

Reardon, Tiffani

Dr. Davis

ENGL 3340

9 December 2013

Defining Diaspora, Hybrid, and Creole in Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*

The final exam prompt number 5 asks to explore the ideas of diaspora, hybridity, and creoleness in postcolonial Indian literature, so I began by looking for those words in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. What I found, however, were three words that not only had completely different meanings than expected, but also had three very narrow definitions that not once stated the word “India” in them. After running into the realization that India is a very under-represented country even in something as universal as the *OED*, I have changed my prompt. I will use this final exam paper to redefine these words from the standpoint of postcolonial India using Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*.

When I hear the word “diaspora,” it is usually in the context of African diaspora—the diaspora that resulted from the slave trade—which is exactly what I understand from the *OED* definition along with the ending: “(the situation of) any body of people living outside their traditional homeland” (“Diaspora”). The issue with this definition is that it doesn't

indicate anywhere the circumstances that cause a diaspora. If I had never heard the word before and I picked up the dictionary and saw that definition, I would take it as any immigrant would fall into that category. However, I don't think that is how it is meant when applied to postcolonial Indian diaspora. Boori Ma from "A Real Durwan" is a great example of the circumstances that displaced people and classified them as diaspora. Boori ma is a 64 year-old woman who takes care of an apartment building in Calcutta. She constantly talks about the losses and pain she suffered from the partition of India, in which she was caught on the opposite side from her family. Mrs. Sen from "Mrs. Sen's" is unspeakably sad about leaving India, as her emotions are released at the mere sound of the country's name. Not all of the diaspora are this unhappy about their displacement and estrangement from their country though, Mr. and Mrs. Das from "Interpreter of Maladies" seem to be indifferent to their Americanization, though they do have their own personal problems. Diaspora, based on interpretation from *Interpreter of Maladies* (no pun intended), is the group of people displaced from their homes because of some devastation in that country.

To be honest when I hear the word "hybrid" I don't typically think of humans at all. I usually think of animals, mythological creatures, and cross-species breeding; however, I can see how the word would be applied to humans in relation to ancestry. The *OED* defines hybrid as "[a] person of mixed descent or mixed ancestry" ("Hybrid"), though I think it also

applies to a person's culture. For example, Twinkle in "This Blessed House" is a hybrid of Indian and American culture because though hers and her husband's religion is Hindu, she is obsessed with Christianity and the Christian décor they found in their new house. Lilia in "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine" is also a hybrid in culture because though her parents know all about the partition of India and try to tell her that Mr. Pirzada is not technically Indian, she still views him as an Indian. Her family also participates in many of the American traditions, like Jack-o-lanterns for Halloween. Hybridity, based on the definition of "hybrid" and the hybrid characters in *Interpreter of Maladies*, is the mix of not only ancestry, but also culture and religion.

I struggled with defining the word "creole." The *OED* defines it as "a descendant of European settlers or (occas.) of Black slaves, in the W. Indies or Central or S. America; a descendant of French settlers in the southern US, esp. Louisiana. Also *loosely*, a person of mixed European and Black descent" ("Creole"). The word seemed more specific to Black heritage rather than Indian, and I still don't particularly like the word for describing postcolonial India. Even after searching Galileo and Google Scholar I was really only able to find sources defining creole as the *OED* does and as a language. For this reason, I would actually like to throw "creole" out of the word list describing postcolonial India and instead look at postcolonialism itself, which isn't in the *OED* at all.

*Postcolonial Theory* by Leela Gandhi defines postcolonialism as “a theoretical resistance to the mystifying amnesia of the colonial aftermath. It is a disciplinary project devoted to the academic task of revisiting, remembering and, crucially, interrogating the colonial past” (Ghandi 4). This tells me that other than the literal definition of the period after colonialism, it is also an academic movement specifically geared toward making sure that colonial India is remembered.

Lahiri’s writing explores the themes of diaspora, hybridity, homelessness, and really the idea that you’re abandoned and lost to your home. These feelings often come from the devastation that occurs after the clash of cultures, and the combination of cultures thereafter. The partition of India started a wave of diaspora and hybridity, sometimes breaking people’s lives and families in two, and others simply displacing them, but everyone was affected by it either way.

Works Cited

“Creole.” *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, Vol. 1: 1993, pg. 547, Def. A1.

Print.

“Diaspora.” *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, Vol. 1: 1993, pg. 663. Print.

“Hybrid.” *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, Vol. 1: 1993, pg. 1285, Def. 2.

Print.