

Conflict of Identities in Second Generation Diaspora in *Jhumpa Lahiri's the Namesake*

Abstract

Being the world's most prevalent phenomenon, extensive diaspora has resulted into multicultural societies. In this age of globalization, cultural boundaries have got diluted. But the dilution of cultures has led to issues of identity. In the context of India, diaspora in the last century was mainly for academic pursuits or economic gains, either towards the middle east or to the western countries, particularly the US. Jhumpa Lahiri, who herself is an Indian expatriate, settled in New York, has raised the same issue of identity crisis in her much acclaimed novel *the Namesake*. A diaspora community faces a clash of opposing cultures. They suffer from the feeling of alienation. In the process of assimilation and acculturation in a completely different cultural environment, they make efforts to accept, to adjust, to adapt and to adopt the alien identity. The pains of conflicts affect the flow of life at every stage. This condition of perpetual friction and conflict is being depicted in the novel *the Namesake*. Jhumpa Lahiri's observation is very authentic and genuine. This paper would focus on the conflicts of identity in the second generation of the diaspora community in the novel *the Namesake* by Jhumpa Lahiri.

Keywords: Existence, Diaspora, Identity, Conflicts, Dilemma, Culture.

Introduction

Emigration or the movement of a person out of a national region is a global phenomenon. This movement beyond the boundaries of not only nations but also culture and emotional roots, entails a variety of national and individual concerns. These cosmopolitan concerns have been articulated through media, cinema, art and writings etc. The literary world is rich with the writings which address the issues of diaspora community. India being the second largest populated country in the world occupies a significant place in diasporic scenario. According to a latest survey on international migrant trends, India's population living abroad is the largest in the world with 16 million people living outside the country. Writers both from India and of Indian origin settled in foreign countries have expressed the diasporic concerns in their literary writings. Writings of the diaspora present the individual concerns of acculturation and assimilation in an alien land. Many Indian English writers such as Salman Rushdie, Bharati Mukherjee, Amitav Ghosh, Rohinton Mistry, Anita Desai and Jhumpa Lahiri have established themselves as writers in the tradition of Indian diaspora.

Aim of the Study

Aim of the present research paper is to highlight the conflicts and concerns of second generation diaspora. In the present age of globalization, diaspora emerges as a major human concern and it entails various issues. Identity conflict is one of them. This research paper brings out an analysis of this issue in context of Jhumpa Lahiri's much acclaimed novel *The Namesake*.

Main Text of the Study

Jhumpa Lahiri is much acclaimed as a writer belonging to the category of Indian diaspora community. She depicts the agony of Identity in her writings. Jhumpa Lahiri was born in London to a Bengali Indian emigrant family from the state of Bengal. Her family moved to United States when she was only two. Lahiri considers herself American, stating "I was not born here but I might as well have been." Since she herself is a second generation expatriate, her portrayal of characters in writing is



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genuine and authentic. Her much appreciated novel *the Namesake* (2003) was selected as one of the best books of the year by USA Today and Entertainment Weekly. It was also the New York Times' notable book, a Los Angeles Times book prize finalist. The novel was also made into a film by famous director and producer Mira Nair bearing the same name. The novel *the Namesake* brings forth the anguish and dilemma of Indian people who have migrated to other countries to seek economic gain and academic achievements. The novel revolves around the life of a Bengali family. The very first chapter depicts the year 1968 when Ashima in her last month of pregnancy still craves for the food which she was habitual to eat in Calcutta back in India. Ashima and Ashok moved United States just after their marriage. Ashok was a doctoral candidate in Electrical Engineering at MIT. Though they have left India to lead the rest of their life in USA, their emotional attachment with the land of their birth is very strong. Their will to carry forward the sanskars and traditions of their Bengali culture is not weakened in the land of freedom and individualism. This adherence to the love and respect for the tradition is much observed in the character of Ashima. Ashima reflects the pain of getting uprooted in alien land. She stands for the existential angst of first generation diaspora. She does not want to change her identity and continues wearing traditional Bengali saree. Even after 18 months of her arrival in Boston she reads the tattered copy of *Desh* magazine that she had brought to read on her plane ride to Boston and still cannot bring herself to throw it away. The attachment to the magazine represents the attachment to her own language and culture. Ashima pities her son because he has entered into the world without having any relative around him as Lahiri writes:

Without a single grand parents or parent or uncle or aunt at her side the baby's birth, like most everything else in America, feels somehow haphazard, only half true. As she strokes, suckles and studies her son, she cannot help but pity him.

Ashima and Ashok's attachment to the tradition is depicted when they don't want to name their child without consent of Ashima's grandmother. When they are asked if they don't like grandmother's chosen name they both shake their heads and reveal "it has never occur to either of them to question Ashima's grand mother's selection, to disregard an elder's wishes in such a way." Finally the child is named as Gogol by Ashok. Ashima approves it because the name stands not only for her sons life but her husband's. Ashima and Ashok try hard to hold on to their Indian identity. "They make a point of driving into Cambridge with children when the Apu Trilogy plays at the Orsen welles, or when there is a Kathakali dance performance or a sitar recital at Memorial Hall. When Gogol is in third grade, they send him to Bengali language and culture lessons every Saturday, held in the home of one of their friends." The strong bond with one's culture and identity becomes frail and sometimes its at the verge of getting lost when the next generation cannot

understand its relevance. Yet the dilemma to set a balance between two cultures and identity causes existential angst. Highlighting the dilemma of the two generations, Paramjit S. judge comments, "the old generation begins to perceive itself as the custodians of the social values and normative patterns, customs and traditions. Conversely new generation considers these values and norms outdated." (2015). Similar conflict of interests and concerns is apparent in the relationships among the characters of *the Namesake*.

The diasporic scenario with Gogol, Moushumi and Sonia, the second generation expatriates, is different to the one with Ashima and Ashok the first generation immigrants. Being herself a second generation immigrant writer, Jhumpa Lahiri has given an accurate and genuine account of the existential dilemma and identity conflicts in characters of Gogol, Moushumi and Sonia. In an interview Lahiri once conceded about her situation as a second generation diaspora in America:

I have somehow inherited a sense of exile from my parents, even though in many ways i am so much more American than they are....I think that for immigrants, the challenges of exile, the loneliness, the constant sense of alienation, the knowledge of and longing for a lost world, are more explicit and distressing than for their children. But it bothered me growing up, the feeling that there was no single place to which i feel belonged.

The same conflict of identity is reflected in the character of Gogol, Maushumi and Sonia. For these characters assimilation and acculturation is easier than their parents. Though their parents provide them the opportunity to create an attachment with their culture but they can not have that much involvement because they find the American lifestyle more comfortable and free. Lahiri has depicted character of Gogol as exemplifying the life of constant conflict between the inner and the outer world. Gogol's early childhood passes with experience of both Bengali and American culture. Ashima teaches him to memorize the four line children's poem by Tagore and also the names of the deities. Till the age of five, he eats Bengali food and is almost surrounded by Bengali environment. When he is admitted in kindergarten, he is unwilling to go to school. He does not want to be called 'Nikhil' the name which his parents have finalized for a good name for Gogol but the child only likes to be called Gogol. Finally Gogol becomes his good name. He begins to assimilate American culture as he grows up. He starts liking for hotdog, mayonnaise, Tuna fish. Lahiri writes:

At his insistence, she concedes and make him American dinner once a week as a treat, Shake'n Bake chicken or Hamburger Helper prepared with ground.....(71).

Gogol is being sent to Bengali language and cultural lessons every Saturday but his parents are unsettled when they found that their children sound just like Americans. When Gogol is eleven, he becomes conscious of the peculiarity of his name. He begins to detest the name when it seems to make him

stand apart from the rest of the classmates. He hates his name because it does not mean anything in Indian language. Name plays a role in providing identity to an individual but Gogol Ganguli does not find any reason to identify himself with this odd name. Though he constantly doubts about the name, his father is very proud of his name because it was volume of Gogol's writing that he was reading when the terrible train accident took place. He believes that the few pages that he clutched in his hand have saved his life. He remembers:

He was still clutching a single page of *the Overcoat* crumpled tightly in his fist, and when he raised his hand, the wad of paper dropped from his fingers. 'Wait' he heard a voice cry out, 'The fellow by the book, i saw him move.'(24)

But Gogol is unaware of this incident. For him it is unacceptable that it is the surname of a Russian writer. This does not make any sense to him. It sounds ridiculous to his ears lacking gravity and dignity. But a person's identity gets inextricably absorbed to his name. It becomes difficult for a person to remove that familiarity by just changing a name. When he talks about his idea of getting his name changed, his father's replies "what's done is done, it will be a hassleGogol has become your good name." But Gogol was hellbent to remove his identity with a senseless name. He found that changing a name is not very unusual. A large number of people have changed their name. After he has got his name changed legally, it seems that he has got a different identity with the name 'Nikhil'. With his new name, he finds it easy to assimilate the culture of the land of his birth. His constant state of dilemma finds relief and he loses his ties with his identity as an Indian Bengali boy. He could not date anyone in his school, never attended dances and parties because with his name Gogol he was still in manner of a traditional Bengali boy. As Lahiri writes:

His parents don't find it strange that their son does not date..... They have never been on a date in their lives and therefore they see no reason to encourage Gogol (96).

Gogol goes through a different experience than that of his parents. While they are still respectful and observant to their Bengali lifestyle, Gogol lives a life like any other American Teenager. He starts smoking, spends nights at friends house, drives to a neighbourhood town to see the Rocky Horror Show but his parents don't suspect him. With a new name and new identity he is able to flirt with girls. Unconsciously he adheres to the view that his confidence will only get boost up with his identity of an American boy. Though he was born in America, he is different. He faces a different existential fragmentation. He identifies himself neither with his Bengali culture nor to the American. He suffers from an identity conflict. His parents expect him to be settled on a profession that can earn him security and respect. But with a new identity as Nikhil he does not have to mind what they say. As Lahiri writes:

But now that he is Nikhil, it is easier to ignore hisparents, to tune out their concerns and plans (188).

With his new life as Nikhil he does everything that 'Gogol' could never have done. "It is as Nikhil that he loses his virginity at a party at Ezra Stiles..." It is also complicated affair for Nikhil because he feels like he is wearing two masks of identity as if acting the part of twins in a play. Even when his parents call him by his new name, he feels that they are not related to him. He meets Ruth who is from a different culture. Her parents are divorced. Her father lives with her stepmother. He cannot imagine coming from such background. When he describes his own parents and upbringing, it feels bland by comparison. Gogol does never share his experience in India with his American friends. It is because he does not feel any attachment with Indian- ness in him. His fascination with American culture forces him to undermine his parental culture. He had an affair with Ruth. But his parents do not want Gogol to involve in any such affair. They warn him saying "he is too young to get involved in this way". They have the observation that love affairs and marriages are only successful when one is involved with somebody in one's own community. They give examples of their Bengali men who married to Americans and finally divorced.

After Ruth, Gogol gets involved with Maxine. He spends much good time with Maxine but she also represents, for him, a life very different from his own. Maxine does not always understand Gogol's family's traditions and she finds herself uncomfortable there. After Ashok's death, Gogol pulls away from Maxine, leaving her out of the mourning ceremony. They soon separate. Thus Gogol's relationship with American women is not successful. It was because of the inherent cultural differences and outlook. He could not find himself completely prepared to marry neither Ruth nor Maxine. He got separated with both the women because he could not identify himself with their culture and lifestyle. Finally, he marries to Moushumi, a Bengali girl. Gogol was very happy with his decision of marrying a girl whom her mother has chosen for him. He was confident about the strength of their relationship because they both share the same cultural background. He thought that like her mother, Moushumi will also prove to be a perfect wife and mother. But Gogol's marriage is not successful with her. The conflicts of cultures and lifestyle results in the divorce between them.

Like Gogol, Moushumi also faces conflicts of identity and existential dilemma. The American lifestyle creates problem in the stability of relationship. The character of Mousumi Majumdar is also in state of conflict and suffering. She grew up in London .When she first met Gogol, she had British accent. Alike Gogol she had also been unsuccessful in her affair with Graham, her fiance an American who backed out of their engagement, just a few days before their marriage. The family connection brought her near Gogol and they got married. Initially she was very much relaxed about her decision to marry a boy from her own community and culture. As Lahiri puts it:

She believed that he would be incapable of hurting her. After years of clandestine relationship, it felt refreshing to court in a fishbowl, to have support of her parents from

the very start, the inevitability of an unquestioned future, of marriage, drawing them along (255).

They marry because they can share a history of family get together. But the impacts of the culture they live in drag them in an unhappy marriage. Moushumi Majumdar's spirit of Independence feels suffocated. She begins to feel bore about her relationship with Gogol. To rediscover herself she involves in an extra marital affair with Dimitri Desjardins, an aimless academic. She cannot conform to become an ideal wife in a Bengali way. The influence of American way of living asserts and gets into conflict with their Bengali culture . In the dilemma of the truth of their existence and identity, both Gogol and Moushumi become victims of pain and suffering.

Gogol's younger sister Sonia also struggle with the dilemma between American friends and her Indian background. She moves to California for college. She too rejects Bengali culture and tradition and enjoys her new identity with American culture. she gets engaged to Ben, a Jewish Chinese journalist in Boston.

Conclusion

Thus, the characters of second generation diaspora community hang between the two identities. Each culture pulling them apart and leaving them in a

state of conflict and dilemma. They do not find themselves attached to their original Bengali culture. It appears them very strange when they visit India and Calcutta. They find it suffocating and outdated. They don't wish to stay there for a long time. In the same way their relationship with Americans is meaningless, full of conflict and dilemma. So the phenomenon of being a diaspora affect nonetheless to the second generation. Their condition is like a plant which is being uprooted to be planted in a soil which is not fully meant to nourish it.

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