
**Religious Diversity and Coexistence
in Jhumpa Lahiri's Short Stories:
"The Blessed House" and
"When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine."**

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Abstract :

Religion is one of the themes tackled in literature providing a source of conflict, especially the diversity of religions in the same country. Various religions are found in the same country leading to dispute and argument. Such arguments are usually heightened when individuals emigrate and settle in a country where the dominant religion is unlike theirs. Consequently, they have to achieve a compromise by negotiating the cultural and religious differences.

Many of the immigrants in the United States of America descend from Asia. They are Hindu, Muslims, Buddhist, etc. Those immigrants faced a difficulty in accepting the American norms of life. They also had problems in accepting other religions. Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* is a collection of short stories that are set in the United States of America and India. Most of the characters are Indian immigrants who are trying to reconcile the cultural and religious differences in their new life in the States.

The aim of this study is to investigate how various religions can coexist at the same time, in the same place. This coexistence is exemplified in the short story entitled "The Blessed House." The study also explores the reconciliation of different religions in a foreign country. In the short story entitled "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine," Mr. Pirzada, a Pakistani man visits an Indian family in the United States of America and develops a truthful friendship with their daughter in spite of the differences in their age and religion.

Introduction: Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*

Jhumpa Lahiri was born in 1967 in London, England. Her parents are Bengali immigrants from Calcutta. The Lahiris lived in South Kingston. Jhumpa Lahiri won the Pulitzer Prize for her collection of short stories *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999). She also wrote the bestselling novel *The Namesake* (2003). Lahiri's motifs include a sense of otherness, loss, miscommunication, and the eternal quest for self-identity. (Kort, p.106)

Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* is a collection of nine short stories that tackle human relationships and cultural differences.

The interaction between cultures and individuals is exemplified in the process of assimilation and estrangement into a new whole. (Prasad, p.204) Some of her stories are set in North America while the other stories are set in South Asia. These nine stories share certain themes and motifs, such as exile, displacement, loneliness, and problems about communication. The characters of this collection of short stories are Indians, Indians émigrés, and American-born Indians. (Huang, 127) Nevertheless Most of the characters in this collection are Indian, whose relationships are deeper than any superficial or photographic depiction. There is reconciliation and compromise in terms of the interaction between cultures. (Prasad, p.204)

In this collection of short stories, Lahiri made use of plots, characterization, and various points of views to interpret the maladies of cultural and human relationships and fill the gaps between two different cultures. (Prasad, p.210) Her collection is similar to a mosaic of portraits, which offers sensitive insights into immigrant lives. (Awadalla and March-Russel, p.98)

“When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine” and “The Blessed House” are two short stories from the collection *Interpreter of Maladies*. These two short stories are about Bengali-Americans and their cultural and emotional negotiation. (Awadalla and March-Russel, p.98) These two stories tackle issues of communication, familial relationships, and the racial issues of India. These topics represent the experiences of human beings. In this way, Lahiri is an interpreter of the maladies of her people as she diagnoses the malady and tries to communicate it to readers. (Mishra and Kumar, p.51) Furthermore, Her stories are a representative of the Indian culture. Her characters belong to different religions and nationalities as they exemplify a universal experience. (Mishra and Kumar, p.52)

Coexistence in “This Blessed House”

In “This Blessed House,” the life and the relationship of second-generation Bengali Americans are tackled with. The experience of immigration and dislocation is not discussed overtly, yet this story manifests the demands of adjustment and acceptance required of a newly married couple who are very different in their personalities. (Awadalla and March-Russel, p.99) In this story, Lahiri deals with the theme of religious differences between immigrants and a new environment. The whole story is about Twinkle and Sanjeev, an Indian couple, and how they embrace a new culture. Although both of whom are Indian, they have different attitudes concerning Christianity. (Burada, p.204)

Sanjeev is an MIT graduate. He is a successful engineer who has his own secretary and “a dozen people working under his supervision.” (138) at a firm in Connecticut. Tanimia, nicknamed

“Twinkle”, is writing her master’s thesis on an Irish poet at Stanford. After their wedding, Sanjeev and Twinkle move to a new house. They find objects left behind by the previous owners. (Kuorti and Nyman, p.209) First of all, they found “ a white porcelain effigy of Christ” in “a cupboard above the stove, beside an unopened bottle of malt vinegar.” When Twinkle says that she wants to keep it, Sanjeev’s reply is very decisive: “Throw it away,” because “we are not Christian.”

The way this couple respond to the overwhelming number of Christian statues, paintings, and cross represents how well they adapt to their new American life. This couple is alien, foreign, and culturally intrusive in the new house to which they move. (Burada, p.206)

The title gives the story a religious tone, which is emphasized by the religious artifact. (Kuorti and Nyman, p.209) The house is blessed because there are many pieces of Christian objects, like a white porcelain effigy of Christ, a wooden cross key chain, a small plastic dome containing a miniature of Nativity scene, and a statue of virgin Mary. Twinkle becomes preoccupied with these objects which causes her husband’s uneasiness. Sanjeev does not show any appreciation for these works of art. (Mishra and Kumar, p.120)

He studied the items on the mantel. It puzzled him that each was in its own way so silly. Clearly they lacked a sense of sacredness. He was further puzzled that Twinkle, who normally displayed good taste, was so charmed. These objects meant something to Twinkle, but they meant nothing to him. They irritated him...[he told Twinkle:] ‘Tell [the Realtor] to take it away.’

Twinkle is happy by the Christian artifacts she finds in the house, not because she has a religious attitude but because they amuse her. (Brians, p.201) Sanjeev becomes more irritated by his wife’s behavior. When Twinkle wants to put the kitchen collection on the mantelpiece, Sanjeev wants to dispense with them. (Huang, p.128)

Twinkle displayed on the mantel “a sizable collection of Christian paraphernalia. There was a 3-D postcard of Saint Francis done in four colors, which Twinkle had found taped to the back of the medicine cabinet, and a wooden cross key chain, which Sanjeev had stepped on with bare feet as he was installing extra shelving in Twinkle’s study... There was also a tile trivet depicting a bond, unbearded Jesus, delivering a sermon on a mountaintop, left in one of the drawers of the built in china cabinet in the dining room.

There is a bit of religious inhibition in the husband, which justifies his resentment and curtness at his wife. Twinkle, on the other hand is delighted by the finds in the new home and she displays these

artifacts which thaws Sanjeev's reticence (Prasad, p.205) Later, they discovered "a larger-than-life-sized watercolor poster of Christ, weeping translucent tears the size of peanut shells and sporting a crown of thorns." Sanjeev tried to convince Twinkle not to display the new poster: "'now, look. I will tolerate, for now, your little biblical menagerie in the living room. But I refuse to have this,' he said, flicking at one of the painted peanut tears, 'displayed in our home.'"

The two major characters of this short story represent two different manners of approaching the confrontation between Hinduism and Christianity. The names of the two major characters are important in the sense that each of which represents a different attitude. Twinkle is referred to by her English name that is connected to brightness and light. She is tolerant, open and curious to discover objects that belong to the previous owners of the house. Sanjeev's name is an Indian name that sounds foreign to the English language which denotes his reluctance to embrace a new life style. (Burada, 204)

The process of Twinkle's exploration does not come to an end as she discovers "a plaster Virgin Mary as tall as their waists, with a blue painted hood draped over her head in the manner of an Indian bride." She wants to put it on the lawn, to which Sanjeev replies: "all the neighbors will see. They'll think we're insane." Yet Twinkle argues that "every other person in this neighborhood has a statue of Mary on the lawn. We'll fit right in." Again, Sanjeev replies: "We're not Christian... I can't have the people I work with see this statue on my lawn."

The discussion between Sanjeev and Twinkle reaches a dead end and leads Sanjeev to reconsider his marriage: "He was getting nowhere with her, with this woman whom he had known for only four months and whom he had married, this woman with whom he now shared his life."

Sanjeev and Twinkle see the statue differently. Twinkle comments: "This is our house. We own it together. The statue is a part of our property." On the other hand, Sanjeev decides to "go outside and remove the Virgin from the front lawn." He also decides to "put it in the garage" and "take it to the dump" later.

Eventually, they made a settlement: "the statue would be placed in a recess at the side of the house, so that it wasn't obvious to passerby, but was still clearly visible to all who came." Ultimately they settled a compromise. Sanjeev and Twinkle held a party and invited their friends and work colleagues. One of his colleagues asked him: "I hope you don't mind my asking...but I noticed the statue outside, and are you guys Christian? I thought you were India." Sanjeev foreshadowed this scene: he previously said: "I can't have the people I work with see this statue on my lawn," but he answered his

colleague's question by saying: "There are Christians in India... but we are not." The party was a success, and "[his] friends adore[d] the poster in [Twinkle's] study."

Diversity in "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine"

This story is set in 1971, when Bangladesh was separated from Pakistan. The American news was full of stories about the crisis of the starving refugees and the assaults of the Pakistani forces. (Brians, 197) The narrator of the story is Lilia, a young girl of ten, whose parents descend from India. Her parents used to invite Mr. Pirzada to their home. (Brians, p.197)

Mr. Pirzada is a botanist who visits the United States of America for Academic purposes. He is away from his wife and daughters, but he is preoccupied by thoughts about his family. He dines with an Indian family, whose daughter is the narrator of the story. Yet, Mr. Pirzada does not show his concerns in the presence of the narrator, except when he watches war on television: "As he watched he had a immovable expression on his face, composed but alert, as if someone were giving him directions to an unknown destination." (Prasada, p.205)

Lahiri portrays life through the eyes of a girl of ten years. She finds it interesting that a man visits their house. (Mishra and Kumar, p.115) "At first I knew nothing of the reason for his visits. I was ten years old, and was not surprised that my parents, who were from India, and had a number of Indian acquaintances at the university, should ask Mr. Pirzada to share our meals."

She is also surprised to know that he is not of their country but of another country. (Mishra and Kumar, p.115) Lilia's father states: "Mr. Pirzada is no longer considered Indian. Not since Partition. Our country was divided. 1947" Lilia reflects: "when I said I thought that was the date of India's independence from Britain, my father said, 'that too. One moment we were free and then we were sliced up.'" Lilia's father explains the political and religious issues to his daughter by using simile and a map: "like a pie. Hindus here, Muslims there, Dacca no longer belongs to us."

Lilia's father points to the enmity between Hindus and Muslims at that time: "He told me that during partition Hindus and Muslims had set fire to each other's homes. For many, the idea of eating in the other's company was still unthinkable." Although Lilia's father tries to help her understand the situation, her confusion increases because

It made no sense to[her]. Mr. Pirzada and [her]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 [her]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.

Ultimately, Lilia understands the difference: “Mr. Pirzada is Bengali, but he is a Muslim... Therefore he lives in East Pakistan, not India.”

In spite of these differences, Lilia’s family and Mr. Pirzada celebrate the Halloween. They buy a pumpkin to “make a jack-o’-lantern” and to “scare people away.” They all took part in carving the pumpkin:

Mr. Pirzada leaned over the pumpkin for a moment to inspect and inhale its contents. My mother gave him a long metal spoon with which he gutted the interior until the last bits of string and seeds were gone. My father, meanwhile, separated the seeds from the pulp and set them out to dry on a cookie sheet, so that we could roast them later on. I drew two triangles against the ridged surface for the eyes, which Mr. Pirzada dutifully carved, and crescents for eyebrows, and another triangle for the nose. The mouth was all that remained, and the teeth posed a challenge.

Mr. Pirzada used to bring her sweets, which she cherishes a great deal. The story highlights tolerance and bond rather than difference. (This story focuses on a bond between a child and an adult. Mishra and Kumar, p.115)

Lilia is excellent in American History but she is ignorant and curious about Hindus and Muslims in the Bengal. (Huang, p.129)Lilia is studying the American Revolution at the same time when she was witnessing the crisis of another place in the world. But that place is not mentioned in her books. (Brian, 197) Lilia’s father asks her if she knows anything about the partition of India and Pakistan. Thus, he asks “‘what exactly do they teach you at school? Do you study history? Geography?’” Lilia’s mother replies by saying: “‘Lilia has plenty to learn at school,’ my mother said. ‘We live here now, she was born here... How can you possibly expect her to know about Partition?’” Lilia’s mother is a good example of assimilation. She focuses on learning about the present.

The school was different from home: “No one at school talked about the war followed so faithfully in my living room” Nevertheless, Lilia responds and reacts to what happens at home by trying to find answers in school. One day, when she was in the library, she saw a section labeled “Asia” and “books about China, India, Indonesia, Korea. Eventually [she] found a book titled Pakistan: A Land and Its People... there was a chapter about Dacca, and [she] began to read

about its rainfall, and its jute production.” Lilia’s teacher discourages her by stating that there is “no need to consult” the library book she seeks on Pakistan after she heard of the crisis of Pakistan and Bangladesh.

In spite of the religious differences, there is a harmony and understanding in Mr. Pirzada’s relationship with Lilia’s parents. There is an emotional acceptance regarding religion. In Lahiri’s stories, issues of religion do not survive in an alien land, where the characters take the labels of Hindu, Muslim, Christian into consideration. (Prasad, 205) Although he speaks the same language of Lilia’s parents, Mr. Pirzada is technically not an Indian, because he comes from East Pakistan. His stay in the USA coincided with the Bangladeshi war of independence in 1971. He is worried about his wife and seven daughters in Decca. (Huang, p.129)

Lahiri verifies the events of her story by referring to the outbreak of the 1971 war and the emergence of the new nation of Bangladesh. Lilia experiences friendship and loss. She is interested in politics and history, but her parents have contrasting attitude to migration and history. Her father shows his concern at his daughter’s education as she is ignorant regarding the world outside the North American history taught at school. (Ranasinha, p. 193)

This story reminds the reader of Pakistan civil war and the partition. Lilia’s mother recalls her past in India during the Independence when the economic and political conditions were difficult. Lilia’s mother remembers the crisis, the power failure, and the kerosene lamps as compared to the secure life in USA. (Mishra and Kumar, p.52) History repeats itself as another war is going to break out:

What they heard that evening, and for many evenings after that, was that India and Pakistan were drawing closer and closer to war. Troops from both sides lined the border, and Dacca was insisting on nothing short of independence. The war was to be waged on East Pakistani soil. The United States was siding with West Pakistan, the Soviet Union with India and what was soon to be Bangladesh. War was declared officially on December 4, and twelve days later, the Pakistani army, weakened by having to fight three thousand miles from their source of supplies, surrendered in Dacca.

Throughout these hard times, Mr. Pirzada slept at their home. During those twelve days of the war Lilia’s father “no longer asked [her] to watch the news with them.” Mr. Pirzada “stopped bringing [her] candy.” Her mother “refused to serve anything other than boiled eggs with rice for dinner.” They were all worried. Lilia remembers

that “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.”

Lilia was affected by the news. She was worried about Mr. Pirzada’s family although she had never them before. “ I prayed that Mr. Pirzada’s family was safe and sound. I had never prayed for anything before, had never taught or told to, but I decided , given the circumstances, that it was something I should do.”

The nostalgic tone dominates the story as Mr. Pirzada longs for his wife and daughters in Dacca. Later, Lilia also longs for Mr. Pirzada after he departs and return to Dacca. (Mishra and Kumar, p.52) She realizes what “is meant to miss someone who was so many miles and hours away, just as he had missed his wife and daughter for so many months.” This story is a coming of age story. At the end of the story, Lilia is not the same. Her understanding of the tragedy in South Asia grows .She is no longer the child who loves sweets. She is now a conscious participant in the history of her parent’s homeland. (Brians, p.197)

After a period of time, Mr. Pirzada returns to his country and sends the new year greeting. He also informs them that his wife and daughters are safe. (Mishra and Kumar, p.115). He sent them a letter in which he “thanked [them] for [their] hospitality, adding that although he now understood the meaning of the words “thank you” they still were not adequate to express his gratitude.” Lilia’s family celebrated by having a special dinner that evening .

Conclusion :

When various races and religions form the population of a country, this may lead to a clash. Yet, this clash may lead to an inevitable collision when individuals immigrate to another country, where religion is totally different. In Lahiri’s “This Blessed House,” this collision is exemplified in Sanjeev’s reluctance to embrace Christian artifacts in his new home. Conversely, Sanjeev’s wife, Twinkle, adores these statues and artifacts. Sanjeev’s reaction is very severe at the beginning, but he approves of the presence of these Christian artifacts in his home. His acceptance shows a kind of coexistence between Christianity and Hinduism.

Whereas coexistence between two religions is present in Lahiri’s “ This Blessed House,” diversity dominates Lahiri’s “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine.” Diversity is presented through three religions: Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism. Mr. Pirzada is a Muslim, who used to dine with Lilia’s Hindus parents. All of whom take part in Halloween, without going through any arguments regarding religion. In this story, religion is related to politics because Lilia’s father tries to help his daughter understand the partition of India and Pakistan. In

addition, he explains to her the separation of Bangladesh from Pakistan. He also tells her that Mr. Pirzada is different because he belongs to another country and his religion is different from theirs.

Lilia, the narrator, cannot understand the difference between Mr. Pirzada and her parents, because they looked alike in everything. Her father explains the difference in terms of religion, geography, and politics. In spite of these differences, the characters of this story share a humane concern for Mr. Pirzada's family and the refugees in Pakistan. They abandon the religious issues in their homeland and care for the safety of their fellows, who are not of the same religion. The story revolves around diversity that leads to bond and toleration rather than difference.

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**التنوع الديني والتعايش في قصص قصيرة لجومبا لاهيري :
البيت المبارك ”وحيثما قدم سيد برزادا لتناول العشاء“**

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المستخلص :

يعد الدين احد المواضيع التي تمثل مصدرا للصراع و خصوصا تعددية الاديان في البلد الواحد . عند وجود اديان متعددة في نفس البلد , يؤدي هذا بطبيعة الحال الى الخلاف و النزاع . و تزداد حدة هذه الخلافات عندما يهاجر الافراد الى دولة حيث تسود ديانة مختلفة عن ديانتهم لذا توجب عليهم ان يحققوا تسوية من خلال مفاوضة الفوارق الدينية و الثقافية . ينحدر معظم المهاجرون في الولايات المتحدة الامريكية من قارة اسيا و يدينون بديانات متعددة كالديانات الهندوسية و الاسلام و البوذية . واجه المهاجرون صعوبات تتعلق بتقبل معايير الحياة الامريكية بالاضافة الى تقبل ديانات اخرى . مفسر العلل هي مجموعة قصص قصيرة للكاتبة الامريكية جومبا لاهيري و تدور احداثها في الولايات المتحدة الامريكية و الهند . معظم الشخصيات في هذه المجموعة هم مهاجرون هنود يحاولون ان يصلحون بين الفوارق الدينية و الثقافية في حياتهم الجديدة في الولايات المتحدة . تهدف هذه الدراسة الى بحث كيفية تعايش اديان متعددة في وقت واحد و مكان واحد . يتمثل هذا التعايش في قصة البيت المبارك كما تبحث هذه الدراسة المصالحة بين الاديان المختلفة في بلد اجنبي ففي قصة حينما قدم سيد برزادا لتناول العشاء يزور رجل باكستاني عائلة هندية في الولايات المتحدة المريكية و يكون صداقة حقيقة خالصة بالرغم من الاختلاف الموجود في دياناتهم .