How Hybridity Affects People Differently

Jhumpa Lahiri “imagines an American world not just through American eyes but eyes that have seen other cultures and a mind that has understood other ways of thought” (Caesar, 2005). Through Lahiri’s background experiences she can provide a different point of view on the American culture and new metaphors of how one experiences the world in daily life(Caesar, 2005). Most of her works focus on hybrid characters and is a person who views the world from multiple cultural backgrounds. These characters work to incorporate ones different backgrounds through daily activities. Some characters choose to express different backgrounds through storytelling, cooking or how they dress. The authors Jhumpa Lahiri, Elizabeth Jackson , and Judith Csear believe hybrid characters can make the transition successfully, some with greater difficulty, and others not at all. Lahiri’s work focuses on the struggle of understanding what being a hybrid is. Jackson’s article is about hybridity and globalization becoming more normal. Lastly, Caesar's work shows the connection between being a hybrid and Lahri’s personal life. Lahiri’s work focuses on the process of becoming hybrid and is emphasized in the works “Mrs.Sen” and “ When Mr.Pirzada Came to Dine”.

Jhumpa Lahiri can be defined as a hybrid herself. She was born into an American Indian family in London in 1967. She grew up trying to balance her multiple cultural backgrounds and wrote about it in her writing. Lahiri wrote for a “homage to her family and a personal endeavor to grasp meaning out of her ambivalent existence” (Escoba,2011). Through her time as a famous author, she has been labeled as many different stereotypes that relate to being a hybrid. The first stereotype is her being an Indian - American author. Next is being an NRI and that is a non-resident Indian or one who claims to be Indian but has never been to India. The last stereotype that Lahiri has been labeled as is an ABCD and this is an American born confused desi (Escoba,2011). Lahiri wants others to know that being a hybrid is becoming normal and one can express multiple cultural backgrounds in everyday life. Lahiri wanted to express her life through multiple pieces in her story “Interpreter of Maladies' as she would describe her life as “My upbringing, an amalgam of two hemispheres, was heterodox and complicated; I wanted it to be conventional and contained. I wanted to be anonymous and ordinary, to look like other people, to behave as others did”(Escoba,2011). Lahiri felt like an outcast at times and wants others to know people can fit in no matter their cultural differences.

Many authors write about the struggle hybrids face in everyday life. An author that shows a character confused about their cultural background is Elizabeth Jackson. In the article “Transcending the Politics of 'Where You're From': Postcolonial Nationality and Cosmopolitanism in Jhumpa Lahiri's Interpreter of Maladies', she describes two characters discussing personal identity. The discussion is as follows :

Q: “Where are you from?”

A: “I'm not from anywhere”

Q: “Well, where were you born?”

A: “I was born in the United States, but I have no memories of it because my family left when I

was two”

Q: “So where did you grow up?”

A: “All over the world: South Africa, Kenta, Brazil, Mexico. And as an adult, I’ve lived in the United States, Singapore, and Trinidad, but mostly Britain.”

Q: “But you’re still American, aren't you?”

A: “Yes and no, I have and U.S. citizenship, but I have never felt that either of those identities fits me.”

Q:“ So how do you define your identity ?”

A:“ Not in terms of nationality”

The question and answers from above show how people who have many different cultural backgrounds struggle to incorporate all aspects into everyday life. The character leading the discussion becomes frustrated as others do not understand the challenge of balancing multiple backgrounds.Becoming hybrid is not easy for everyone and some people will never succeed at it. The author writes “Globalization is happening , whether we like it or not, and consequently there will be more people who do not define themselves in terms of nationality” (Jackson,2012). More and more people will be hybrid and not define their nationality as they will have more than one. With the increase in hybridalty the world will gain “close connections between people of diverse origins will reduce mutual misunderstanding , hostility , and conflict” (Jackson,2012). People will learn to embrace multiple cultural backgrounds through everyday activities.Many stories from Jhumpa Lahiri’s book “Interpreter of Maladies” focuses on the challenging aspects of finding one's cultural identities. Some of the issues one may face is not knowing how to express themselves, not knowing what their cultural background is and trying to explain the struggles of being hybrid to other people.

In “Mrs.Sens”, the struggle of trying to become hybrid is shown through the main character Mrs.Sen. The story begins with an eleven-year-old boy named Eliot who needs a babysitter to watch him every day after school. Eliot's mother begins to search for a babysitter until she finds Mrs. Sen. Mrs. Sen is a professor’s wife who is part of an Indian American family living in the Boston area. Mrs. Sen enjoys watching Eliot after school and builds a relationship with him while cooking and discussing different Indian customs. Mrs.Sen choose to talk about important customs as a way to teach Eliot about how people from all over the world live differently. As she is giving Eliot a lesson on the different customs from her homeland, Eliot notices that the Sens clothing is different from what he and his mother wears. He realizes that Mrs. Sen wears a sari while his mother wears clothes from the Banana Republic. She also chose to discuss the customs as a way to get her feelings out and realize she needs a trip back to India. The discussion of Indian customs is bringing up a sensitive spot as Mrs. Sens is nostalgic for her native country.

Mrs. Sen becomes very homesick and is struggling to continue living her daily life in America. She has problems completing multiple everyday activities such as cooking and driving while missing her home country. One part of her life that has become more difficult is driving around to do errands. Mrs. Sen expresses her feelings towards driving as “I hate it. I hate driving. I

won’t go on” and does not want to learn to drive (Lahiri, 1999). The sounds coming from starting a car and moving the gear shift freaks her out. She misses her old life back in India where she was much happier. She said “at home , you know, we have a driver.” “You mean a chauffeur” (Lahiri, 1999). She is nervous while living it the states and misses the luxury of having a personal driver. Mrs. Sen realizes that not everything is handed to her in America and she has to work for what she wants. This is part of living the American dream. When she comes to terms of not having a driver in her new town she has to become brave as Eliot is not old enough to drive and complete errands for her. One day she needed to run to the fish market and get fresh products for her meals that day. On the way she has a minor accident where her an Eliot do not get injured. At this point Eilot realizes that she is a distracted driver and struggles to keep her eyes on the road.She continues to drive and is confused about why no one slows down on the road and Eliot has to try and explain how to drive from what he has seen his mom does. Mrs. Sen is feeling terribly homesick while cooking food from her native country. She never lets Eliot in the kitchen and says “Just sit, sit please, it will take just two more minutes,” she said, pointing to the sofa, which was draped at all times with a green and black bedcover printed with rows of elephants bearing palanquins on their backs” (Lahiri,1999). Mrs.Sen thinks if she allows Eliot to be in the room while cooking , it will take away part of her cultural identity and something she enjoys while trying to begin a new life.These is two aspects she is struggling with while trying to fit the mold of a typical American.

At one part Mrs. Sen bursts into tears and it is clear that she is not satisfied with the lifestyle she has been living in America. She then leads Eliot into her bedroom to show him her personal collection of saris, none of which she wears anymore. After showing Eliot her collection she sits with Eliot and emphasizes her alienation of missing her friends and family in India. Mrs. Sen is living a double life as her relatives want her to write about her new life as they are excited to hear about her experience. Mrs. Sen's relatives imagine her new American life to be spectacular and perfect. In reality, she is unhappy with the life she was creating in America and this is a common issue of becoming a hybrid.

The second piece of Jhumpa Lahiri's work that shows the struggle of becoming hybrid and it not being taught in schools is “When Mr.Pirzada Came to Dine”. In this piece, the narrator is a 10 - year old girl named Lilia. She is the daughter of an Indian American couple and questions how a family friend balances having two different cultural backgrounds. Lilia’s family becomes lonely as they do not know many people in the Boston suburbs. The family begins to search for new friends and finds Mr.Pirzada, who is a visiting researcher from Dacca, Pakistan. He is in the states for a year on a government grant to learn and write about the foliage of New England. Mr. Pirzada visits Lilia’s family daily and enjoys going over because the two families have multiple things in common. They talk about their similar South Asian backgrounds, love for food and their homelands. Mr. Pirzada especially likes to talk with Lilia as she is not up to date on other parts of the world.

A major part of this short story is when Lilia realizes not everyone is treated equally in the world. Some people are treated differently for their cultural backgrounds and an example of this is one night Lilia has a one on one talk with her father. During the conversation he says, “Mr. Pirzada won’t be coming today. More importantly, Mr. Pirzada is no longer considered Indian” (Lahairi, 1999). The reasoning behind this is that in 1947 India has been divided. Lilia becomes confused since Mr.Pirzada and her parents all speak the same language and have similar customs from their home countries. After the discussion is over Lilia’s father is frustrated that she is not being taught about the different cultural identities all over the world. He proceeds to ask her, “what

exactly do they teach you at school? Do you study history? Geography”(Lahiri,1999). Students should be aware that people from all over the world live differently from one another and have different customs and traditions. Lilia’s mother has different feelings about the discussion, she thinks about how her daughter is lucky enough to have a safe life in America with no worries. When Lilia goes to school, teachers do not mention the big historical events happening across the world. In social studies class, the students are learning about the American Revolution instead of following the wars featured on the news. Social studies teachers should be teaching students about major events happening all over the world and not just local ones. Mr.Pirzada’s daily visits spark Lilia’s curiosity to learn about Pakistan culture. She decides to check out a book on this culture and gets in trouble by the librarian. The librarian told her that the book had nothing to do with her given writing assignment. It is the school librarian's fault that students are struggling with the idea of hybridity as they do not let the students learn and explore other cultures from their own. Hybridity should be taught in schools in today's society as many families move from Middle Eastern countries to America to start a new life.

In January, Mr. Pirzada becomes unhappy and decides to go home and visit his wife and seven daughters in Dacca. The family misses Mr.Pirzada just as much as he misses them. Later on in the year, Lilia’s family receives a surprise postcard from an important family friend. Mr. Pirzada writes to them discussing the time he has spent making memories with his family again. He then expresses his gratitude for the wonderful stay he had over in America. The letter is filled with positive news to celebrate but Lilia is not feeling the celebration. During this time Lilia said,” I knew what it meant to miss someone who was so many miles and hours away” (Lahiri,1999). This is the first time she is experiencing missing someone who lives on the other side of the world. Lilia is encountering the struggle of being a hybrid for her first time as Mr.Pirzada made it work becoming hybrid as he enjoyed his time in America.

As a famous writer Jhumpa Lahiri can explain being a hybrid from her own cultural background as she was born American Indian. She has first hand experience of balancing more than one cultural identity and expresses it through multiple pieces of her work. The hybrid characters in her works either transition successfully, some with more challenges and others not at all.

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