



Identity and cultural conflicts in Jhumpa Lahiri's novel, The Namesake

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Abstract:

Jhumpa Lahiri's novel, *The Namesake* describes the struggles and hardships of a Bengali couple who immigrate to the United States to form a life outside of everything they are accustomed to. It explores the concepts of cultural identity, of rootlessness, of tradition and family expectations in a lucid and elegant prose. In her fiction, memory, nostalgia, loss and longing are some of the prominent themes. Her stories tell of people who have moved countries in the hope of a better life, but past remains there as a shadow to remind them of their original roots. This novel is a documentary of such experiences, a glowing miniature of a tiny family making the voyage between two worlds.

The aim of the paper would be to analyse first and second generation immigrant characters in the novel, *The Namesake* and explore complex cultural relations and identity crisis from the contemporary cultural discourse. The paper would be an attempt to examine the conflicting attractions of the American way of life and the tug of traditions between two different cultures. The kind of relationship these characters develop over the years in an alien land, and how the inherited values always determine one's cultural identity.

Key Words: Namesake identity cultural clash immigration

Introduction:

Borefore, dealing exclusively with my topic, I would like to carry a brief analysis of two young contemporary female diasporic writers-Jhumpa Lahiri and Kiran Desai. These two share many common cultural themes in their works. Both have achieved fame and glory globally. Jhumpa Lahiri Pulitzer prize winner of 2000 is regarded as the original and innovative writer of the



diasporic dilemma and dreams. Similarly, Kiran Desai, a Booker prize winner of 2006 possesses a unique power of creativity, showing the tales and tragedies of individuals and families of different cultures and religions placed either in the backdrop of rural India or in the tempting and promising cities of America. The postmodern fragmentation is revealed through their protagonists wavering attitudes toward Englishness, and self imposed departures from their homeland and comparisons between adopted- mother country. Each of the Jhumpa Lahiri and Kiran Desai's works expand rather than limits the readers engagement with the text. In their works, both reader and character exit the world they know and move towards a mutual goal, the reader engaging with a narrative plot while the character crosses a geographical one.

Lahiri was born in London in 1967 to Indian parents, and she migrated with them to the United States two years later. Her narratives are a mixture of fiction and autobiography filtered through a dual lens, even though she confessed that while growing up in Rhode Island in the 1970s, she felt neither Indian nor American: "Like many immigrant offspring I felt intense pressure to be two things, loyal to the old world and fluent in the new, approved of on either side of the hyphen". Looking back, I see that this was generally the case. But my perception as a young girl was that I fell short at both ends, shuttling between two dimensions that had nothing to do with one another" ("My Two Lives" 2006).

Discussion:

Culture and identity are frequently linked together, but they should not be thought as exactly the same. Culture represents the 'macro-pattern'-the big picture. It includes the customs, attitudes, beliefs, traditions and rituals of a society. Identity represents the smaller, 'more micro' meaning we have as individuals. The sociologist Raymond Williams, in his book, Key Words: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society says:

"Culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in English language. This is partly so because of its intricate historical development in several European languages, but mainly because it has now come to be used for important concepts in several distinct intellectual disciplines and in several distinct and in compatible systems of thought"



Mathew Arnold's secular and humanistic view of the culture is that "which seeks to do away with the classes to make the best that has been thought and known in the world" (Arnold, qtd in Contemporary diasporic literature)

Eliot in his essay, "Notes towards the Definition of Culture," views contemporary condition of third world migration as:

"The migrations of modern times . . . have transplanted themselves according to some social, religious, economic or political determination, or some peculiar mixture of these. There has therefore been something in the removals analogous in nature to religious schism. The people have taken with them only a part of the total culture. . . . The culture which develops on the new soil must therefore be bafflingly alike and different from the parent culture: it will be complicated sometimes by whatever relations are established with some native race and further by immigration from other than the original source. In this way, peculiar types of culture-sympathy and culture-clash appear." (Eliot, qtd in Question of Cultural Identity 55)

Stephen Greenblatt views "culture as a complex whole" and illuminating the cultural significance of literature involves more than reconstructing these boundaries. Culture may be a web of constraint, but at the same time it "functions as the regulator and guarantor of movement." Although limitations must be present in a culture, these must also have enough elasticity to allow movement and adaptation. This elasticity allows a culture to change over a period of time. Furthermore, cultures survive only because of the experimentation and improvisation of societies. A society must tolerate and even encourage mobility to determine what attitudes, activities and aspirations fulfill its needs and foster its success. For instance, a culture may need to experiment with tyranny to realize it needs democracy. A culture may need to improvise and mediate or modify its constraints to accommodate the diversity of people needed for its work." (Greenblatt, qtd in Stephen Greenblatt, Rutledge)

Stuart Hall, in his essay, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" says that identity is not as transparent and unproblematic as we think it to be. Instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, we should think of it as a product, which is never complete, and is always in process, always constituted within, not outside, representation. Hall defines "cultural identity" to be a matter of "becoming" as well as "being". Cultural identity belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something that already exists, transcending time, place, history, and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything that is historical, they undergo constant transformation (Hall, qtd in Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory).



In light of the above theoretical background I would analyse first and second generation immigrant characters in the novel, *The Namesake*, and would attempt to address the issues of identity and cultural collision through textual references. As has been demonstrated throughout this paper, diasporas are in a continuous state of formation and reformation. Their situation can change, often dramatically, in response to tumultuous events and more subtle changes in religious epicentres, homelands and hostlands.

In *The Namesake*, identity is illustrated by intensely examining the importance of one's background, name and culture. The main characters in the story try to uncover the reasoning behind their lineage, which they believe will lead to the discovery of their self with respect to the society they are born and raised. The novel describes the struggles and hardships of a Bengali couple who immigrate to the United States to form a life outside of everything they are accustomed to. The story begins when Ashoke and Ashima leave Calcutta to settle in America. When the novel opens we find that Ashima is pregnant and has two weeks left for her due delivery. She is struggling with abdomen sensations and pain. She calls her husband Ashoke, a doctoral candidate in electrical engineering at MIT. She does not say his name instead utters interrogative that has come to replace it, which translates roughly as "Are you listening to me?" (Lahiri, 2). The tone of the novel is set in very first chapter that the kind of social customs and habits which were part of their cultural heritage in India would directly come in contrast with the customs and rituals of the foreign land. Ashima never thinks of her husband's name, when she thinks of her husband, even though she knows perfectly well what it is. She does not utter his name because it is not the type of thing Bengali wives do. (Lahiri, 2). When Ashima is admitted in the hospital, her inherent ties with mother country still remain visible. She thinks that "it is strange that her child will be born in a place most people enter either to suffer or to die" (Lahiri, 4). It was the first time in her life that she slept alone surrounded by strangers. She struggles to negotiate her acquired cultural identity as she is not yet accustomed with an alien culture. She is lost in her conservative views, and wishes she could have been in Calcutta, where women go home to their parents to give birth away from husband and in-laws (Lahiri, 3). Through a series of events finally Ashima gives birth to a son. The traditional naming process in their families is to have an elder who will give the new baby a name. They write a letter to Ashima's



grandmother back in India. The letter never arrives, and soon after, the grandmother dies. As per Bengali culture Ashoke suggests the name of Gogol, in honour of the famous Russian author Nikolai Gogol, to be the baby's pet name, never intended to be used by anyone other than family. Entering kindergarten, the Gangulis inform their son that he will be known as Nikhil at school. The five-year old objects and with the intervention of school administration he was admitted in the school as Gogol. This was the beginning of his conflict within and outside.

The characters in the novel suffer from cultural clash as well as identity crisis. Ashok and Ashima are more prone to these clashes. As they have spent most of their life in India, they feel more attracted to their ancestral land than this new adopted land. Gogol, who is born in America makes several American friends and is more adoptable to the surrounding world. All these characters are neither fully Indian nor American, instead they exist somewhere in between these two worlds. The cultural customs, ideas and habits that are inherently present in every person cannot be substituted with the customs and ideas of other person, but due to the prevailing situation one has to adopt the new customs as a mid-way between two extremes.

The immigrant characters in the novel constantly undergo the process of imitation, adaptation and transformation. They struggle to maintain a balance between the Indian tradition and new ways of life in the foreign land. This is the plight of diaspora communities. In building new life in a different world something must be destroyed. Ganguli's although have build a new world but they have lost the scent and fragrance of their old tradition.

Ashima, during her initial stay in an alien land, was very worried about loss of cultural identity. She was even terrified to raise a child in a country where she is related to no one, where she knows so little, where life seems tentative and spare (Lahiri, 6). The only solace to her was to read *Desh* magazine. The Bengali printed pages, slightly rough, would give perpetual comfort to her. (Lahiri, 6). As in every society traditional values bind people together, they are part of one's identity. So these values must be preserved. But it is also a fact that change is the order of the world. Without change societies are bound to perish. Ashima, also has to change, she has to retain both traditions in such a way that neither of these would become a burden for her. Her complete change of traditional values would also mean a betrayal. Her grandmother would never think that Ashima would eat beef or wear skirts or cut off her hair or forget her family the



moment she landed in Boston. (Lahiri, 37). But with the passage of time, she compromised between two different cultures, a compromise which she had to do. This negotiation and elasticity as per Greenblatt allows a culture to change over a period of time. She has made way for a culture/identity which belongs neither to her homeland nor to the host land. Her transformation, whether voluntary or involuntary, makes her the creature of mixed identity. Furthermore, cultures survive only because of the experimentation and improvisation of societies. We notice that Ashima feels very lonely and depressed during her initial stay in the foreign land. “There is no one to feed or entertain or talk to for weeks at a time. At forty-eight she has come to experience the solitude that her husband and son and daughter already know, and which they claim not to mind. “It is not such a big deal,” her children tell her. “Everyone should live on their own at some point, but Ashima feels too old to learn such a skill.”(Lahiri, 161). But during the later years of her life, after the death of her husband, she does a similar compromise with the host culture. So Ashima somehow manages to negotiate between two different cultures. “She does the laundry once a month. She no longer dusts, or notices dust, for that matter. She eats on the sofa, in front of the television, simple meals of buttered toast and dal, a single pot lasting her a week and an omelette to go with it if she has energy to bother. Sometimes she eats the way Gogol and Sonia do when they visit, standing in front of the refrigerator, not bothering to heat up the food in the oven or to put it on a plate.”(Lahiri, 162)

Ashoke, Gogol’s father, is also an important figure in the story. He is a defining character both for the family and for Gogol as the protagonist. His accident in the train in India, his decision and effort in moving to America and his death in America are three ways in which he is important to the novel. Ashoke as an Indian young man moves to America after a suggestion given to him by a stranger on the train in India who had the experience of living in England for a while: Although, this meeting was short - the man died in the train accident a few hours after they met- the idea given to Ashoke remained with him until he eventually made the journey to America together with his wife. After the train accident, he envisioned another sort of future. He imagined walking away from the place in which he was born and in which he had nearly died. (Lahiri, 20). To realize his dream, he secretly applied to continue his engineering abroad. When he was accepted with full fellowship, his parents protested. “We already lost you once” (Lahiri, 20). His



siblings pleaded, and his mother speechless refused food for three days .We notice that in order to achieve his dream, he has to suffer from the pangs of separation. His family also has to endure the pain of separation. Infact, Ashok’s split life is a documentary of immigrant experience of loss and longing.

Gogol Ganguli, although the Namesake is essentially the story of Gogol Ganguli, there are more characters involved in the novel, for example Gogol’s family members and the girls with whom he has been involved. It is through their perspectives that the story is written. The novel provides more information about Gogol’s parents, Ashima and Ashoke, than his sister Sonia. Among the girlfriends, Maxine and Moushumi have more significance than Gogol’s other previous girlfriends. Maxine is an American girl who does not have a dual aspect to her identity or nationality as opposed to Gogol, and this characteristic of hers provides a deep and informative contrast to Gogol with his sense of difference and multiplicity regarding his identity. Moushumi is Gogol’s wife who in many respects resembles Gogol and is a child to Indian immigrants; however, she is different from him in her own way of perceiving her identity. Nevertheless, all these characters are inseparable parts of the network around Gogol and provide a sufficient lens through which the theme of cultural clash and identity can be dealt with. Gogol hates that his name is both absurd and obscure, that it has nothing to do with who he is, that it is neither Indian nor American but of all things Russian. He hates having to live with it with a pet name turned good name. (Lahiri, 76). It is not the problem with the name, but it is actually the culture that enforces him to locate his identity. It dismays him that his parents choose the weirdest namesake. Leo or Anton he could have lived with. Alexander shortened to Alex, he would have greatly preferred. His name was the only thing that tormented him. He in frustration changes his name to Nikhil but that also did not work. He married Moushumi, a second generation immigrant to find refuge in dual identity. However, she does not adopt Ganguli name, even with a hyphen. Gogol finally realizes the pain his parents would have suffered. He wonders how his parents had done it, dwelling unconnected, in a perpetual state of expectation, of longing. Gogol knows now that his parents had lived their lives in America in spite of what was missing, with a stamina he fears that he does not possess himself. He had spent years maintaining distance from his origins; his parents in bridging that distance as best they could. (Lahiri, 281). Gogol finally believes that



there is no such thing as perfect name. I think that human beings should be allowed to name themselves when they turn eighteen, he adds, “until then pronouns.” (Lahiri, 245)

Conclusion:

Cultural assimilation for immigrants is a complex process in which they not only fully integrate into a new country, but also lose aspects, perhaps their entire heritage too. The assimilation takes place on socioeconomic status, second language attainment and intermarriage. The novel shows that diasporas are always in transformative phase. They keep on assimilating new customs and life styles from the host culture and in the process lose vital aspects of their own culture. The Ganguli’s over the time maintained a balance between two cultures, but the younger generation could not locate their identity in either of the two home-host cultures. They instead inculcate those cultural customs which go beyond nation, history, space and time. The central protagonist Gogol acts as a link between two widely cultures. He is caught between the family expectations of being loyal to the mother land and fluent in the host land. His efforts to change name shows the trauma and frustration of the immigrants living between multiply cultural identities. He therefore adopts a culture that in the words of Eliot is bafflingly alike and different from the parent culture. In this way *The Namesake* is a story of identities. It begins with a migration in the first generation and follows with its specific concerns to the second generation. The family is split; two are Indians and the other two are born in America. The juxtaposition of the different nationalities creates further tensions for the characters involved. As one sees all through the novel, each Ganguli family member is a singular case and unique version who seeks for his or her own real self and tries to answer the question of identity. Although they live together and share much, they still have differences in their life orientation and their experiences with their identities which are mostly related to their Indian-American lives.

There is a marked difference between the first and second generation immigrants in the novel. The first generation immigrants- Ashok and Ashima, suffer from severe identity crisis. They over the period, undergo various adaptations and compromises on social, religious and cultural grounds in order to be the acceptable members of the society. The cultural history which they carry to the adopted land enforces them to shuttle between two horizons and live a life of an enforced other. The first generation immigrants show a dwindling connection to their traditional



culture in the form of food, dress, and language. They invent imaginary homeland through memory. Their adaptation of certain aspects of host culture is a tactic to survive the onslaughts of cultural clash. This is evident by the fact that they do not want Gogol to marry an American girl, Ruth because they do not consider it as a positive step. “You are too young to get involved this way,” Ashoke and Ashima tell him (Lahiri, 117). They have even gone so far as to point out examples of Bengali men they know who’ve married Americans, marriages that have ended in divorce.

The second generation immigrant characters- Gogol and Sonia suffer from different identity crisis. They are more concerned with their rootlessness and mixed biography. They try to build their cultural history in the main stream culture, unlike their parents who show extreme longing for their homeland. Among these two characters Gogol is more sensitive towards his place in the American society. He is less attracted by his parents constant reminders about his roots and role in the society. His identity is what Stuart Hall says, Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything that is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Gogol wanted to re-name himself to get accommodated in the host culture without knowing that identity depends much more on the name. He longed for the things which lure him in the new land while as his parents have longed, all these years, for the people they love in India. (Lahiri, 177)

Thus addressing the theme of immigration, identity, collision of cultures, and the importance of names in *The Namesake*, Jhumpa Lahiri demonstrates how much of a struggle immigration can be. The novel takes the readers deep into the Gangulis' immigrant experience: their puzzlement at and isolation from an alien culture, their loss of connection with families in India, where births and deaths occur apart from them; their seeking old ties in a circle of other Bengali immigrants, several of whom become substitute aunts and uncles to Gogol and his sister, Sonia. According to Dubey, “the immigrant experience is complicated as a sensitive immigrant finds himself or herself perpetually at a transit station fraught with memories of the original home which are struggling with the realities of the new world” (Dubey, qtd in “Jhumpa Lahiri. b.1967: Biography-Criticism”). This is the plight and agony of the diasporas living split lives within the confines of multiple cultures in various parts of the world.



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