



CULTURAL HYBRIDITY IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S NOVEL *THE NAMESAKE*

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Abstract: Culture is the sum total of the learned behavior people that are essentially considered to be the tradition of that people which is transmitted from one social group to the other from generation to generation. Cultures are translocal that involves a global flow. Hybrid culture in its most basic sense refers to mixture. The contemporary usage of culture are scattered across various academic disciplines. This paper attempts to explore the evolving dynamics of culture when it is intertwined with a new culture through the life of the protagonist in *The Namesake*, a novel by Jhumpa Lahiri, a Pulitzer Prize winner who explores the relocation and displacement that results in cultural hybridity. The paper discusses the term 'cultural hybridity' and their role in the present world. Myriad issues on multiculturalism, the struggle for identity and belongingness which is suffered by the characters in the novel are some significant aspects that are explored here.

Key Words: Hybridity, Multiculturalism, Immigrant, Displacement, Transnational Identity.

1. INTRODUCTION:

Globalization has established a change in the pattern of how the population moves their settlement from its established colonized areas to other parts of the world. With this change came the juxtaposing, meeting and mixing of culture that naturally took place due to the transition. A culture that seemed natural and hence, taken for granted thereby undergoes a change from being local to that of a global form. Culture is vital and the backbone of every society, a way of living which can be summed up as a network of shared meanings. The vital characteristics of a group of people with a common language, religion, way of life, cuisine, social organizations, music and arts, etc are all defined by their own culture. Hybrid culture is used to describe societies that emerge from cultural contacts of European explorers and those explored. It emphasizes on the intermingling of a major culture into a minor culture.

According to Roland Barthes, a 'third language' evolved that is neither the one nor the other. This model of altrity is based on a contact between two parties at one time. Cultural hybridity attempts at maintaining a sense of balance among the values, practises, and customs of different cultures that are more than one. Jhumpa Lahiri belongs to the first generation offspring migrants that are characterized by their participation in the mainstream of the American culture that are available for them in the larger social space outside the limited family space. The parents disapproved this, and at the same time, the children disapproved the parent's proximity to the ancestral culture which the Indian American community tries to replicate in the new space. The family space and the community space, however, cannot remain pure as change of place inevitably makes it hybridized.

2. Accessing hybridity in *The Namesake*:

Lahiri's first novel *The Namesake* was published in 2003 and deals with the themes of immigrant experiences, identities and displacement, and its ties and clashes between the generations. We feel a sense of living in exile, loss of communication, sense of belonging to nowhere and the inability to feel accepted after reading her novel. The different experiences which the first and second generation Indian immigrants face in United States also include a complicated social status and difficulties in relationships which all revolve around the general theme of displacement.

The image and concepts of the first generation settlers become the harbingers through which the second generation learns about their homeland. Cultural displacement at times culminates in the loss of language, family ties



and support system. Lahiri takes on culture and its significance through an immigrants experiences with a realistic outlook. Through her narrations of an immigrants experience in America in the novel, she consciously focuses on the merits of native culture and the mysteries of acquired culture. Having ones roots, language and social norms are the three most important parts of the definition of what it is to be a human being and losing it amounts to displacement or loss of identity in some cases. For the second generation, the concept of identity is a complicated issue. The Indian culture and value system are followed at home, whereas, in public the American code of conduct is followed. The first generation settlers desires for good education and successful careers for their children. They want them to exploit the situation and derive maximum benefit for themselves on the condition that they must follow the Indian moral and culture code at home.

Lahiri's novel *The Namesake* takes the Ganguli family from their tradition bound life in Calcutta to their challenging transformation in America. After an arranged marriage, Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli settle in Cambridge, Massachusetts. An engineer by profession, Ashoke seems to adapt more easily than his wife, who resists everything that is American and pines for her family in India. In India, it is believed that children have concern for their parents, but it was traumatic for the couple to realize later that though their children adopted American culture, they do not bother to come and meet them on Thanksgiving, an annual celebration where families usually gathered to celebrate with parents. In another instance, it was shocking for the first generation immigrants to learn from their relatives living in India that the whole children, grandchildren, daughter in law, etc resides under the same roof, a culture which is alien for them. Ashima and Ashoke try their best to hold on to their Indian roots and their culture despite being surrounded by the American culture all around. For instance, they go to the Kathakali dance performance and Sitar recital at memorial hall. Also, when their son Gogol was in the third grade, he was sent to attend Bengali language and cultural lessons every Saturday. It is worth to be noted that a migrant's parent culture and tradition cannot be transplanted in another geographical locale but it can only be staged without much significance. Thus, we see a lot of displacement of culture where culture gets relocated only symbolically. If any form of culture is carried on, it gets hybridized with the host culture. In this process, another new culture is produced in the periphery of margin of other culture, which is normally known as marginalized lives. Most of the time, this culture ends up neither here nor there.

Being aware that his new-born son is an American, Ashoke wanted to cling to his traditional roots and decides to wait for his family in India to send a name for his son. In this way he follows the Indian tradition that the oldest member of the family chooses the name of the new born: the family extending from Boston to Calcutta. Meantime, while waiting for his grandmother from India to send him the name, Ashoke chooses a pet name Gogol after a Russian writer, a reminder of his savior in the train accident where he nearly died. Unfortunately, the delivery of the letter with the name never happens. The grandmother dies and the name intended for the child remained a mystery. The juxtaposition of the cultures leads to the acceptance of the pet name as the real name which remains with Gogol and causes the proceeding identity related problems for himself and subsequently for his family. Later, he gives the name Nikhil to his son through which he doubles his son's identity into a transcultural identity that he himself possesses.

3. Displacement and Cultural dilemma as portrayed by Lahiri in *The Namesake*:

Lahiri's book *The namesake* shows how immigrants face cultural dilemmas in the new world they have embraced. Despite their conscious endeavor to stick to their own cultural beliefs and customs, we find the characters gyrating towards the host country in their everyday lifestyle and gradually imbibing their cultural ways resulting in cultural assimilation. Cultural traditions evolve in separate spaces and develop its own identity based on their perceived similarity of traditions or circumstances. Ashoke is an Indian husband to an Indian wife and also a father to his American children, who lives between two different identities. Ashima is the only character in the novel that assimilates to the American lifestyle and adapts to a trans-cultural life at the end.

Initially, the main reason for Ashima's displacement in the American society is the distinction between two very different cultures: America and India. Culturally, they are poles apart. Though men and women seem to be equally independent in America, there are certain cultural peculiarities according to the Indian perspective regarding the role of the sexes in society. She organizes many parties where Indian families were invited to maintain the Indian customs and create a surrogate India in America. She tries hard to preserve her family's Indian identity against the appeal of western culture but her children adapts to the American culture where they are born and brought up. Celebrating Christmas, roasting turkey son Thanksgiving and cooking American food once in a week for the children are some of the concessions she makes to adapt herself to the American mainstream.

With the passage of time, Ashima gradually gains confidence and independence like any typical American woman. She worked as a librarian and makes friends with her American colleagues which was a new experience for



her. Paying bills, buying tickets, driving the car and changing house are all new duties that she learns after her husband's death. She gains cultural and geographical fluidity over the years making her transform into a transnational figure.

4. **CONCLUSION:**

The concept of cultural hybridity is beneficial in highlighting the mixture of cultures and the emergence of a new form of identity. The quest for identity is more pronounced and persistent for those who grow up simultaneously in two worlds where separate cultural traditions are kept separate in time and space. The multiple diverse orders we live in today has put us in great problem in this multicultural and globalized world. The process of globalization has not only unsettled people and culture, but it has also created new identities and affiliations in terms of both conflict and collaborations. Lahiri stresses that for people of diaspora, home is a fluid concept that changes meaning according to the prevailing mindset of the person. In the parent child relationship, we also find the older generation feeling dislocated and the children finds themselves rootless.

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