cultural heritage and the unfolding history of their homeland. However, their physical separation from these events mean that the effects reach them later, filtered through a temporal lag, where the effects of historical trauma reach them indirectly and with delay.

This shows that diasporic life, even though geographically isolated, remains deeply connected to and shaped by the cultural and historical currents of its homeland. Therefore, Lilia's exposure to Mr. Pirzada's displacement and dual identity allows her to learn the complexity of cultural belonging as a constant negotiation within historical and cultural contexts. Through Lilia's evolving understanding, readers can examine the multifaceted difficulties of identity construction and displacement in diasporic circumstances present in the subtext of Lahiri's prose.

Lilia's journey of (self-)discovery in cultural hybridity reaches a significant milestone when the emotion of empathy becomes the foundation for her understanding. Her ability to empathize with Mr. Pirzada signifies her progression toward maturity (Kilbert 11) and marks the beginning of a new sense of hybridity. As Kilbert observes, "[o]ver time, her engagement in observing and comprehending cultural differences becomes deeply emotional" (10), and this emotional growth is evident as Lilia begins to feel a profound connection with the victims of the Partition of India, which enhances her ability to empathize with Mr. Pirzada. This experience becomes a pivotal lesson, nurturing her emotional sensitivity and her capacity for compassion (Deb 124). One

particular instance of this is when during one of Mr. Pirzada's visits, the news report that Dacca is experiencing a political upheaval, making it an unsafe environment, and consequently placing Mr. Pirzada's family in danger. Lilia is deeply shaken by the situation, and her growing empathy eventually manifests in a nightly ritual, a whispered prayer for Mr. Pirzada's family while she is eating a piece of candy from her little collection:

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... 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. (Lahiri 32)

Though never being taught how to pray, she subconsciously finds that she can connect to Mr. Pirzada through their shared spiritual background. Her little ritual can be viewed as a childlike act, but it can also be interpreted as a symbol of her uniting her American upbringing with the emotional and spiritual dimensions of her parents' cultural heritage. Reading this through the lens of Bhabha's idea of ambivalence we can conclude that identity is not fixed but rather "translated, rehistoricized, and read anew" in the third space (68). In this view, identity is something fluid that is under constant transformation due to the interactions of different cultures, histories and experiences, which is a notion that Lilia's evolving hybrid identity exemplifies. She "translates" her identity by integrating elements of her parents' and Mr. Pirzada's cultural heritage into her own understanding. Then, confronted with the realities of the ongoing India-Pakistan war, she reflects on its significance for Mr. Pirzada's identity and reevaluates her own place within this shifting historical and societal context, consequently embodying the process of "rehistoricization" described by Bhabha. Ultimately, her interactions with Mr. Pirzada prompt her to see her new identity in a new, more nuanced light, demonstrating how cultural hybridity can foster personal growth and broaden one's understanding of not just themselves but of others as well.

Therefore, through Lilia's experiences, Lahiri illustrates the transformative potential of cultural hybridity. Her encounter with Mr. Pirzada and her growing awareness of political and historical settings challenge her American-centric worldview and help her to develop empathy and a closer relationship to her parents' background. This negotiation of differences showcases Bhabha's third space, where the "interstitial" space between cultures enables the emergence of a dynamic and evolving identity (269). Lahiri ultimately shows that the second-generation immigrant

identity is a rich and inspiring interaction of histories and perspectives, rather than as an arena of conflict.

The Complexities of the Exploitation of Hybridity in “Sexy”

In Lahiri’s short story “Sexy”, Miranda, a young woman in Boston, begins an affair with Dev, a married Indian man who exudes charm and mystery. Dev’s identity is central to the story, as he represents a form of cultural otherness that fascinates Miranda. He is confident and charismatic, but he also uses his cultural background as a way to get what he wants, exploiting the duality of his hybrid identity. Contrary to the promising and constructive portrayal of hybridity seen in Lilia’s character in “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine”, “Sexy” reveals a more complex and morally ambiguous side of hybridity. Through this short story, the readers can observe how hybrid identity can be strategically used – even misused – to its full potential when it becomes a tool for personal gain rather than mutual understanding or growth.

Dev’s dual cultural identity goes beyond his romantic appeal to Miranda; it also gives him the ability to move within different cultural environments, allowing for a moral detachment from his actions. As a second-generation immigrant who grew up in America, “Dev is much westernized in his lifestyle and sexual susceptibility” (Kabir 11) and is more closely aligned with his adopted American identity, an experience which is similar to Lilia’s situation in “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine”. However, whereas Lilia’s innocence represents the potential of cultural hybridity, Dev’s experience is shaped by his selfish desires as an adult, using the agency afforded by his hybridity to satisfy his own needs. With Miranda, he becomes the seductive, exotic lover fulfilling her fantasies; while with his wife, he embodies the conventional family man following cultural norms. Therefore, his hybridity helps him perform different characters depending on the context. This fluid identity functions like two mirrors, reflecting various versions of Dev depending on the mirror he faces.

Dev is a fascinating mix of cosmopolitan sophistication and cultural intrigue when he is with Miranda. His stories about playing cricket by a lake while dressed in white, drinking mango juice from a tray, and taking afternoon naps in the Indian heat (Lahiri 77) create a nostalgic, idyllic picture of his life in India.

These details, while likely true, are selectively shared to charm Miranda and reinforce her romanticized image of him as an Indian man. Dev subverts Bhabha's notion of mimicry by intentionally placing himself in the position of being "almost the same, but not quite". His self-presentation incorporates just enough exoticism to intrigue and captivate Miranda while maintaining a sense of familiarity that does not make her feel alienated. Dev occupies this "phantasmic space", (Bhabha 75) where he both fulfills and manipulates Miranda's fantasies of cultural difference. By playing this ambiguous role, Dev creates a subtle power inversion: while Miranda believes she is gazing at and holding an exotic figure, it is ultimately Dev who controls the narrative she sees. He carefully balances how he presents himself, allowing Miranda to view him as attractive and intriguing but in a way that reduces his identity to a simplified, romanticized version.

On the contrary, next to his wife, Dev takes on a completely separate role. His demeanor turns into that of a traditional, devoted husband—one who buys her luxurious face creams, supports her journey to India, and fulfills the family responsibilities expected of him. However, having been socialized in the Western society, Dev has the opportunity to choose the extent to which he aligns with either his native cultural traditions or his adopted American identity. This flexibility is a product of his hybridity which grants him agency over how he defines himself. Yet hybridity influences more than just self-definition; it reshapes other areas of life as well, especially interpersonal and familial relationships. Ali and Begum reinforces this idea by highlighting how the adoption of Western cultural values have disrupted diasporic communities and significantly changed its gender dynamics (107). This is especially true for marital relationships which "hold immense significance in Indian tradition" (Ali and Begum 106). Additionally, a new norm seems to emerge, which "presumes total sexual autonomy for both partners rather than marital faithfulness" (Ali and Begum 106). This mindset underlines how Dev rationalizes and justifies his affair with Miranda. By compartmentalizing his relationships with others, Dev avoids moral confrontation, which allows him to rationalize his infidelity. Each of his identities is located in a distinct moral compartment, allowing him to behave in ways that could otherwise clash if considered as part of a cohesive whole.

Miranda's perception of Dev is heavily shaped by the Western gaze, which reduces him to a figure of cultural Otherness. Her ignorance about his heritage is apparent early in their

relationship: “At first Miranda thought [Bengali] was a religion” (Lahiri 70). Dev’s playful correction—indicating Bengal on a map in *The Economist*—carries a hint of condescension though. He brushes aside her curiosity with the remark, “Nothing you’ll ever need to worry about”, before tossing out the magazine (Lahiri 70). Their conversation shows that there is a power imbalance in their relationship: Miranda perceives Dev as a fascinating mystery, while he avoids exposing more about himself, keeping up the mystery that makes her interested.

This power imbalance is further reinforced by Dev’s tendency to define himself through physical boundaries rather than a shared sense of cultural or ethnic identity. As Mandal notes, Dev “prefers to keep his relationship with Miranda [rather] physical than emotional” (42-43). Despite Miranda’s efforts to seek an emotional connection as well, shown in her sudden interest in Dev’s culture, Dev avoids allowing their affair to transcend the physical level. Elevating the relationship emotionally would leave him no choice but to confront the morality of his actions and acknowledge their potential consequences. Thus, this emotional detachment allows Dev to conform to the Western stereotype of the exotic Indian man, fulfilling both his desires and Miranda’s fantasies. It ensures that he avoids guilt while exploiting the Western gaze to his advantage, which makes their relationship a transactional performance of cultural and physical desire.

Miranda’s romanticization of Dev’s cultural background is evident in her fantasies. When they are intimate, she imagines “deserts and elephants and marble pavilions floating on lakes beneath a full moon” (Lahiri 79), revealing how her perception of him is filtered through stereotypical, Westernized notions of India. These images show her limited awareness of his heritage, which she simplifies to a series of picturesque clichés rather than exploring their depth and complexity.

Dev’s decision to selectively reveal parts of his heritage can be also interpreted as a form of self-exoticization. He purposely places himself in the role of Other who is both accessible and mysterious by creating a narrative that resonates with Miranda’s idealistic dreams, turning his cultural experiences into consumable anecdotes.

Bhabha’s concept of mimicry further explains this dynamic: Dev embodies a hybrid identity that is “almost the same” as Miranda’s American norms, with his job at an investment bank and his polished appearance (“a flamingo pink shirt, a navy-blue suit, a camel overcoat”, Lahiri 71). Yet he is “not quite,” as he retains an exotic appeal that forms Miranda’s perception of him as both

a delicate and an enticingly foreign being. This duality allows him to navigate within Miranda's Western view.

Subsequently, the polarity of West and East holds great significance in Dev's and Miranda's extramarital relationship, shaping and defining their dynamic. Kabir explains that Dev's sexuality is heavily influenced by traditional values and when contrasted with the liberal attitudes of the West, he adopts a façade of duplicity to be able to navigate this contrast. In their relationship, Dev embodies the East, while Miranda represents the West, creating this magnetic push-and-pull between the Orient and Occident that lies behind their connection (21). However, as Kabir highlights, the cultural divide prevents the "total assimilation" of their identities (21), which leaves their relationship in a superficial interplay of attraction and difference. This cultural polarity creates a dynamic where Dev's hybridity becomes a tool for managing his dual identity: while his Indian roots tie him to a set of traditional values, his exposure to Western norms allows him to manipulate these two identities to serve his desires. The relationship, therefore, reveals how Dev leverages his cultural hybridity to not only use it as a bridge for mutual understanding but also as a means to keep the relationship on his terms.

Hence, Dev's ability to shift between identities reinforces the adaptability and agency afforded by his hybrid cultural position, and how he navigates between the different roles demonstrates the fluidity of his identity. By selectively presenting facets of his cultural background, Dev controls how others perceive him, which shows a subtle form of power that lies in being able to occupy multiple cultural spaces. His self-exoticization and ability to manipulate the Western gaze reflect his agency in defining his narrative, even as it raises questions about authenticity and moral responsibility.

Through Dev, Lahiri portrays cultural hybridity as an ambiguous space—one that allows for creativity and empowerment but also necessitates a continual negotiation of identity. Dev's story ultimately reveals how this "in-betweenness" can function as both a liberating force, enabling individuals to adapt and thrive in different contexts, and a source of moral and emotional complexity. This duality highlights the transformative potential of cultural hybridity, which can empower individuals to redefine themselves, but this redefinition may come at a personal and ethical cost.

Cultural Hybridity as a Means of Connection and Separation in “A Temporary Matter”

“A Temporary Matter” is a short story that portrays the lives of Indian-American couple, Shoba and Shukumar, as they struggle with the aftermath of a stillborn child and their faltering marriage. Experiencing a power shortage in their street, they have no choice but to face the problems in their relationship and are compelled to reflect on their shared lives in the past days, months, years. Their expectations and fears are revealed during the course of a game which they play while the lights are out: they have to tell something to the other that they have never told before. During this whole process, the profound and underlying effects of their mixed identities come to the surface, and are realized in a shared yet quiet despair which subtly separates them further from each other emotionally.

Despite the primary focus on familial and marital problems, the examination of the couple’s hybrid identity as second-generation immigrants presents a significant subtext in this work, serving as a notable factor contributing to the couple’s detachment. Analyzing how their identities operate both as a bridge and a barrier underscores the complexity of cultural duality, and also showcases Bhabha’s argument that “[t]he borderline engagements of cultural difference may as often be consensual as conflictual” (28). This perspective emphasizes that cultural interactions are not strictly defined by harmony or conflict but are instead shaped by an interplay where collaboration and isolation coexist. Ultimately, their struggles illustrate the paradoxical nature of hybridity - simultaneously a source of connection and separation - that leads to their growing emotional and physical isolation.

Similar to “Sexy”, the narrative centers on a second-generation immigrant man; however, unlike Dev whose actions were presented through the prism of Miranda’s Western ideals, in “A Temporary Matter” Shukumar is the focalizer of the narrative. This shift signifies an important departure in how hybridity is represented: Shukumar, as a second-generation immigrant, gains agency over the narrative, which positions himself as the one who defines his own story rather than being defined by the perspective of another. With this narrative control, Shukumar symbolizes a form of reclamation, as the hybrid identity becomes self-articulated. His inward expression of hybridity highlights the tensions between self-perception and external realities, showing that hybrid identities are neither wholly self-determined nor entirely shaped by others, but exist in a liminal

space. Bhabha's notion of liminality further suggests that this liminal space is a site of existence for constant negotiation and transformation, where the "image" of identity is always a repetition, not an original or complete representation of self (82). Shukumar's agency over the narrative also comes with certain limitations as everything is filtered through his perspective; even his wife Shoba is portrayed through his descriptions and interpretations, making her character a construct of his narrative rather than an independent voice. Despite this, Williams argues that Shoba retains knowledge and agency beyond her husband's perception, even though his portrayal of her is shaped by contrasts (71), which reflects the nature of hybridity itself, as it cannot be reduced to a single narrative or interpretation.

As second-generation immigrants Shoba and Shukumar embody the internal struggles of negotiating between inherited cultural values and the realities of life in a Western setting. They adopt certain American traditions such as celebrating Christmas, although only celebrating it occasionally. While Christmas is not part of their Indian heritage, their hybridity gives them the choice to embrace this Western festivity. However, they also retain parts of their native culture as seen in their plans for holding a traditional rice ceremony for their baby: "Shoba had already made the guest list, and decided on which of her three brothers she was going to ask to feed the child its first taste of solid food, at six months if it was a boy, seven if it was a girl" (Lahiri 11). This process of balancing between two cultures aligns with Bhabha's notion that it is the "inter" – the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the inbetween space – that carries the burden of the meaning of culture" (69). In Shoba and Shukumar's case, their conflicts with each other and their cultural identities underlyingly play out in this "inbetween" space. For them, instead of being a uniting force, as seen between Lilia and Mr. Pirzada in "Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine", hybridity creates a barrier, mainly rooted in their differing levels of connection to their native culture.

While both of them were raised and socialized in a Western setting, Shoba appears to be more closely tied to her Indian heritage, having visited India regularly during her youth and having been exposed to traditional customs. Her direct experiences of India seem to influence her actions and perceptions, as seen in Shukumar's descriptions of her or during their candlelit dinner on the first occasion when their electricity is cut. When the power goes out, Shoba initiates their game of secrets with drawing on a memory. She remarks that the scene "feels like India", adding "I remember during power failures at my grandmother's house, we all had to say something" (Lahiri

12) Her ability to channel her memory of India, provides a sense of continuity, showing an active engagement with her hybrid identity.

This moment not only reflects Shoba's nostalgia for her cultural roots but also highlights a key difference between her and Shukumar. Contrary to Shoba, Shukumar lacks firsthand experience of his own cultural heritage. Despite having visited India in the past, Shukumar's father's concerns about his health led them to refrain from further trips, and eventually Shukumar lost interest in returning to India. During one of their conversations with Shoba he ponders that "[a]s a teenager he preferred sailing camp or scooping ice cream during the summers to going to Calcutta" (Lahiri 12), and it is only after his father's death that his interest towards his homeland is rekindled. He started studying "its history from course books as if it were any other subject" (Lahiri 12), showing his more formalized and detached approach to hybridity. This is in stark contrast to Shoba's first-hand experiences, who has a more experimental understanding of her culture, which aligns with the typical approach adopted by second-generation immigrants, as Field observes that "second generation is educated about their roots, often not through a process of formal education, but as a private, familial experience." (170). Shoba's close connection to her cultural heritage is particularly evident in her relationship with food, which reflects a rather intimate cultural understanding.

Food, just like in "Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine", bears high significance in the narrative of "A Temporary Matter" as well, carrying subtle and intricate meanings. Instead of just being simple nutrition, food becomes a multifaceted symbol through which Lahiri presents the issues of diasporic belonging and gender roles (Fediakova 22). Although Shoba and Shukumar have assimilated well into American society, their home provides a striking illustration of cultural fusion: the overall design and décor is that of a typical American household, while the kitchen keeps traces of their Indian heritage. Shukumar's reminiscing emphasizes these Indian elements in the kitchen: "the pantry was always stocked with extra bottles of olive and corn oil, depending on whether they were cooking Italian or Indian" and "endless boxes of pasta in all shapes and colors, zippered sacks of basmati rice, whole sides of lambs and goats from the Muslim butchers at Haymarket, chopped up and frozen in endless plastic bags" (Lahiri 6). Therefore, their kitchen, represents how they integrate their Indian culture into their otherwise American home. Consequently, this juxtaposition in their home highlights that cuisine represents a crucial facet of cultural heritage, with gastronomy

being an aspect of culture that transcends generations, making it a primary means for many second-generation immigrants to preserve their native cultural identity.

Likewise, for Shoba and Shukumar, food remains as a significant and enduring connection to their cultural roots, despite having most areas of their life integrated into American society. As Fediakova claims, by adapting Indian dishes with using American ingredients, their hybridity manifests in the food they make (24). Therefore, food becomes a symbol of their lived experiences of hybridity, portraying how food emerges as a means of negotiating cultural belonging. Despite the compromises, Shoba and Shukumar seem content with this “gastronomic enclave” (Fediakova 24), by allowing them to merge the two sides of their identity.

Furthermore, the home of Shoba and Shukumar is not just the enclave of gastronomy but a place for what Bhabha describes as “history’s most intricate invasion[s]” (35). According to his concept, home is a place impacted by historical and social events, showcasing how personal and private spaces are never entirely isolated from larger cultural and societal contexts (35), which demonstrates the experiences of Shoba and Shukumar. He further argues that history’s “intricate invasion” create displacement in which “the borders between home and world become confused; and, uncannily, the private and the public become part of each other, forcing upon us a vision that is as divided as it is disorienting” (35). In essence, the home becomes a space where individual identity, cultural heritage, and societal expectations meet in a way which creates both connection and conflict.

For Shoba and Shukumar, their home is both a refuge where they maintain cultural traditions, and a site of emotional disconnect and avoidance. Their choice to preserve Indian traditional practices is confined to the domestic sphere; however, their home is far from harmonious. Shoba and Shukumar have grown distant, and the intimacy of their relationship was taken over by avoidance. Shukumar observes that they have become “experts at avoiding each other in their three-bedroom house, spending as much time on separate floors as possible” (Lahiri 4). Their physical separation in their home highlights the intrusion of unresolved grief and emotional isolation, which disrupts the unity and purpose of a domestic space. Analyzing their situation through Bhabha’s argument that the public and private spheres blur within the home (35), it becomes clear that the couple’s avoidance of each other reflects not only their internal struggles but also the weight of external cultural and societal expectation that shape their lives. Their home; therefore, becomes a

battleground where their identities, emotions, and unresolved conflicts play out, reinforcing the idea that the home is a divided and disorienting space where the boundaries between the personal and the external are continually negotiated.

Ultimately, Shoba and Shukumar further reinforce the notion that hybridity is a process of ongoing negotiation. Their relationship also shows that while cultural hybridity can be a source of liberation through self-definition, and can grant agency over defining one's own narrative, it also bears an isolating effect, which manifests not just between the individual and society, but between two individuals navigating their own hybrid identities. Therefore, the struggle for connection within the hybrid identity becomes a struggle for self-definition, a challenge to reconcile the multiplicity of influences that shape the individual. In this light, Shoba and Shukumar's experience, underscore that hybridity is not just a source of personal and cultural complexity, but a force that shapes relationships and serves as both a means of connection and alienation.

Conclusion

According to Bhabha "to exist is to be called into being in relation to an otherness, its look or locus" (75), which encapsulates the reality of the second-generation immigrant experience that Lahiri's characters also face. Their identities do not just exist in isolation; but are always in relation to something else, resulting in it becoming a part of themselves that they actively create or produce, an inherent fragment that is constantly under transformation. Jhumpa Lahiri's fiction explores this transformation through subtle subtext, which lays out the trajectory of second-generation immigrant identity, mirroring how the essence of hybridity lies deep within these individuals, just as it is intricately woven into their stories.

Starting this exploration from a child's perspective, Lilia shows the potential for transformation that comes with cultural hybridity. Her interaction with Mr. Pirzada sparks a growing awareness and curiosity for a better understanding of the political and historical contexts that shape her identity as a second-generation immigrant. Lilia's journey also highlights the emotion of empathy playing a key role in bridging the gap between the two sides of her identity, bringing closer her American-centric worldview to her Indian cultural heritage. Through Bhabha's theory of third space, readers can observe Lilia negotiating her identity in this "interstitial" space (Bhabha 269) as she cultivates a dynamic, evolving sense of self. At last, Lahiri portrays second-generation immigrant identity as a rich and inspiring interplay of histories and perspectives,

showing how Lilia's embrace of this hybridity allows her to bridge her American and South Asian identities and navigate the complexities of her dual heritage.

The negotiation of identity, which is starting to form in Lilia, is further exemplified by Dev, whose ability to shift between identities underscores the flexibility and agency afforded by his hybridity. He navigates between the different roles of his life seamlessly, showcasing hybridity's fluid nature. Furthermore, the transformative potential hinted at in Lilia's journey is fully manifested in Dev, who leverages his hybridity to selectively present aspects of his cultural background, which grants him a certain power to shape and control how others perceive him. However, Dev's agency ventures into a morally grey zone as he subverts Bhabha's concept of mimicry, manipulating the Western gaze to shape and control his narrative. Therefore, his character demonstrates how agency can blur the lines between authenticity and exploitation, raising questions about moral responsibility. Dev's portrayal of cultural hybridity shows that it does not just encourages empowerment, but also calls for a continuous negotiation of identity. His narrative further highlights the empowering opportunities of hybridity while simultaneously recognizing the potential ethical and personal costs inherent in the redefinition of oneself, which demonstrates how in-betweenness can be both a liberating force and a source of moral and emotional complexity.

Finally, Shoba and Shukumar, reveal the emotional complexity of cultural hybridity, and its way of functioning between two individuals who share this duality. Their relationship further reinforces the idea, first observed in Dev's character, that hybridity is a process of ongoing negotiation. Paradoxically, instead of fostering intimacy, their shared heritage just adds to the ever-growing physical and emotional gap between them. Consequently, their relationship illustrates that the struggle for connection within hybrid identities often becomes entangled with the struggle for self-definition. Shoba and Shukumar's experience, underscore that hybridity is not just a source of personal and cultural complexity, but a force that shapes relationships and serves as both a means of connection and alienation.

At last, Lahiri's stories collectively suggest that for second-generation immigrants, cultural hybridity is not just a source of conflict, but also an outlet for personal and relational growth. Through the trajectory of hybrid identity explored in these three short stories, it becomes evident these characters gain the freedom to define themselves in ways that are both authentic and multifaceted, embracing identities that celebrate heritage while allowing for personal choice.

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