

The detrimental effects of diaspora in the interpreter of maladies



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Do geographical demarcations define one's identity? This question is especially poignant for people from post-colonial nations exiled from their homelands. A recent article on diaspora asserts that "Diaspora brought about profound changes in the demographics, cultures, epistemologies and politics of the post-colonial world" (Silva 72). The effects of diaspora and exile are exhibited in Jhumpa Lahiri's collection of short stories, *Interpreter of Maladies*. Many of the stories in Lahiri's collection are set against the backdrop of the India-Pakistan War and the Partition of India in 1947 during which India and Pakistan were geographically divided into two separate nations (Keen). In particular, the stories "A Real Durwan" and "When Pirzada Came to Dine" display the significant impact that the war and division had on the identities, culture, and relations of Indian and Pakistani people at the time. While both of the stories dramatize the experience of diaspora, Lahiri also shows how each character's experience is unique to their specific context. For example, in "A Real Durwan," the main character, a poor woman named Boori Ma, remains in India, and displays the "uneasy relationship between native Calcuttans and the border crossers" (Mitra 242). Unlike Boori Ma, Mr. Pirzada is an upper-middle class, well-educated Muslim in the United States conducting research about the foliage of New England. In "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine," Lahiri demonstrates how Indians and Pakistanis stuck in the United States are able to find "acceptance and solace beyond the barriers of nations, cultures, religions and generations" (Rath 73). However, despite their different situations, both Boori Ma and Mr. Pirzada endure dislocation from their homelands. As such, both characters experience a similar sense of alienation, loss, and nostalgia for their home country that is central to the experience of diaspora and exile.

<https://assignbuster.com/the-detrimental-effects-of-diaspora-in-the-interpreter-of-maladies/>

After July of 1947, India would never be the same. In August, India broke free from Britain and their apathetic treatment whose colonial rule had lasted almost three hundred and fifty years (Keen). As Bates asserts, despite India's attainment of freedom, a religious division existed between the Muslims and the Hindus, resulting in continuous conflict due to supposed irreconcilable differences. In 1943, the Muslim League resolved to extricate itself from India; this resulted in a detached Muslim state, eventually to become known as Pakistan (Keen). Their desire for separation can be attributed to the British system of classification based on religious beliefs as well as the ideological differences that existed between the Muslims and Hindus of India. While some still hoped to keep India united under a three-tiered government, Congress' dismissal of this plan caused the Muslim League to believe partition was the only option. The successful division of India into separate entities, India and Pakistan, was achieved at a great cost (Bates). Riots led to the deaths of one million people along with countless rapes and lootings. With new borders designated based on religious beliefs, fifteen million people found themselves displaced from their homes and sought refuge in areas completely new to them in the largest mass migration to ever occur. In 1971, a civil war in Pakistan resulted in further division and the emergence of Bangladesh. According to Keen, " many years after the Partition, the two nations are still trying to heal the wounds left behind by this incision to once-whole body of India. Many are still in search of an identity and a history left behind beyond an impenetrable boundary." While the Muslims achieved their desired separation from the Hindus, this war detrimentally affected millions of people, including both Boori Ma and Mr. Pirzada.

In Calcutta as a refugee following the Partition of 1947, Boori Ma experiences “ the rigors of reconciling as well as easing into the disquiet labyrinth of a new life” after losing everything, including her husband and four daughters (Rath 73). Transitioning from riches to rags after being expelled from her homeland, like many others, Boori Ma involuntarily assumes the position of a “ splintered immigrant woman” living in a stairwell (Rath 73). With “ her voice: brittle with sorrows, as tart as curds, and shrill enough to grate meat from a coconut,...she details her plight and losses suffered since her deportation” while she sweeps the stairwell daily, fulfilling her duties as durwan—notwithstanding that “ under normal circumstances this was no job for a woman” (Lahiri 70, 73). Often reflecting about her past in which she lived a life of luxury and extravagance, she nostalgically shares with the residents, “ A man came to pick our dates and guavas. Another clipped hibiscus. Yes, there I tasted life. Here I eat dinner from a rice pot,” “ Have I mentioned that I crossed the border with just two bracelets on my wrist? Yet There was a day when my feet touched nothing but marble. Believe me, don’t believe me, such comforts you cannot even dream them,” and “ Our linens were muslin. Believe me, don’t believe me, our mosquito nets were as soft as silk. Such comforts you cannot even dream them,” (Lahiri 71, 74).

The affluence she experiences prior to the diaspora strongly contrasts with her current life style. Sleeping minimally, owning very few possessions, and lacking friendships, Boori Ma is a complete outsider living an impoverished life. Mitra’s comment that “ a person uprooted by history, displaced by the lines drawn on a map by an imperious colonial bureaucrat, Boori Ma is perceived as different,” captures the magnitude of the aftermath of the

Partition in the lives of individuals (243). Because of the alterations made to India and Pakistan's borders, numerous civilians found themselves marginalized, including Boori Ma, as illustrated when the narrator remarks, "Knowing not to sit on the furniture, [Boori Ma] crouched, instead, in doorways and hallways, and observed gestures and manners in the same way a person tends to watch traffic in a foreign city" (Lahiri 76). This perfectly depicts the sense of alienation Boori Ma faces. Rather than feeling comfortable in the residents' homes, Boori Ma develops timidity and apprehensiveness similar to when "a person...[watches] traffic in a foreign city," largely owing to the residents' treatment of her (Lahiri 76).

Regressing back to a significantly lower socioeconomic status, Boori Ma is not treated as an equal, affirming the "sharp portrait of the postpartition isolation and helplessness endured by migrants" (Mitra 245). With no support in the absence of both family and friends, Boori Ma's life in Calcutta starkly contrasts to her life before the diaspora. Ultimately, residents in the building become so enamored with funding building renovations that their already limited hospitableness becomes almost nonexistent as revealed when Boori Ma mentions, "' Her mornings were long, her afternoons longer. She could not remember her last glass of tea" (Lahiri 80). Everyone was too caught up worrying about others' perceptions of themselves as well as contributing to the materialistic nature of society to acknowledge their durwan. The residents' lack of appreciation for Boori Ma reaches a new level when she is wrongfully blamed for the disappearance of the building's basin and kicked out of the stairwell. The residents' brusque accusations, "'This is all her doing,' one of them hollered, pointing at Boori Ma" and " We shared

our coal, gave her a place to sleep. How could she betray us this way?" vividly expose their hostilities towards the border crossers (Lahiri 81). Sadly, because " her otherness renders the community indifferent to her historical plight," she finds herself homeless (Mitra 242). Because of border adjustments and the resulting religious intolerance, Boori Ma is not only stripped of her family and homeland, but also loses herself.

The depiction of Mr. Pirzada's postpartition experience in " When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine" differs in several ways to that of Boori Ma's. The narrator, Lilia, shares that " In the autumn of 1971 a man used to come to our house bearing confections in his pocket and hopes of ascertaining the life or death of his family" (Lahiri 23). Although he also suffers from the separation from his wife and seven daughters who remain in Dacca, where " teachers were dragged onto streets and shot, women dragged into barracks and raped," Mr. Pirzada's status as a Muslim does not provoke the hostility that so often arose following the diaspora (Lahiri 23). Lilia's Hindu family defies the typical antipathy expressed towards Muslims but rather offers companionship to Mr. Pirzada as he helplessly watches the destruction of his homeland and brutal killings of people on the nightly news from their family room. After Lilia, who is only ten years old, refers to Mr. Pirzada as " the Indian man," she fails to comprehend her father's response that " Mr. Pirzada is no longer considered Indian. Not since Partition. Our country was divided. 1947. Hindus here, Muslims there" (Lahiri 25). Struggling to accept the alleged disparities between her family and Mr. Pirzada, she says,

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
<https://assignbuster.com/the-detrimental-effects-of-diaspora-in-the-interpretor-of-maladies/>

ate pickled mangoes with their meals, ate rice every night for supper with their hands...Nevertheless my father insisted that I understand the difference (Lahiri 25).

Silva's comment, " when Lilia tries to understand the difference between her father and Mr. Pirzada, she shows that the organization of the work—or the division of people in homogeneous and distinct groups—is not solid and fixed like the structure of a map" confirms the sentiment that geographical demarcations do not define identity (Silva 61). While recognizing their religious differences, Lilia's parents, unlike many others, do not employ this as grounds for unjust treatment. Despite the thousands of miles standing between him and his home, Mr. Pirzada gains some consolation through the kind reception Lilia's family affords him. Lilia reminisces that while war was being waged in Dacca, " the three of them [operated] during that time as if they were a single person, sharing a single meal, a single body, a single silence, and a single fear" (Lahiri 41). This proves the absurdity of the dissociation between Muslims and Hindus in India and Pakistan. United in concern for the safety of Mr. Pirzada's family, Lilia's family and Mr. Pirzada's status as Hindu or Muslim holds no significance. With each of them holding on to hope for the safety of Mr. Pirzada's wife and daughters, Lilia assumes the position of Mr. Pirzada's temporary daughter while he remains in the States. He evidences his paternal tendencies when asking Lilia, " Will you be warm enough?" and " Is there any danger [for Lilia]?" (Lahiri 37, 38). Lilia cherishes Mr. Pirzada's routine gift of candy, a symbol for his daughters, as manifested when she says, " I coveted each evening's treasure as I would a jewel, or a coin from a buried kingdom" (Lahiri 29). Ultimately, Silva's

assertion that “ As [Mr. Pirzada] shows, dealing with the clash of two or more worlds means the possibility of a life in transit, or in-between. There is no home to go back to, no identity to claim, no maps to establish as true,” captures the limbo engulfing Mr. Pirzada (Silva 65). Eventually, Mr. Pirzada returns to Dacca, blessed by the survival of his wife and daughters. Lilia exposes the giant hole left in her heart when she shares, “ Though I had not seen him for months, it was only then that I felt Mr. Pirzada’s absence. It was only then, raising my water glass in his name, that I knew what it meant to miss someone” (Lahiri 42). While Mr. Pirzada’s life would never be the same after 1947, his identity is not completely forsaken.

With Boori Ma experiencing the loss of her economic status and Mr. Pirzada facing the separation from his loved ones, the Partition evokes a sense of nostalgia for their lives prior to the diaspora when fleeing for their personal safety was not necessary. Like Rath claims, “ Lahiri delves headlong into the souls of remarkably identifiable characters grappling with displacement, guilt, and fear as they try to strike a semblance of balance between the solace of the present and the lingering suffocation of the past” (76-77). The division of India clearly impacts both of their lives, although fortunately for Mr. Pirzada, he undergoes only temporary detachment from his family.

Works Cited

Bates, Crispin. “ The Hidden Story of Partition and its Legacies.” History. BBC, 3 Mar. 2003. Web. 26 Apr. 2012..

Keen, Shirin. “ The Partition of India.” Postcolonial Studies at Emory. Emory, Spring 1998. Web. 26 Apr. 2012..

<https://assignbuster.com/the-detrimental-effects-of-diaspora-in-the-interpretor-of-maladies/>

Lahiri, Jhumpa. *Interpreter of Maladies*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin , 1999. Print.

Mitra, Madhuparna. " Border Crossings in Lahiri's ' A Real Durwan.'" *The Explicator* 65. 4 (2007): 242-245. Academic OneFile. Web. 23 Apr. 2012.

Rath, Sujit Kumar. " Loneliness and Nostalgia Among Women Characters in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*." *Cyber Literature* 4. 2 (2011): 72-77. Google Scholar. Web. 26 Apr. 2012.

Silva, Daniela Coredeiro Soares. " Reinventing Cartography: Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* and *The Namesake*." *Em Tese* 10 (2006): 60-66. Google Scholar. Web. 23 Apr. 2012.