

Cultural Conflict in the Diasporic Writings of Jhumpa Lahiri

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ABSTRACT

Today the second generation of post-colonial writers dominate the Indian English fiction. The post-colonial writers started publishing their works in 1980s. The second generation of Indian English writers and specially the women writers like Nayantara Sahgal, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande and Jhumpa Lahiri have also produced the diasporic writings that are concerned with post-colonial issues of socio-political situation, gender discrimination, displacement, a sense of loss and nostalgia, cultural conflict, assimilation and identity crisis. The cultural conflict and its consequent assimilation is the main theme of the fictional world of Jhumpa Lahiri. This paper focuses on the central message – the cultural conflict emanating out of the disturbing life of the protagonists that makes the telling effect on their personal, family and social life, thereby, creating a series of conflicts which is finally resolved into a kind of cultural assimilation whose spectrum will be explored and explained in the context of the novels of Jhumpa Lahiri.

The process of cultural conflict and assimilation must be analysed and interpreted from various angles in terms of the acceptability of the immigrants in the new society, their strife and struggles to adapt to the new culture and its values, power and the innate acumen and efficiency of these incoming people to hammer out a balance between their native values and habits with the culture and society of alien land. Sometimes these immigrants do not find favourable welcome and acceptance in the new environment and consequently, they start living in close proximity to one another to share beliefs and common values. Such living together with common purpose and goal gives rise to ghettos, where the emotional and cultural bonds are strong and the honour and dignity of life is mutually respected. It is generally believed that immigrants in the alien society are accepted and gradually assimilated into the main streams of the society. The people of the same ethnic group make ghettos and start living together in the alien culture. As Oscar Handlin observes in *The Uprooted* about the ghetto culture, "So strangers became friends, no need to ask what antecedents: the ability to communicate with each other was bond enough" (171).

Culture is the sum total of everything that is created and also modified through the behaviour and personality of two or more interacting individuals. This interaction between two individuals of diverse ethnic background precipitates cross-cultural conflict, which is operative at social as well as personal level. While in Nayantara Sahgal cultural-conflict is translated in terms of East-West encounter. Jhumpa Lahiri deals with it at the political and racial level, where the protagonist, who are Indians settled abroad are constantly haunted by the sense of exile.

The immigrant realise that separation from his or her roots means freedom, but it also involves a lot of risk and hazards. Evidently, the danger and insecurity in the new land also means freedom and opportunity. The role and relevance of woman migrating to America is slightly different from their male counter parts. The immigrant women are quick in adapting themselves in a new culture and society and they get new jobs,

pick up the language and acclimatise themselves in a quicker and better way. It is because, the divergent cultural and racial streams of the alien society that is inhabited by racial prejudices and cultural bias. This is what Dr. Sethi and Das Gupta mean when they write:

...apart from the professional meetings, there is very little social acceptance in the first generation (Gupta and Sethi 54).

In America, one noticeable issue faced by the Indian immigrants is their physical features which single them out as Indians or Asians. This feeling of self-alienation brings them together so that they can experience intense personal feelings and assert their Indian identity. These physical traits and the cultural habits make them come close to one another, consequently, they compulsively maintain temples and gurdwaras in every town and city in America. So this process of gradual assimilation is both individual and social. At the individual level the immigrants learn language, adopt the lifestyle of the new country and pick up habits and etiquettes that make them acceptable to the target society. At the social level, the values and customs of the target society are acquired so that you do not feel awkward or a stranger. So, during the process of conflict and assimilation the shift is from value of change to the value of preservation, followed by a shift from individual to the group. As has aptly been said in *The Search for an American Indian Identity*:

Tribal societies represented a priceless asset which could be a source of strength and wisdom for other Americans, a living demonstration of the rich human values of a close knit community. The Indian and the immigrant blended to make diverse contributions to the national life. One would value and interpret the American experience in positive terms (Hertzberg 309).

Jhumpa Lahiri has successfully explored and expressed many aspects of diasporic consciousness and immigrant

experience of dislocations, relocation, pains and problems of the migrant women in her novels. As a result, she has dealt with the ambivalence of their psychic and emotional identity as well as the shock of dislocations at several levels. Today, most of the writings by Indians are full of the post-colonial vision, where the themes of displacement, relocation, a sense of loss and the fractured identity dominate the Indian English fiction. The concept of diaspora which was first used in the classical world had acquired a new importance in the late 20th century with the appearance of the second generation of the Indian English writers, who published their work in 1980s. So, a collective experience of diaspora signifies a group trauma where one constantly thinks of home but lives in exile. The second generation of Indian English writings comprises new texts by women writers, like Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Jhumpa Lahiri and Bharati Mukherjee. The second generation writers have produced diasporic discourses led by Salman Rushdie, where the common ground of discourse is the issue of gender and changing role of woman and society. The central characters in these writings struggle hard to create their own space.

The Namesake is the novel written by Jhumpa Lahiri located in America which carries the protagonist's conflict of culture and their struggles and strife for assimilation. The novel describes the struggles and hardships of Ashok and Ashima, a Bengali couple who migrates from Calcutta to America. Ashoke also leaves his home in pursuit of higher studies and went to America and returns after two years. After two year's stay in the USA he comes back to India, marries a nineteen years old Bengali girl from Calcutta named Ashima, who has no idea or dream of going to a place called Boston so far off from her parents. Ashima's family gives her a number of instructions when she was going with her husband, "not to eat beef or wear skirts or cut off her hair and forget the family the moment when she landed in Boston". (*The Namesake*, 37). Lahiri analysed how the first and second generation trapped between two conflicting cultures with their social and religious differences. Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* is a story about the cultural conflict and assimilation faced by the Indian couple and their America born children.

A frantic search for identity and alienation become their quest that forces them to indulge in communication. This makes the protagonist as one, who is more Indian in abroad than in India. For example in *Namesake* of Lahiri, Ashima the first generation immigrant when moves to an alien land faced the cultural crisis of being an outsider, due to language and dressing, whereas, the second generation immigrant like Gogol, faced the problem of identity, because he is struck between their birth and parent country. For instance Gogol lives between the world of past and present. Although he attempts to escape from the past by disapproving his cultural roots and changing his name, he is someone how connected to his roots. He is uncomfortable with his past. He cannot understand the significance of the name Gogol that his parents chose for him. Rather it is because of the very name, he is being teased by his friend. As a result, when he turns eighteen, he goes into a Massachusetts courtroom and asks the judge to change his name. Gogol thinks that by changing his name to Nikhil he would get rid of his past, but his parents still calls him

by his original name. This shows that a simple name change does not alter the fabric of a person. . Robert Cohen rightly remarks "a member's adherence to a diasporic community is demonstrated by an acceptance of an inescapable link with their past migration history." (*Global Diaspora*, 21).

Jhumpa Lahiri tries to resolve these cross cultural-conflicts in a number of rituals surrounding death. Ashima does not like to display the design on the gravestone made by young Gogol when suddenly his father dies. This refusal also changes the relationship between Sonia and Ashima. So, this theme of cultural conflict in human relationship between couples, families and friends is central in her world of fiction. Since, her characters undergo identity crisis, so through these relationships and identity issues Jhumpa Lahiri not only explores but also explains the sense of isolation and identity. Since Lahiri is a second generation immigrant, who can speak and show comfortably the state of "in betweenness". Due to her deep emotional identification and familiarity with Indian diaspora the readers easily identify with her characters, as it happens in *Namesake*, where the quest for identity in a society treats you as alien even if you were born there.

Later on Gogol came to know about the reality of his name and how it is connected with his father's past. The conclusion is that while interpreting the theme of cultural dilemmas of the migrants Lahiri does not remain confined to the dislocations of migrants in foreign lands alone, rather she presents dislocation as a permanent human condition. Lahiri comments on Ashoke's death in America by saying, "who had forsaken everything, to come in this country, to make a better life, only to die here?" (180). Through this analysis of her novel Jhumpa Lahiri brings alive the picture of the alien and unknown world that is as much a land of opportunities as it is of conflict. Jhumpa Lahiri represents a number of experiences of immigrants that is the challenge of exile, loneliness, sense of alienation, conflict of culture and search for identity. By analysing the novel we can understand how the first generation immigrant suffers in an alien country. Although, immigration is never a completely unpleasant experience as a few immigrants quickly succeed in assimilating themselves with new geographical, social and cultural environment, but for many this assimilation is neither a smooth sailing nor a cake walk, as they are trapped in the quagmire of cultural conflict that inevitably leads to a sense of loss, feeling of nostalgia and their illusion of having assimilated the alien culture completely. In *The Namesake*, Ashima shows her positive growth and attitude by accepting USA after a span of period.

There is a double sense of loss reflected in the writings of diasporic writers: one is their severed bond with the motherland and the other is their invariable struggle in their attempt to belong to the alien culture and society. Such post-colonial diasporic writings very prominently address conflicts and problems arising out of the transnational hiatus generated by the immigrant community oscillating between the attractions of 'home' and aspirations of 'house'. A quick survey of the literature on Indian diaspora like the writings of Salman Rushdie, Jhumpa Lahiri, V.S. Naipaul and Bharati Mukherjee reveal that the cultural conflict, social alienation and double perspective are deeply rooted in cultural hybridity, ethnicity,

migration and the resultant marginalization. As the writings of Bharati Mukherjee and Jhumpa Lahiri show that the immigrating character is caught between the two cultures and consequently suffers from double consciousness that eventually takes him away from his parent home, culture, language and roots.

This novel is a beautiful artistic account of the cultural conflict between Indian culture and western culture, as well as

modern outlook and traditional way of living. So, instead of being merely a study of psychological drives and subconscious intuitions to shift the right from the wrong, the dark from the light and the temporal from the spiritual the book also becomes a powerful exploration of cultural conflict and repeated attempts on the part of the protagonist to assimilate these contradictions and gapes so as to lead and live a life of her choice and assert her identity.

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