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Search for Identity in the writings of Jhumpa Lahiri

Suneeta Rathore

M. Phil Research Scholar,
Department of English
Dr. C. V. Raman University

Dr. Om Prakash Tiwari

Associate Professor
Department of English
Dr. C. V. Raman University,
Kota, Bilaspur

Abstract

Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* is about characters that are in search of their individuality which dwell between Indian and American culture. The culture of human beings that is deeply rooted in land its features. *Interpreter of Maladies* is a collection of short stories written by Jhumpa Lahiri describing displaced personae. It's a story of Ashima and Ashok Ganguli who leave India for the better opportunities in America and about their children Gogol and Sonia. The immigrants lead a double Identity, and therefore, feel Suspicious and fearful towards the new culture in years of Settlements in a new Country. Their children are born in the new world but they belong to their Native Country.

Keywords: Identity, Existence, Migration, Social engineering, Communication

Jhumpa Lahiri is an American writer of Indian Origin. She Belong to the second generation of migrants. At present she lives in the US with her husband and her two children. However, she has become a part of the literary landscape of India as she writes her novels sometimes in India, as such can be counted as an Indian Writer in English. The Pulitzer is not the first Honour to come Lahiri's way. The title story, *Interpreter of Maladies* (2000), has been selected for both the O. Henry Award and The Best American Short Stories.

The Namesake opens when Asima Ganguli, a young bride, is about to deliver her first child in a hospital in Massachusetts. Her husband, Ashoke, is an engineering student at the Massachusetts Institute of technology (MIT). While she prepares to give birth to the baby, she understands her terrible loneliness. In spite of Ashoke's endearing presence, she misses her relatives and friends in Calcutta, for childbirth in Calcutta is not a private happening. It involves a whole Lot to people who comfort the pregnant mother with both words of advice and of solace. Being in a state of Ione Liness in the United States, Ashima has to battle

against language as well as cultural barriers. To quote Spivak here, she is like “one woman teetering on the socle mouvant of the history of the vanishing present, running after “culture” on the run, failure guaranteed” (Spivak 359). When a healthy baby is born Ashoke names him Gogol as the hospital authorities pressurize him to name the child immediately. He chooses Gogol as the name for his child as Nikolai Gogol is his favourite Russian author and also because in a train accident when Ashoke is rendered immobile owing to a severe back injury, it is a page from a novel written by Gogol that attracts the attention of the search party. In one sense, but for Gogol, Ashoke would have died in the accident. When the child arrives at threshold of manhood he hates the name Gogol, in spite of Ashoke’s reasons for naming him so. The parents give him a Traditional Bengali name Nikhil, which is used in the public sphere. Nikhil goes to Yale and this creates a literal and a symbolic distance between Nikhil and his parents. Becoming thoroughly Americanized, Nikhil is exasperated with the tradition-bound lives of his parents. Nikhil gets a job in New York. But he is dissatisfied with it because he wants to be an independent architect. Spiritually restless, Nikhil dates American girls and deliberately keeps away from home. He still hates the name Gogol. Soon, Nikhil moves in to live with Maxine, an American woman whom he met at a party. Gogol introduces Maxine to his parents, however, Ashima does not take a liking to Maxine. This further creates a rift between the son and his mother. Maxine’s parents accept him as their son and Nikhil feels that he is more comfortable in Maxine’s house than in his own. But shortly after this, Gogol’s father Ashoke dies of a heart attack while he is working for a project in Ohio. The death of his father impacts Gogol so much that he prefers to be alone most of the time. Maxine attempts to break the ice but fails in her attempt. Gogol breaks off the relationship with Maxine and prefers to stay with his mother and sister Sonia. Gogol is made to meet a Bengali girl by name Moushumi, who is heartbroken because an American called Graham had promised to marry her but had cheated her finally. After a few meetings, Gogol and Moushumi are attracted to one another and decided to get married. But their marriage is a disaster as Nikhil soon realizes that Moushumi is having an extra-marital affair. After the divorce, Gogol remains alone. Ashima has decided to live in India and US, trying to make the best of both worlds. Sonia has decided to get married to an American by name Ben. Gogol, at last, has begun to like his name as he understands why his father was very particular about this name. Just like how the novel by Gogol literally saves the life of Ashoke during the train accident, now it is the name Gogol that saves Nikhil’s life emotionally and spiritually as he is able to contend with his loneliness with a sense of equanimity.

They belong to two cultures but in reality not to anyone. They have to put their names in such a way which seem to fit in both the cultures. Thus, my purpose in this paper is to show how the immigrant’s children went to please their parents and also fit themselves in a new world despite their divided identity, words cultural conflict, second generation. A society culture defines how its members communicate and cooperate with each other. It’s learned behaviour. The basic elements of culture are social structure, language, communication,

religion and values. Basic to every society is its social structure, the whole background that bounds the role of individuals with the culture and individual's liberty of movement with the society. The quest for Cultural identity arises in Lahiri's writings. India has no single culture. Besides many cultures have crossed and blended here, and produced a hybridity in India which makes it unique the Indian culture identity has acquired a diverse structure by modern generation. Cultural mirror is a learned conduct that is spread from one member of a society to another. Some elements of culture. These tenets provide only partial aid to the second generation, however, as their own identities remain inextricably tied to their national affiliation as Americans. As the second generation by definition was born in the United States or has been raised in this country from a young age, it is not surprising that their cultural identity is strongly influenced by their status as Americans. Yet the identities of the second generation rarely enact the dualism suggested above in the existence of strong ties to two cultural entities.

The second generation exists in a liminal space of cultural borderlands between the United States and their family's country of origin. The second generation is constantly negotiating their understanding of themselves, striving to balance, if not also integrate, their cultural roots and their American lifestyles. Yet as often as this group may celebrate having "two homelands"- the purported ideal of the immigrant family- it also experiences a dual alienation; for these children of immigrants observe a largely static representation of their cultural inheritance in their daily lives. Critics such as Stuart Hall have eschewed the notion that culture is a fixed site of meaning, or simply "common historical experiences and shared cultural codes which provide us, as 'one people; with stable unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning" (Hall "Cultural Identity and Difference" 393). Prashad defines culture as "a living set of social relation" rather than a "timeless trait" that could be passed from one generation to next (112). The physical and psychological distance from cultural forms that the second generation experiences precludes a complete identification with their "roots." Concomitantly, the second generation differs from the white majority.

In another story 'When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine', the couple also grows by without invitation; (Lahiri, 24) The company loving are unable to terms with the detached way of modern life. Particularly for traditional, domestic women like Mrs. Sen, it is all the more inconvenient. The part alien, part native selves of Mrs. Sen blur her idea of belongingness. She cannot decide which place she belongs to. She feels more intimate with India. She has a collection of souvenirs to preserve the homeland memories. There is a recorded cassette with her people's voices on it, some sarees, letters, a curved blade used to cut vegetables, etc. At times, she is hopelessly lost in an emotional vacuum. Once she gets the news that her sister has given birth to a baby. How much she longs to see the new born. But she cannot it. These wistful recollections of the local life are a ready evidence of the restless state of the migrant mind. She is unfit and unprepared for this new world.

Lahiri, in both of her works *Interpreter of Maladies* and *The Namesake* struggles with characters that are trapped wandering between two worlds, generation immigrants find it hard to let go of their culture and traditions and they fight back to carry on with the environment, which they are second generation immigrants have in some way or other adjusted and assimilated themselves into the folds of the new culture even if they feel a pull towards their native land. Her stories are recounted in fashions that merge economy of idiom that communicate the involvedness of the plot and characters as much by the disguised as by the declared. Tight fitted with words, yet awfully persuasive, she intertwines illustrated images for the reader in a rational approach. Further, an ear for discourse, a far discourse, a sense of novel metaphors and a judicious expressive talent permeate Lahiri's text with elegance. I can securely affirm that Jhumpa Lahiri thrives in fusing the theme of migration and dislocation to that of individual relations. She illustrates her characters sprouting in the center of a new crossbreed culture, Indo-American awareness. This new age susceptibility gives them a separate self in the world. This is my response to the concern which looms large among the academia today. In this context I would quote the concept note of a seminar which I attended recently on diaspora writing: "When one looks at diasporic writing, one comes across tremendous creativity, heteroglossia, hybridity (mostly positive) and linguistic experimentation. Concerns touching upon race, ethnicity, belonging, otherness (as well as 'othering') gender, subalternity, voices do come in most of the time and that is a refreshing departure from the earlier more or less monolithic Anglo- American- centric, of Euro-centric fare which one worked with a few decades back." The point of dialogue was, "Is it a return to the roots or a re-alignment in the wake of a blending of two different world orders?" In case of Jhumpa Lahiri, it is a curious amalgamation of both. To rationalize this dialogue, I would like to quote Lahiri from one of her recent published article in the Newsweek. During this period Jhumpa Lahiri from one of her recent essays published in the Newsweek. During this period Jhumpa Lahiri had been working on her novel *Unaccustomed Earth*: "Indian-American' has been a constant way to describe me. Less constant is my relationship to the term. When I was growing up in Rhode Island in the 1970 I felt neither Indian nor American. Like many immigrant offspring I felt intense pressure to be tow thing, 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." The new Indian expatriate writers like Bharti Mukherjee, Rohinton Mistry, Uma Parameswaran, Ashish Gupta, Kiran Desai, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Anjana Appachana, Shauna Singh Baldwin, Jhumpa Lahiri, and a host of other are the best examples. Simple as their plots might appear to be, they are subtle open ended and often indefinite. Cross cultural outlook or attitudes define the outline of Lahiri's anxiety, multiplicity and inwardness to the literature of East Indian experience.

Multiculturalism has led to a true society of equals and making the society to culture the spirit of tolerance respect towards others, which is not a sign of weakness, but of strength. Lahiri's stories depict the multicultural style especially with the second generation

immigrants. These second-generation Immigrants become the perfect bilingual and bicultural in their linguistic gaining and cultural assimilation. In the novel Sonia gets married to half-Chinese boy called Ben, and Moushumi who does not fit into any one culture or country as she has acquired a global identity. This shows that the immigrants are exploring new identities through the possibility of international routes where the whole world will become a single soul.

Climbing the ladder of success in a host country is not an easy task when. The immigrants should have great courage and ability. Some of our Indian immigrants initially start from the lower rungs and later they rapidly climb up the ladder of success and reach their destiny. It is a matter of great pride that our Indians are now heading large banks, airlines, consultancy firms, software companies and also establishing their own enterprise. In Lahiri's stories, the characters are all well become a Vice President to his company, Ashoke works as an Engineer in Optics and even the second generation immigrants are also well established in the host country. Though out each of her stories there is a theme of hardship, love, tradition, alienation, nostalgia, identity crisis, in-between condition and multicultural life style. Lahiri also depicts the importance of family which is the most important part of our life and which plays a major role in helping us adjust to the new environment. In one of the short stories, Lahiri being a second-generation immigrant she becomes the perfect voice of her immigrant characters. She is abundantly admired for the works in which she portrays the characters drawn from all over the world –India, United States, U. K., and other Common wealth countries. Her style of language is spontaneous with minute details. Her smooth use of language makes her communication very lucid in all her stories. Her stories, which are set in India and America symmetrically, establish the Indo-American cultural link. She herself suffers from in-between condition just like Gogol in the novel.

In conclusion, Ashoke and Ashima's the US has not been a happy one; though they have earned some money, they have no joy. Ashima has to be a widow at an early age. Ashoke dies an anonymous death with no loved ones nearby. Gogol is dating not only young girls but also a married woman. His identity as Indian is questionable; his behavior, thought born to Indian parents, is American. Sonia, Gogol's sister alone seems to be level-headed; she may marry her American boy-friend Ben and settle down in life. Since Gogol is hero of the novel. Lahiri has not shown much interest in Sonia. She is not a fully developed character. In so many ways Gogol's family life is a string of accidents.

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