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“Mixing Geographies, Melting Pots,” An Analysis of Jhumpa Lahiri’s ‘Interpreter of Maladies’

ABSTRACT

A text is a product of tradition of interpretations. There is no fixed or determinate meaning that will pass the test of time. With each and every reading, with a different critical approach or with the passage of time, the meanings of literary texts keep on changing. Similarly, in the critical discourse, a critical concept undergoes the same process of refinement. It loses much indeterminacy, and accommodates wider horizons of human nature, by passing through different time periods.

The Concept of ‘hybridity’ and ‘identity crisis’ also underwent a seminal change from its very inception to the present time. It has actually influenced the development of future events. From Bhabian rhetorical formulation of concept to the neoliberal globalization, these concepts are being rearticulated beyond the poetics of race and colonialism. Such shift from geographical and cultural bound colonial discourse, to the ‘new global world’ has unsettled many of the prevailing assumptions through which these concepts have been typically understood.

This Research article will analyze Lahiri’s “Interpreter of Maladies” and focus on these concepts and will try to locate the wounds and wedlock’s, pains and pangs of the citizens living in the neoliberal global world. The author will analyze how marginalized groups in the present day scenario feel the pain of immigration and identity crisis. The author will try to analyze the question of ‘other’ through the lens of diasporic writing and will explore how far the plight of this generation immigrants differs with pain and anguish of earlier generations, caught in the vicious design of civilization.

Key Words: diaspora, alienation, hybridity, identity crisis, other.

INTRODUCTION

The subject matter of this study is not to explore the much researched concepts of ‘Diaspora’ ‘hybridity’ and ‘identity crisis’ from traditional colonial discourse, but to engage in more recent and emerging trends of globalization, shared economy and glocalization. In the words of

sociologist Ronald Robertson, 'glocalization means the simultaneity-the co-presence of both universalizing and particularizing tendencies'. The integration process of 'marginalized' has started before the demise of the empire but in present days context the 'alienated other' depicted in diasporic fiction is caught 'in-between' the promising world of opportunities and the blissful past. This diasporic crisis of identity is not the result of encounter between the 'civilized and the 'savage' but rather a more psychological conflict dealing with the complex relationship between the 'civilized versus 'civilized' in which both experience a kind of shared responsibility to promote their own traditions and customs.

The term 'diaspora' has become a catchword in the social and cultural sciences. The proliferation and popularization of a concept frequently results in a loss of precise meaning and analytic power and this has happened to diaspora (Brubaker 2005). The term 'diaspora', from the Greek, meaning dispersal, distribution, or spreading has been applied to the worldwide scattering of the Jews. In more recent times it has been applied to number of ethnic and racial groups living distant from their traditional homelands. (Manjit Inder Singh P. 37). As for Indian diaspora is concerned, we can deduct that it has vastly enriched the cultural and critical debate in both home and host lands. The exploration of 'self' has become an in-alienable metaphor for the second generation Indian diasporic writers. The cultural clash between host and homeland does not necessarily represent a battle for superiority, but a constant negotiation of the opposites, a negotiation, so important to bring the east and the west closer. The diasporic writers in a way act as bridge of 'a-historical world' where history, geography and national boundaries carry no connotations.

2. BACKGROUND

In his collection of essays, *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha claims there is a space "in-between the designations of identity' and 'this interstitial passage between fixed identifications opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy" (4). The post-colonial theoretician, Homi Bhabha coined the term "hybridity" in a view that many writers have a sense of belonging to both cultures. This interaction of the cultures no doubt leads to further conflicts, but it certainly opens new routes and modes of thinking for the individual and group identities of the diaspora and guides them to outgrow the Stereotyped experiences of being uprooted, displacement and marginalization. Bhabha argues in *The Location of Culture* that "the very concepts of homogenous national cultures" must go through "a profound process of redefinition" (5), as he believes that human beings have "no necessary or eternal belongingness" (175) to lose. The hybridity is positioned within the third space, and according to Bhabha, "this hybrid third space is an ambivalent site where cultural meaning and representation have no premordial unity or fixity". To elaborate on Bhabha's idea, Huddart remarks that he has challenged the inclination toward the polarity of the world into the "self" and the "other" by such concepts as hybridity which imply the "mixed - ness" and "impurity" of contemporary cultures. Since all cultures interact with each other, he believes that "cultures are not discrete phenomena (4). Moreover, the cultural effects of globalization are increasingly reciprocal, with mass migration producing significant cultural changes in host nations. As Vertovec implies in his work on "super-diversity," migrants cannot be conveniently

grouped into clear-cut "diasporas" because the realities of cultural dynamics are much more complex than those envisioned in simplistic models of "multiculturalism," which wrongly attribute homogeneity and cultural stasis to groups of people from particular parts of the world. Besides Bhabha, Stuart Hall has highlighted the transcendental quality of identity on the whole and diasporic identity in particular. In his "Introduction" to the Questions of Cultural Identity, Hall argues that "identities are never unified," but "increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across" therefore, they are "constantly in the process of change and transformation" (4). Inquiring into diasporic culture, both Bhabha and Hall move away from the "bipolar model" to "tripolar model" that gives priority neither to the motherland nor to the residing country, rather accentuates the "middle ground" which Bhabha calls "the third space" (Kral,12). The fluidity and flexibility of hybrid identity can be compared to cosmopolitanism. Various definitions of cosmopolitanism have been proposed by various critics, all of which suggest that, whereas globalization is an ongoing phenomenon, cosmopolitanism is an attitude cultivated partly in response to the reality of globalization. Globalization is happening, whether we like it or not. Ideally, in this globalized world, close connections between people of diverse origins will reduce mutual misunderstanding, hostility, and conflict. As Rachel Trousdale notes in her discussion of transnational fiction, people with a cosmopolitan orientation conceive of their communities "based not on the location of their roots but on a shared willingness to reach beyond them" (194).

3. DISCUSSION

In analyzing Jhumpa Lahiri's Fictional world, my focus will remain on the issues raised above, particularly, how the notions of hybridity and identity co-exist and reach beyond the conventional boundaries of nationhood. In her short story collection, "Interpreter of Maladies", Jhumpa Lahiri portrays various characters that either belongs to what we may call as 'mixed cultures' placed either in rural India or promising world of America. They undergo a series of social, economical and psychological upheavals and in the process reveal their 'self' and 'the connections with the society' in a daring language.

In the first story, 'A Temporary Matter' Shukumar and shoba, half Americanized married couple, caught in a dual situation, reveal the kind of relationship they have developed while living in an alien land. The breakdown of electricity line, a temporary matter, reminds them, their ancestral past. It acts as a bridge to mend their troubled relationship and take refuge in a mixed culture.

"It is like India," Shoba said, watching him tend his makeshift candelabra. "Sometimes the current disappears for hours at a stretch. I once had to attend an entire rice ceremony in the dark" (Lahiri, 11)

The couple being trapped 'in-between' the memory of the motherland, and the marital boredom, typical of American society, experience a state where they cannot abandon either, but only to embrace both, in order to negotiate opposite terrain. The mixing of these two opposite terrains- the sacrosanct Indian marriage bond, and the new acquired American life styles, held them together, only to sink in the waters of both traditions and re-born as the hybrid citizens of new, borderless world.

The second story, 'When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine' shows the value of embracing 'co-existence' as an alternate means to defeat racial and religious intolerance. The ten year old narrator, Laila, does not find any difference between her parents and Mr. Pirzada. "Mr. Pirzada

and my parents spoke the same language, laughed at the same jokes, looked more or less the same” (Lahiri, 25). She is unaware about the partition and Bangladesh-Pakistan war of 1971 which has created a void in the sub-continent. The cultural hybridity which the characters consciously or unconsciously embrace, shape their new and complex identity, where they forget hot debates on race and religion rather engage with each other with mutual trust, care and understanding.

The third story, ‘Interpreter of Maladies’ set in India, portray both types of characters, Indian decedent living in America, and purely Indian, living in India. The cultural clash and lack of communication between characters is at the heart of the story, but on the deeper level, the story explores one or another kind of malady the characters suffer from. Mr. Kapasi represents traditional values of home, family and discipline. He performs the job of an interpreter at a doctor’s clinic. His liking for Mrs. Das lasted only when she disclosed her extramarital affair to him. Mr. Kapasi observes his Indian born tourists from America, through his own myopic lens. “They were all like siblings, Mr. Kapasi thought as they passed a row of date trees...Mr. and Mrs. Das behaved like an older brother and sister, not parents.” (Lahiri, 49).

On the other hand, Mr. Das and his family observes India more through their camera and consider themselves to be looked as foreigners.

“Oh, Mina and I were both born in America,” Mr. Das announced with an air of sudden confidence. “Born and raised. Our parents live here now, in Assansol. They retired. We visit them in every couple years.”(Lahiri, 45)

Both set of characters- Mr. Kapasi, and Mr. Das family, share different viewpoints as they are influenced by the culture they live in. The difficulty of assimilating a new culture is very hard and painful yet helpful in promoting harmony. The aspects like ethnicity, religion and language are greatly influenced by one’s culture and these aspects form one’s identity.

The fourth story, ‘A Real Durwan’ focuses on the character of Boori Ma, frail 64-year old woman, a Durwan (doorkeeper). She was separated from her husband, two daughters and home. Her raspy voice details the losses she has suffered because of partition. The pains and pangs of partition keep her wandering door by door and spend her sleepless nights on the roof of the apartment. She had been looked as an untouchable devoid of any support or sympathy.

The underneath idea is that composite culture is the alternate to acquire peace and tranquility in the world. The stratification of people into ethnic or class categorization can tear apart this world. When people will realize the difference and accommodate the opposites, then a harmony will exist between the peoples of different race, caste or religion.

Another underneath idea of the story is that nation and capital policies only derail the peace and prosperity, the territorial borders limit the diverse cultures to grow and maintain their identity.

The fifth story, ‘Sexy’ contrasts the American background with India. The American woman, Miranda gets involved in an affair with a married Indian man named Dev. Miranda’s character shows the openness to learn more about India and Indian culture. Her relationship with Dev is a positive sign towards negotiating opposites and embracing the mixed identity as an affirmative step for understanding the world.

The sixth story, ‘Mrs. Sen’s’ is replete with the theme of immigration, isolation and loneliness. She always remains occupied with her past life, back in India. She does not want to inherent the

alien culture rather she remains busy in the customs of her homeland. “Two things Eliot learned, made Mrs. Sen happy, one was the arrival of a letter from her family (Lahiri 121)”, the other was fish, a traditional food of Bengali’s in India. In the words of Jennifer Bess “Mrs. Sen has lost herself to the silence of loneliness and the noise of modern life.” Her negation to assimilate in an alien culture has made her ‘other’ from the rest of the society. This ‘other’ is not the product of colonial hegemony, but an ‘other’ who denies to reconcile cultural bargain.

The seventh story, ‘This Blessed House’ deals with the characters, Sangeev and Twinkle, newlywed couple. The theme of cultural integration is beautifully interwoven in the story. Lahiri shows the reader how different levels of integration between the immigrant and first generation immigrant create a conflict that is brought out by the Christian objects. Finally Twinkle becomes the catalyst for Sangeev’s loss of cultural identity to make place for his cultural integration into America. While Sangeev is an Indian immigrant to the country, Twinkle was born in the United States of America to Indian parents who emigrated from Calcutta (Lahiri, 142). It is this difference in integration that enables Twinkle to have a non-threatened, respectable attitude towards the biblical menagerie (Lahiri, 139). Twinkle has undergone the ‘enormous metamorphosis’ needed to link her parents’ immigrant past with her first generation experience as an American citizen at the present. This is why she is able to be a Hindu with henna-streaked hair (Lahiri, 139) and still accepts the symbol of Christianity into her home, whereas Sangeev, who is still earlier in the process of integration, resists it as much as possible. The ‘house’ a symbol for American dream could be owned and lived only by surrendering to the present moment to become one with the host culture yet unique and distinct, like the hosts.

The penultimate story, ‘Treatment of Bibi Haldar’ brings a twenty-nine year old woman on scene, who suffers from the malady of ‘alienation and isolation’. It brings eastern- western mythoi-religious beliefs together to show the marked difference between the two cultures. “Concerned members of our town brought her holy water from seven holy rivers (Lahiri, 158). The writer also points that “at the suggestion of blind Christian she was once taken by train to kiss the tombs of saints and martyrs” (Lahiri, 158). Bibi is a symbol of oppressed and alienated woman, confined in the house and tied to the social customs. “She was never taught to be a woman, nor was allowed to watch television because Haldar assumed ‘its electric properties would excite her...her studies had ended after the ninth standard’ (Lahiri, 163). Bibi’s isolation and alienation has been highlighted on social, economic and gender grounds, the factors which even in twenty-first century are so determinable to shape one’s identity. The birth of her son like Jesus signals a new hope in her character regeneration and compels her to live a life of her own. “The world begins at the bottom of stairs, now I am free to discover life as I please” (Lahiri, 170).

The final story, ‘The third and final Continent’ explores the theme of location, dislocation and relocation. The three main characters, narrator, his wife Mala, and an old woman, Mrs. Crofts, each suffer from one or another kind of malady. They are always in the process of ‘becoming; over ‘being’. Mrs. Croft always talks about ‘man on the moon’ because when she was born, nothing like that was thought of. Her conservative, traditional and modest values highlight the generation gap, which she either has to overcome in order to mix in the fast changing world or she has to surrender herself to the emerging trends of global world. Her old age acts as the symbol of bygone times, her death as the birth of new generation and her daughter, Helen as the new season of discovery.

Similarly, the character of the narrator and her wife unveils several layers of meaning. The narrator's six year stay on an alien land has helped him to drink and think in a way which resembles neither to the home culture nor to the host culture. He has lost the fragrance of the coconut oil and the delicate sound of his wife's bracelets which used to lure him in the homeland (Lahiri, 192). His transformation of cultural identity is gradual and slow process towards the realization that 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*, 1993: 394). It is also true about Mala, she, in her initial stages carry her cultural roots to her new abode but with the due course learns how to be a faithful, duty-bound traditional Indian wife and how to respond to the new surroundings that apparently offer her no riches. Her adaptation and assimilation of this new hybrid identity is an affirmation that the two worlds, east and west can survive and live amid the differences. "Mala no longer drapes the end of her sari over her head, or weeps at night for her parents" (Lahiri, 197). There is a complete synthesis of the 'three continents'. The only concluding thesis would be that if Mala and her husband can survive on three continents, then there is no obstacle that their son cannot conquer them.

CONCLUSION

Jhumpa Lahiri's works expand rather than limits the readers engagement with the text. In her 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. She with her brilliant portrayal of diverse characters placed in different social and cultural environments endorses cultural hybridity. This diverse international mixture of hybrid cultures has helped the neo-global world to negotiate the differences and notion of fixed borders to enter geography of borderless space. The diaspora acted as a melting pot, wherein different ethnic, racial and cultural groups of people managed to dilute the hot colonial/postcolonial debates. Hybridity captures the spirit of times with its obligatory celebration of cultural difference and fusion. The short story collection, "Interpreter of Maladies" successfully captures this spirit. Lahiri's elegant stories tell the lives of Indians and people navigating between the strict traditions they've inherited and the baffling new world they must encounter every day.

Similarly, Jhumpa Lahiri's short story collection goes beyond mono-cultural assumptions of identity and highlights the importance of examining and endorsing cross-cultural dynamics of identity without any bias or superiority of one over another. Her contribution towards the development of multiculturalism is evident through her personal life as well as her fictional world.

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