

This family. for lilia's
family, dinner
together



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This paper aims at discussing the importance of food and the relationship it has with memory and identity in Jhumpa Lahiri's *When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine*. Food acts as catalyst between memory and identity. Food can strengthen identity and may recall the individual's memory. In "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine" we read the story from the point of view of Lilia, a little girl whose parents are from India and then moved to the United States. The short story tells the family interactions with a man coming from Dacca, Bangladesh, Mr. Pirzada, who would regularly have dinner with Lilia's family. For Lilia's family, dinner together with Mr. Pirzada connects them to their motherland, as they watch the war play out on television. Enjoying the company of each other distracts them from the upsetting news, "in spite of it all, night after night, my parents and Mr. Pirzada enjoyed long leisurely meals. After the television was shut off, and dishes washed and dried, they joked, and told stories, and dipped biscuits in their tea". (Lahiri, 1999) Food seems to generate a tactile, sensory feeling and nostalgia, as it links people belonging to two different nationalities by drawing the analogy between their sharing of meals in Lilia's home and events of the 1971 war. This story focuses around Lilia and her parents, who are Indian, and Mr. Pirzada, who is Bengali and how these people from two separate nationalities find commonality in Bengali food. The distinction between the two peoples comes up when Lilia calls Mr. Pirzada "the Indian man" and her father corrects her by telling her that Mr. Pirzada is not Indian. Lilia said "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, for dessert dipped austere biscuits into successive cups of tea". (Lahiri, 1999) By Lilia's observation Mr. Pirzada was very similar to her parents. She gives many accounts on which all three of the adults have similar, if not exactly the same, eating habits. When eating kebabs with Lilia's family, Mr. Pirzada recollects his memory about his homeland in Dacca, imagining how desperate and frightened his wife and seven daughters are. " One can only hope," he said, reaching for another, " that Dacca's refugees are as heartily fed" (Lahiri, 1999). His pleasure in eating dinner may bring him to revisit his past, with his family before he left. That specific meal of kebabs for Mr. Pirzada, was a tool for memory and identity as South Asian origin, also reflects his happy experience in the past in his homeland which is rather impossible for him to see that day due to the war that's happening back home. In " When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine" Lilia's initial description of Mr. Pirzada shows how integral food is in Indian culture. She notes that he carries a photo in his wallet of his daughters " at a picnic, their braids tied with ribbons, sitting cross-legged in a row, eating chicken curry off of banana leaves". (Lahiri, 1999) Throughout her relationship with him, Lilia associates Mr. Pirzada with the sweets he always brings her when he comes to dine, and describes his gifts as a " steady stream of honey-filled lozenges, raspberry truffle, and slender rolls of sour pastilles" (Lahiri 29). She considers these candies highly valuable, and " inappropriate...to consume... in a casual manner" (Lahiri, 1999). Lilia also describes the lengths to which her mother went to prepare meals: " From the kitchen my mother brought forth the succession of dishes: lentils with fried onions, green beans with coconut, fish cooked with raisins in a yogurt sauce" (Lahiri, 1999). Lahiri <https://assignbuster.com/this-family-for-lilias-family-dinner-together/>

uses this to expand upon dining traditions in India where every meal was important and required hours of work. Lilia mentions early on that her mother complains about neighbors never dropping by, and that her parents would hunt through the phone book for Indian surnames to find potential friends of the same heritage. This is attributable to the fact that acquaintances held dinners more often in India. Author, Krishnendu Ray's said " women do express and maintain their social position in the community through food work. They keep account of friends and neighbors who have invited them for dinner and the number of times they have been invited". Additionally, one of the few American traditions that Lilia's family adopts is that of Halloween: one involving food like pumpkin seeds and candy. At the end of the story when Lilia's family receives word from Mr. Pirzada that he had reunited with his family and all of them were well, Lilia's family commemorates the occasion with food. She notes that: " to celebrate the good news my mother prepared a special dinner that evening, and when we sat down to eat at the coffee table we toasted our water glasses" (Lahiri, 1999). Lahiri uses Lilia's family and Mr. Pirzada to show the vital role that food and dining plays in Indian culture. The candies Mr. Pirzada brings to Lilia give him hope that his family was also being taken care of in Dacca. Since his daughters are around Lilia's age, Mr. Pirzada feels a connection with Lilia. By giving Lilia candies and protection, Mr. Pirzada is wishing the same is being done for his daughters. Lilia prays for Mr. Pirzada's family every night by eating a piece of candy she has been collecting from Mr. Pirzada. The candy itself represents hope and a connection between Mr. Pirzada, his daughters, and Lilia. Mr. Pirzada spoils Lilia with candy because he has no daughters in America. He gives Lilia the candy and treats her as one of his

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own daughters so that in the event that he may return home and find his daughters missing or deceased, he will still have a daughter of sorts in America. Lilia uses the candies Mr. Pirzada gives her as faith that his family is okay. Lilia had a nightly routine of eating one of Mr. Pirzada's candies and praying for his family. Lilia believes that by eating the candy in this manner she is helping his family and has faith that his family will be all right. The representation of the candies as a sense of hope is also coming to an end. During the twelve days of war, Mr. Pirzada has stopped bringing candies to Lilia, since he is too focused on watching the news with Lilia's parents. However, Lilia never loses hope. " Since January, each night before bed, I had continued to eat, for the sake of Mr. Pirzada's family, a piece of candy I had saved from Halloween" (Lahiri, 1999). Lilia saves all of her Halloween candy to continue praying for Mr. Pirzada, showing how significant and important the act is for Lilia. Food symbolizes what home could and should be, during this short story food is used to symbolize family and community. It's used to describe the relationship between memory and identity Food acts as catalyst between memory and identity. Food can strengthen identity and may recall the individual's memory.