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Adolescent Development of Ethnic Identity in Fiction

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Adolescent Development of Ethnic Identity in Fiction

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At first glance, one might not notice the striking similarities between Lilia, of Jhumpa Lahiri's "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine," and Maggie, of Alice Walker's "Everyday Use." Yet, these stories reveal more than meets the eye. In fact, in both of the aforementioned accounts, the reader has the opportunity to watch the young female character develop her own ethnic identity. Based on the research of W. David Wakefield and Cynthia Hudley, as recorded in the professional journal, *Theory into Practice*, there are three critical stages that adolescents go through in the process of developing their ethnic identity. Though the characters in these stories are of different ethnic backgrounds, the process they go through in understanding them is quite similar.

In order to understand the importance of ethnicity in each of the girls' development of self, it is helpful to note the meaning of the term "ethnicity." Wakefield and Hudley define ethnicity as "an ascribed or self-identified affiliation typically based on aspects of one's family heritage, shared language, culture, or nationality" (148). This means that by reflecting on and learning about one's family history, beliefs and other shared commonalities, an individual can acquire his or her own connection with this group. This aspect of development is important because it helps adolescents discover their role as a member of a specific background, enables them to connect with others who share this common ground and allows them to experience an aspect of their history that may influence their future. According to the information presented in Wakefield and Hudley's article, "Ethnic and Racial Identity and Adolescent Well-Being," Lilia and Maggie begin with an "unexamined ethnic identity," progress to an "ethnic identity search" and end with an "achieved ethnic identity" (148-149).

In the beginning of each of the stories in this discussion, it appears as though the girls have "unexamined ethnic identities," which Wakefield and Hudley describe as the time when adolescents have not yet explored their ethnicity or perhaps do not quite understand what ethnicity is or means (149). In "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine," this is evident when Lilia asks her mother for "a glass for the Indian man" (Lahiri) and is promptly corrected by her father. She then follows her father as he proceeds to describe the difference between Hindus and Muslims, East Pakistan and India. Though Lilia tells her father she understands the differences he is describing, in reality, "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...took off [their] shoes before entering a room, chewed fennel seeds after meals as a digestive, drank no alcohol..." (Lahiri). This difficulty in understanding the differences between her family and their frequent visitor is a perfect indication that Lilia is in the first stage of ethnic identity development.

Likewise, Maggie of "Everyday Use" does not quite comprehend her ethnic background either. However, unlike Lilia, this perhaps is best portrayed in Maggie's self-esteem. Wakefield and Hudley have determined that development of one's ethnic identity has a positive effect on his or her self-esteem (150). Therefore, as Maggie better develops her sense of ethnic identity, so, too, does her self-esteem increase. At first, the reader is introduced to Maggie as a young girl, unsure of herself, with her "chin on chest, eyes on ground, feet in shuffle" (Walker). When she speaks, her voice is "so low you almost couldn't hear her" (Walker). When her older sister, Dee, begins to rummage through family heirlooms, Maggie hangs back. It does not take long, however, for Maggie to embark on the second stage of ethnic identity development.

Soon, Maggie has begun her “ethnic identity search” (Wakefield and Hudley 149). According to the researchers, this stage is marked by the adolescent’s involvement and interest in their ethnic history and culture with a desire to learn and understand their background more fully (149). In Maggie’s instance, this is when she offers to allow her older sister to take a couple of quilts that had been hand-sewn by their grandmother and promised to Maggie by their mother. By listening to her mother and sister argue over the quilts, Maggie begins to develop a sense of the importance of her ethnicity. This is also apparent when Maggie was the one to answer her sister’s questions about some heirlooms around the house when Dee was unsure as to how the pieces fit into their cultural history. Maggie’s knowledge of her family’s cultural history and her reluctance to let go of the heirlooms display her growing appreciation for her ethnic background.

Lilia embarks on this journey through Mr. Pirzada’s visits and what she learns in the time he spends at their home. It is during this time that Lilia watches the evening news with her parents and their guest, learning of the war in their home country and watching Mr. Pirzada in an effort to “figure out what made him different” (Lahiri). This is also when Lilia notices the differences between her family and the children at school. For instance, Lilia observes that no one at school is as knowledgeable of the Indo-Pakistan war as she is. Additionally, she makes an effort to learn more about Pakistan by seeking out a book in the library, though her teacher scolded her for reading it. Night after night, Lilia becomes more interested in her ethnicity, albeit mostly through the war and out of concern for Mr. Pirzada’s family. Still, her actions portray her progress through the second stage of her development of ethnic identity.

The final phase of this process is when an adolescent uses the information they have obtained in their search to develop their own “achieved ethnic identity,” with the knowledge of what their ethnicity means and a commitment to said ethnicity (Wakefield and Hudley 149). Lilia reaches this point during the twelve days of the war in December of 1971. Her greatest recollection of this time is of her parents and Mr. Pirzada “operating...as if they were a single person, sharing a single meal, a single body, a single silence, and a single fear” (Lahiri). This statement shows Lilia has come to understand the importance of what is occurring between Pakistan and India. It also displays her understanding of her family’s actions, such as her mother only serving boiled eggs and rice during the time of the war and her father watching the news every night. Additionally, when Mr. Pirzada returns to his country, Lilia continues to look at her father’s map and reflect on the Pirzada family, further displaying her continued interest in her newly discovered ethnic ties. Maggie’s final step in this process occurs under less intense circumstances.

In the quarrel between Maggie’s mother and her sister, the reader learns that Maggie intends to use the quilts when she marries. It is also made apparent that Maggie understands that these are special quilts because they are a part of the family’s heritage and history since they were hand-made by the girls’ aunt and grandmother. In her mother’s eyes, Maggie deserves the quilts more than Dee does because she truly understands this relation whereas Dee only thinks she does. After all, Maggie states that she can remember her past relatives without the material reminders. She also states that she can always make new quilts, which will also remind her of her grandmother, since she is the one who taught Maggie to sew. In addition to these revelations is the fact that Maggie gains her confidence by the end of the story. This is evident when she simply smiles at her sister when Dee departs, clearly upset at her mother’s refusal to relinquish the quilts. Even Maggie’s mother states that it was “a real smile, not scared” (Walker). At this point, her journey is complete; Maggie has found her ethnic identity.

Clearly, Lilia and Maggie are adolescents of different ethnic backgrounds who undergo very similar processes in developing their ethnic identities. Both girls began with an unclear concept of their ethnicity, embarked on a journey to discover their ties to their heritage and used this knowledge to accept and participate within their ethnic groups. When reading two short stories such as “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine” and “Everyday Use,” these similarities may not be obvious at first. Yet,

just as these characters had to look deeper within themselves to discover these ethnic identities, so, too, must a reader look beyond the surface to discover aspects that may otherwise go unnoticed.

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