

# Freedom or Suffering: Post-Partition Memories and Fractured Identity Reflections in Jhumpa Lahiri's Select Short-Fictions

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## Abstract

The liberation of India from British domination in 1947 was the most significant historical event in the South Asian history. Despite the fact that freedom promised only liberty, equality, and fraternity, the only result was widespread violence, which eventually led to British-India being divided into two sovereign dominions (India and Pakistan). This Partition resulted in the loss of houses, properties, friends, relatives, and, most importantly, identity. The purpose of this paper is to look at how Jhumpa Lahiri addresses diasporic concerns, unpleasant partition experiences, and fractured cultural identity in two of her short- stories, "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine" and "A Real Durwan", from her collection, *Interpreter of Maladies*. Lahiri, an Indian immigrant from the United Kingdom, is well aware of the difficulties that immigrants experience in their host country. She has brilliantly depicted the painful consequences of partition in the works described above, especially the bloodshed that occurs during the civil war between East and West Pakistan. The goal of this article is to examine how Lahiri uses these two short stories to emphasize the deceiving features of freedom.

**Keywords:** Diaspora, Freedom, Identity Crisis, Post-Partition Memory, Suffering

## Introduction

After over 200 years of rule, the British finally left India in 1947, dividing the continent into the Muslim-majority Pakistan and the Hindu-majority India. A massive exodus began right away, with millions of Muslims moving to West and East Pakistan and millions of Hindus and Sikhs moving the other way. With Muslims on one side and Hindus and Sikhs on the other, communities that had lived side by side on the Indian subcontinent for almost a millennium assaulted one another in a dreadful wave of interethnic violence—a mutual genocide that was shocking and unprecedented. Punjab and Bengal, two provinces close to India's borders with West and East Pakistan, respectively, saw a lot of massacres, burnings, forced conversions, mass abductions, and horrendous sexual assault. Thousands of women were raped, with many of them scarred or dismembered as a result. Intersection between two countries inflamed the conflict rather than bringing the anticipated peace and freedom. Many years after the partition, the people of the two countries are still striving to heal the scars and pain caused by this heinous historical event.

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The majority of writings on the partition deal with the immediate brutality and tyranny that occurred during the split. These works are centered on violence. Murder, rape, looting, migration, railway massacres, and other crimes are all too prevalent in partition works. It is self-evident that incidences resulting from division, breed hate among the people of the Indian Subcontinent. It also passes on from generation to generation throughout the course of each decade. Diaspora writers are emerging in the sphere of literature as a result of this transmission of partition history or experiences, as well as longing and belonging to their homeland. Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, Jhumpa Lahiri, and other diasporic writers, for example, represent their experiences, memories, and post-memories in their literary works. In *Interpreter of Maladies*, Jhumpa Lahiri captures the aftermath and successive trauma of partition. The perceptions and experiences of first and second generation diasporas, who came to the United States and the United Kingdom from the Indian Subcontinent, are also explored in this collection.

Jhumpa Lahiri, byname of Nilanjana Sudeshna Lahiri, was born on July 11, 1967, in London, England. Her parents had emigrated from Calcutta to the United Kingdom. They moved to the United States because of her father's employment and eventually lived in South Kingston, Rhode Island. Her parents, on the other hand, were committed to their East Indian culture and tried to instill in their children a sense of pride in their origin. As an adult, Lahiri discovered that she could be a part of these two realms without the embarrassment and difficulty she experienced as a youngster. According to Jhumpa Lahiri, exile, loneliness, continual sense of estrangement, and a yearning for a lost world, are real and unpleasant experiences for immigrants. *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), her first collection of short stories, won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 2000. She's also won the PEN/Hemingway Award, the Frank O'Connor International Short Story Award, and the National Humanities Medal for her literary works.

Lahiri's short stories are based on her Indian roots, and they deal with the immigrants' struggle for identity, alienation, and cultural conflict. The majority of her art is inspired by her own experiences as an Indian-American immigrant and her close observation of those around her, such as her parents, relatives, friends, Bengali communities, and the American fraternity. According to Taylor Shea: "Lahiri uses her cultural background as an Indian American to create plots and characters that express the juxtaposition in her own life. She builds a balanced representation of her cultural group she openly admits that *Interpreter of Maladies* is a reflection of her own experiences as well as those of her parents and their Indian immigrant friends" (Shea, 2016). Like other modern post-colonial literary figures, the majority of her characters in the stories have flexible identities. They are citizens

of two nations in most circumstances; therefore their natural and cultural identities are fluid. As S. Anandh Raj observed; "They are physically in America and psychologically their minds are in South-Asia. They deal with loneliness of dislocation, cultural displacement and sense of identity and belonging with fine details of both Indian and American cultures" (Raj, 2016).

The Pulitzer Prize-winning short story collection, *Interpreter of Maladies*, was published in 1999. There are nine short stories in all; three of them are set in India, while the others are set in the United States and the United Kingdom. Characters in this collection face a variety of diasporic issues, including miscommunication, nostalgia, solitude, hatred, fractured cultural identity, psychological issues, traumatic experiences and so on. Miss Lahiri's attempt to explain the maladies of the mind that people suffer from, and the unique manner in which she helps them understand their own shortcomings, surely merit the prize and the prestige she achieved with her debut volume of short fiction, whether she recommended a remedy or not. With a striking understanding she dives profound into the mental profundities of her characters and uncovers their internal world by an entrancing yet misleadingly straightforward style. Jhumpa Lahiri's two short stories 'When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine' and 'A Real Durwan', from the collection, *Interpreter of Maladies*, are chosen for the present paper.

The story, 'When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine' is set in autumn, 1971. Lilia, a lady recalling her ten-year-old memories, is the protagonist of the story. Lahiri's experiences as a child of Indian immigrants are recounted in this fiction. It starts with the political news from Bangladesh's 1971 battle for independence. Mr. Pirzada is a Pakistani-Bengali Muslim who is on his way to becoming a Bangladeshi, whereas Lilia's Hindu family is of Indian ancestry. Mr. Pirzada, who comes from Dacca in East Pakistan, was awarded a stipend to study foliage in America for a book he intended to write. After Lilia's parents welcomed him over the phone because they were tired with the boring American way of life, he became a regular dinner guest at Lilia's house. Mr. Pirzada has seven daughters and a large mansion in Dacca, Lilia discovers. She is also acutely aware of Mr. Pirzada's longing for his children and his home. Despite the fact that he is a Muslim, he quickly becomes a close friend of the family. Lilia knew about the history of Partition, when Hindus and Muslims set fire to each other's homes. Accordingly it fills her with shock that Mr. Pirzada and her parents, "spoke the same language, laughed at the same jokes and looked more or less the same" (Lahiri, 1999). When Lilia thanks Mr. Pirzada for the assortment of sweets he presents her, he mocks her, indicating that such curtsy has no place between friends. With his 'rotund elegance', 'faint theatricality', and 'superb ease', he makes quite an impact on Lilia. Another thing Lilia sees about him is his silver watch, which is set to Dacca's local time. As a result of East Pakistan's aspiration for

independence, a conflict broke out between India and Pakistan. Due to the insecurity that her family is facing, Lilia recognizes the strain it has produced in her parents as well as Mr. Pirzada.

The narrative focused primarily on the post-independence period and the significant political upheavals that occurred following the country's independence in 1947. India's partition was a watershed moment in the country, causing widespread confusion and instability. The author depicted atrocities committed during the Partition and their aftermath through the eyes of a ten-year-old girl child in this story. The Pakistani Civil War and the Pakistani army's invasion of Dacca caused a lot of death and destruction in East Pakistan, which also had a negative impact on Mr. Pirzada's family. Though Lilia's family had no direct link to the events that took place after Partition but their love and sympathy for their homeland caused them to understand and sympathize with the innocent people who were affected by it. Being a part of the expatriate community, this affectation reflects their longing for the land they belong to.

Diasporas frequently experience a sense of alienation in their host country. As a result, they experience some sort of identity crisis or loss as well. Identity appears to be a major theme in postcolonial literature, and Lahiri also explored that same theme of identity crisis or loss in her works. The identity loss of Mr. Pirzada is due to the 1971 Bangladesh War, a temporary political crisis. He travels to the United States to research New England foliage and momentarily lost contact with his family due to the war. The war breaks out in March 1971, and Pirzada finds himself as a war refugee. Despite being stranded in the United States, Mr. Pirzada's identity is rooted in East Pakistan (Bangladesh), and he longs for his motherland. His pocket watch is also set to his country's regular time. As Lilia explains, "Unlike the watch on his wrist, the pocket watch, he had explained to me, was set to the local time in Dacca, eleven hours ahead" (Lahiri, 1999). A critic Caesar observes, "It is almost as if a shadow of Mr. Pirzada is trapped there in New England, while the true Mr. Pirzada goes about his life in East Pakistan" (Caesar, 2003).

The misery of losing contact with his wife and seven daughters as a result of the Pakistani conflict moulds Mr. Pirzada's diasporic consciousness and, as a result, fuels his desire to return home. Mr. Pirzada visits Lilia's residence every day and offers her candies in an attempt to recreate his household and his daughters' presence. Lilia, on the other hand, stores the candies in a beautiful sandal wood box that used to belong to her grandmother. This demonstrates that, she recognizes that her parents' visitor is related to her Indian history in some manner, and she honours this by putting the gifts she gets from him in the Indian box. Mr. Pirzada's strong emotional bond with Lilia, is his only means of expressing his parental love for this

young child who reminds him of his seven kids. In this position, Mr. Pirzada exists in two worlds: physically in America and mentally in Dacca, where he pines for his motherland. Jhumpa Lahiri highlighted two separate facets of culture in this narrative. It is Mr. Pirzada's cultural identity that connects him to Lilia's family; on the other hand, war and language split the human race forever in the same geographical location.

Freedom caused Mr. Pirzada to lose his political identity, but for Boori Ma of "A Real Durwan", it is her financial identity that she has to sacrifice. She has lost all of her possessions due to the forced migration to India from Pakistan in 1947. In the story, "A Real Durwan", Boori Ma is a woman who is searching for a sense of stability in her life. She is constantly moving from one place to another on that apartment, and she doesn't have a home of her own. As Hassan Bin Zubair, Dr. Uzma Imtiaz and Dr. Aisha Jadoon assert, "Boori Ma is a character of the story who represents the diaspora who is dissociated from her family during the Partition while crossing the border" (Zubair et al., 2021). However, she has lost her financial position in the process. The southern region of Asia was partitioned into two entities, India and Pakistan, in 1947. Bengal was split into two halves as well. West Bengal joined India, whereas East Bengal (modern-day Bangladesh) joined Pakistan. This was a very contentious decision, and it had led to many problems between the two countries. The split is especially evident in the way they view their respective religions, with India being majority Hindu and Pakistan being majority Muslim. This led to the displacement of over fifteen million people, who were forced to migrate. Consequently, the region has become increasingly unstable. As a result of the mass migration some people lost everything, including their national identities. Boori Ma, the protagonist of the story "A Real Durwan," is a refugee since Partition in 1947 who has lost her upper-middle-class identity. Boori Ma is a Bengali name that means "big mother." In southern part of Asia, this kind of name is usually given to an elderly maid. It isn't the true name of someone. The reader does not uncover her real name until the end of the story. Boori Ma works as a Durwan at an apartment building of Calcutta: "It was with this voice that she enumerated, twice a day as she swept the stairwell, the detail of her plight and losses suffered since her deportation to Calcutta after Partition. At that time, she maintained, the turmoil had separated her from a husband, four daughters, a two story brick house, a rosewood almari and a number of coffer boxes whose skeleton keys she still wore, along with her life savings, tied to the free end of her sari" (Lahiri, 1999).

Throughout the narrative, Boori Ma's self-identity is linked to the skeleton keys that are stolen at the end of the story. Boori Ma's prior identity as an East Bengal richman's wife is more significant to her than her current identity as a

Durwan. She can't get rid of her first homeland's identity (East Bengal, Pakistan/Bangladesh). As she asserts: "Yes, there I tasted life. Here I eat my dinner from 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" (Lahiri, 1999).

As in other diaspora South Asian novels, the concept of an "imaginary home" is prominent in the plot of this story "A Real Durwan". It is Boori Ma's "imaginary home," where she lived a prosperous and secure life. However, the political migration of 1947 has shattered her existence. She traded a wealthy lifestyle in Pakistan for an impoverished one in India. She can't seem to piece together the other half of her rich Pakistani existence. Nobody believes her stories about her fractured Indian existence since there isn't enough hard evidence to support them. The residents of the apartment building therefore conjured up Boori Ma's past: "The theory eventually circulated that Boori Ma had once worked as hired help for a prosperous zamindar back east, and was therefore capable of exaggerating her past at such elaborate lengths and heights" (Lahiri, 1999). As a result, only Boori Ma retains her upper-class East Bengali identity and is estranged from the West Bengalis in the building. This is evident in this scene: "Knowing not to sit on the furniture, she 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, 1999). Domestic employees and housemaids in South Asia are not allowed to sit on the furniture. Boori Ma claims to have been wealthy in Pakistan, but is now poor in India. For her, losing her birthplace also means losing her financial status. As a result, she never sits on any of the furniture when she visits one of the flats. This appears to be a terrible fall for the wife of a formal feudal lord (as Boori Ma claims). At the end of the story the building's only sink is stolen, and Boori Ma is evicted from that apartment with the acquisition of being a thief. Boori Ma has always felt estranged in this part of the world, and her identity would always be linked to East Bengal, as symbolized by the basin incident. She will always be an outlander. This is a true account of what happened during the division, when millions of helpless people were abused and killed. Thousands of them were also left alone or separated from their families as a result of the Indo-Pak divide. These events, as well as the suffering of the diaspora in the host country, are depicted in the collection of Lahiri's short stories.

Jhumpa Lahiri's short stories feature fictional characters, yet the themes she explores and the issues her characters face are universal. Losing one's original identity and attempting to reclaim it, is a typical dilemma for diaspora cultures. They attempt to recreate something in order to maintain their identities. It also implies that their initial national identification will continue to be significant throughout

their life. Even if an expatriate becomes a citizen of a new country, he will never be able to lose his national identity. In P. Kanimozhi's opinion, "Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* is about the conflict of individuality in the place of no origin. Each characters struggle to attain their identity in alien land and their great hope is that they would go back to their homeland which they belong to. The theme of her works relate to the experience of immigration, cultural confrontation, assimilation and intergeneration connection" (Kanimozhi, 2020). The majority of the characters in the *Interpreter of Maladies* are unable to fully integrate into their new environment. Their longing for their hometown develops into a disease. Despite the fact that their difficulties are distinct, the core of their issues is the same, i.e., their original identity and the identity of their children. However, unlike Mr. Pirzada, most of the individuals are unable to return to their homelands and live in the host country permanently. That means their maladies are incurable. Lahiri describes the issues or illnesses, but does not provide a remedy or a treatment. She is, in the end, an "interpreter of diseases," not a "physician of maladies."

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