



THE THEME OF CORE VALUES AND CULTURAL IDENTITY IN THE NOVELS OF JHUMPA LAHIRI

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ABSTRACT

Jhumpa Lahiri employs her visionary craft and modern narrative approach to describe her different themes throughout her stories. The present chapter attempts to study the idea of cultural identity and feminist vision presented in the literary work of Lahiri. Lahiri, herself a second-generation Indian immigrant woman, has contributed tremendously in the field of art and literature by giving a vivid description of immigrant experiences right from the cross-cultural conflicts in identity and strong influence of expatriate experiences on Indian women. Ever since the civilization came into existence, the human society has developed its own value and belief system to strengthen the society from within. In earlier times, people were god-fearing and believed in Hell and Heaven based on their deeds. However, the advent of science and technology has brought a tremendous change in human minds as they became more materialistic and less spiritual. India is being considered as the Spiritual Leader of the world and that could be seen reflected in ancient Indian literature. But, with the passage of time, as Indians started moving to the West in search of newer opportunities, subsequently a class of Indian immigrants emerged in the Western World.

Key words: Identity, culture, immigrant, experience, change, spiritual etc.

Jhumpa Lahiri employs her visionary craft and modern narrative approach to describe her different themes throughout her stories. The present chapter attempts to study the idea of cultural identity and feminist vision presented in the literary work of Lahiri. Lahiri, herself a second-generation Indian immigrant woman, has contributed tremendously in the field of art and literature by giving a vivid description of immigrant experiences right from the cross-cultural conflicts in identity and strong influence of expatriate experiences on Indian women.

Ever since the civilization came into existence, the human society has developed its own value and belief system to strengthen the society from within. In earlier times, people were god-fearing and believed in Hell and Heaven based on their deeds. However, advent of science and technology has brought a tremendous change in human minds as they became more materialistic and less spiritual. India is being considered as the Spiritual Leader of the world and that could be seen reflected in ancient Indian literature. But, with the passage of time, as Indians started moving to the West in search of newer opportunities, subsequently a class of Indian immigrants emerged in the Western World. This class found themselves caught in between two contradictory social environments, largely because of very different cultures.

Jhumpa Lahiri belongs to such a section of American society who was born to Indian parents in London and raised in the United States. She is an English-speaking writer of this Indian origin class in the west who try to explore the present with a background of Indian heritage.

Lahiri, with her distinctive prose, very beautifully narrates the lives of Indian Diaspora who juggles between two entirely different cultures, from one generation to another. Her writings sublimely talk about the day to day challenges faced by Indian immigrants who witness the traditional spirit of India being tossed between the highly industrialized and modern western world.

Having said that, shifting to other country doesn't mean disrespecting Indian traditions and also it doesn't mean extreme jingoism. There is no ill feeling for culture that is alien but there is a natural homesickness that comes in over the time. As Chaman Nahal rightly states in his article "Cross-cultural Tensions: E.M. Forster and Ruth Pravar Jhabvala" that "May be two large segments of cultures such as the East and the West cannot meet in harmony; some of us believe they can. All right, they meet in disharmony. It is all the same a meeting, a meeting of meanings." It aptly makes a point that in present era of highly globalized and hi-tech world where the whole planet is well-connected like a small village, intermixing of different culture is a necessary reality. Though the differences are bound to happen, but there must be co-existence and mutual respect for each other. The cross-culture interaction in every field has enhanced the knowledge of mankind and

brought a sea of change in the way one use to see one's life.

'Multiculturalism' thus means not only the cognizance of the differences between various cultures but also the acceptance and respect for this diversity. It is a positive term which gives a hope of peaceful co-existence after acknowledging that ethnic values like food habits, dressings, languages, attitudes and traditions, religions and customs are bound to be different based on geographical or historical backgrounds. Bhikhu Parekh interestingly mentions that the challenge with multiculturalism is not the existence of several cultures but the main focus should be dealing with the relationship between diverse cultural beliefs. India is not new to this concept of cross-cultural phenomenon. In fact, one of the prime characteristics of Indian sub-continent lies in its 'Unity in Diversity'. Being the home of umpteen languages, tribes, customs, food, religions and ethnic multiplicity, India has always been leading an example to the world on how to open arms wide for new things without any bias or prejudice. Multiculturalism promotes the concept of equality and cooperation. English enjoys the status of most widely known and spoken language across the world. With its global presence and acceptance, English literature has increasingly accommodated influential writings from different countries. The modern English literature comprises of the work contributed from writers of different ethnicity and they tend to write about their own cultures. Indian writers and writers with Indian origin have played a major role in taking the Indian culture and values on board globally by writing about their rendezvous with Indian-ness. The case of Indian diaspora is distinct as they are the ones who are carrying and practicing the Indian values and culture on a foreign land among strange people. Culture is an important essence of an individual's identity. This is why Indian immigrants are more aware and conflicted about their identity, being caught in between two different worlds. The cultural and religious foundations in the form of texts and visuals are important source of their identity.

Jhumpa Lahiri is one of the most prominent writers in modern English literature who has contributed tremendously in taking the culture of India at global level by her vivid description of several encounters of Indian immigrants through her short stories as she herself is one of them. This chapter focuses on the literary work of Jhumpa Lahiri with respect to the cultural identity and associated aspects of Indian diaspora.

Culture is a broad term that involves a whole gamut of individual's life right from the food to clothing and language, religion and almost everything that defines a way of life if a person in a civilized society. Simply put, culture is all about the thinking and action of a person. Culture is essentially inherited from one generation to another and can also be borrowed from peer groups. The different aspects of culture like art, literature, architecture, philosophy, science, music etc. is

reflected in everything that culture is comprised of that is mainly the traditions, customs, festivals, clothing, food, ideas, rituals, beliefs, fears etc. Culture includes material and immaterial elements, both explicit and implicit patterns of behavior, conscious and subconscious essence of lives that are constantly passed on from generations to generations with few alterations due to natural environmental or human-made technological factors. The agents of transferring the cultures are symbols of human lives that enables communication and preservation of acquired knowledge like art, music, language, traditions, literature etc. In context of this Sunil Khilwani correctly adds, “Ram’s birthplace is not a quarrel about a small piece of land. It is a question of national integrity. The Hindu is not fighting for a temple of brick and stone. He is fighting for the preservation of a civilization of brick and stone. He is fighting for the preservation of a civilization, for his Indianness, for national consciousness, for the recognition of his true nature.”

Literature is of utmost importance for the detailed understanding of a particular culture as culture reflects vibrantly in the texts and style. Any critical study of a text is incomplete and might be incorrect until it is studied in the purview of the contextual culture. This point is clearly underlined by Bill Ashcroft and Pal Ahluwalia in their words:

“The text could be seen to be a much more complex formation than a simple communication from an author. But the implicit effect of textuality was to sever the connection of the text from the world. For Edward Said, the world from which the text originated, the world with which it was affiliated, was crucial, not only for the business of interpretation but also for its ability to make an impact on its readers. Said shows how the worldliness of the text is embedded in it as a function of its very being. It has a material presence, a cultural and social history, political and even an economic being as well as a range of implicit connections to other texts. We do not need to dispense with textuality, nor with the centrality of language to show how the embedding of the text in its world, and the network of its affiliations with that world, are crucial to its meaning and its significance, and, indeed, to its very identity as a text.”²

Hence, culture is the soul of any literary work and one of the main elements that defines an individual’s personality and identity. Cultural identity is the identity or feeling of belonging to a group. It is part of a person’s self-conception and self-perception and is related to nationality, ethnicity, religion, social class, generation, locality or any kind of social group that has its own distinct culture. In this way, cultural identity is both characteristic of the individual but also of the culturally identical group of members sharing the same cultural identity or upbringing.

There is a mention of a Hindu ritual called *Rice Ceremony* in several plots of Jhumpa Lahiri. According to Bengali Hindu culture, The *Annaprashan* (Rice Ceremony) is a ritual which is

celebrated as a mark of first feeding of solid food other than mother's milk in his life, generally when he is six months or twelve months old. It is an auspicious ritual being carried out in presence of relatives and elderly members of the families. This symbolizes the blessings from family to the infant for his wellbeing and prosperity. Mention of this rite in different stories by Lahiri shows the strong impact of her origin and culture over her writing even though she stayed away from India geographically.

Sunil Khilnani writes in the *Idea of India* "From its very earliest days it (India) claimed to speak for the nation and did so by stressing India's right to collective liberty. Its demands were not for the equal rights of all individuals but that culturally Indians should beat liberty."

In the words of Michel Bruneau, "Through migration, diaspora members have lost their material relationship to the territory of origin, but they can still preserve their cultural or spiritual relationship through memory. Territory or, more precisely, territoriality – in the sense of adapting oneself to a place in the host country – continues to play an essential role. Memory preserves part of territoriality, whilst the trauma of uprooting creates conditions of mobilisation that can play a substantial role in integrating and unifying various family, religious or community sub-networks into a real diaspora. The construction of commemorative monuments, sanctuaries, monasteries and other symbolic (and sometimes functional) places is an essential means, for the members of a diaspora, of a re-rooting in the host country."

The writings of Lahiri chronicle the society, which is in transition, unstable and in motion of change. This is the world that she has been experiencing all her life; the feeling of belonging to nowhere or somewhere in the middle of the worlds. She uniquely links history with literature to represent the psychological, social and historical consequences of migration on immigrants. The unwanted resulting complexities in human emotions due to inner conflicts of identities and rootlessness due to displacement forms the issues dealt and expressed by Jhumpa Lahiri's characters. The bedrock of Lahiri's secretive art is her relevance to Indian heritage. Taylor Shea observes:

"Lahiri uses her cultural background as an Indian American to create plots and characters that express the juxtaposition in her own life. She builds a balanced representation of her cultural group. She openly admits that *Interpreter of Maladies* is a reflection of her own experiences as well as those of her parents and their Indian immigrant friends."

With the backdrop of Indian legacy and cultural values, she tries to address the issues of multiplicity of identity, alienation and confusion among Indian immigrants. She vividly describes the daily struggle faced by displaced people in an adopted country on various levels especially

psychological and cultural assimilation. Taylor Shea notices how sublimely Lahiri utilizes her cultural background to create various characters and compare their lives to represent their cultural dilemma as the stories unfold. For example, Lahiri's maiden work *Interpreter of Maladies* is of course a collection of short stories distinct from each other but still they can be brought under one roof as all the stories have something in common. Even though the plots and circumstances of characters differ and independent of each other, but

they all talk about the challenges faced by first class Indian immigrants while settling down in an alien culture of United States.

The story of 'A Temporary Matter' shows how a temporary power cut off enabled both Shobha and Shukumar to open their heart out in front of each other, something which they couldn't do since long time. It reveals to the reader the reason of Shobha's frequent outing for dissertation and Shukumar's prolonged stay inside house. Both of them wanted to stay away from the world alien to them. There is always an element of loss and missing of loved ones in Lahiri's stories. The characters dwell on deprivation. Mr. Pirzada is seen watching the news of his country on TV while his wife and children are away from him. This shows how an individual miss his country and get anxious for his family despite being in the much better state financially and commercially. Indian families are very different than the families in west. The bond is very strong and close-knit as all share common household and stay together. The relationship between elders and young ones are very special as elders play a pivotal role in shaping child's personality. Ashima, of *The Namesake* wants to raise his son Gogol in the vigilance and care of elders like what she has seen all her life. She doesn't advocate the idea of raising Gogol alone in America. Shoba's mother sticks to her tradition values and religion beliefs even after migrating to America. "She set up a small shrine, a framed picture of a lavender-faced goddess and a plate of marigold petals, on the bedside table in the guest room, and prayed twice a day for healthy grand-children in the future."

The power outage is one such event in India that occurs frequently in small towns but instead of bringing the city to the halt. Electricity power cut brings out a different dimension to the lives of Indians. It is this time when normally all the family members or friends or neighbors sit and indulge in chit-chat discussing all the family matters together. This such a simple yet powerful plot has been created magically by Lahiri to enact the nostalgia in Shobha's character. As she has spent more time in India as compared to Shukumar, she remembers how they used to joke and recite poems at her grandmother's house during powercuts. This memory of Indian experience made her initiate the conversation and confessions with Shukumar. Shukumar understood the hidden Indian in Shobha.

"She kept the bonuses from her job in a separate bank account in her name. It hadn't

bothered him. His own mother had fallen to pieces when his father died, abandoning the house he grew up in and moving back to Calcutta, leaving Shukumar to settle it all. He liked that Shoba was different. It astonished him, her capacity to think ahead. When she used to do the shopping, the pantry was always stocked with extra bottles of olive and corn oil, depending on whether they were cooking Italian or Indian. There were endless boxes of pasta in all shapes and colors, zippered sacks of basmati rice, whole sides of lambs and goats from the Muslim butchers at Haymarket, chopped up and frozen in endless plastic bags.”⁷

Shukumar developed interest in history of India only recently as he found Bengali diction confusing and boring. Shoba and Shukumar share a common grief of death of their unborn child. When Shoba shared an incident of how a child was incessantly crying during rice-ceremony attended by her, Shukumar started wondering: “Their baby had never cried, Shukumar considered. Their baby would never have a rice ceremony, even though Shoba had already made the guest list, and decided on which of her three brothers she was going to ask to feed the child its first taste of solid food, at six months if it was a boy, seven if it was a girl.”⁸

Lahiri’s stories deal with the loss of near ones. It shows how her characters are influenced by the loss and how they handle the pain. The absence of parenthood due to the death of unborn child is most likely the reason behind the rift between Shoba and Shukumar. They couldn’t take the pain together and instead got separated to deal with this loss in their own ways based on their cultural and emotional backup.

Lahiri uses her dazzling craft to narrate the story through the eyes of ten years old little girl Lilia in ‘When Mr. Pirzada Comes to Dine’. It is a noticeably influential style to proceed with the story through juvenile. The plot shows how the tense situations in Dacca have a deep impact on Mr. Pirzada who is a temporary resident in America. Though Mr. Pirzada is going through a successful phase of his life in terms of career, doing a research but he is always worried for his wife and daughters who are far away in Dacca. Lilia’s concern for Mr. Pirzada and her perception about him during his short stay with her family forms the focus of the story. There is an attempt to indicate the differences in India and America. As Lilia adds about Indianness: “The supermarket did not carry mustard oil, doctors did not make house calls, neighbors never dropped by without an invitation, and of these things, every so often, my parents complained.” The influence of Indian culture is not only seen in the names of characters but also the backdrops being chosen by Lahiri for weaving the stories. For example, in this story Lahiri is using the partition of India and formation of Pakistan. Lilia, being an innocent child couldn’t make out the difference between an Indian and Pakistani as both look the same. He thought Mr. Pirzada to be a Pakistani until her father explained

him. Earlier she used to find the similarities between his father and Mr. Pirzada.

“Mr. Pirzada and my parents spoke the same language, laughed at the same jokes, looked more or less the same. They ate pickled mangoes with their meals, ate rice every night for supper with their hands. Like my parents, Mr. Pirzada took off his shoes before entering a room, chewed fennel seeds after meals as a digestive, drank no alcohol, for dessert dipped austere biscuits into successive cups of tea.” But later after knowing that Mr. Pirzada is Pakistani, she started finding the dissimilarity between the two. “Now that I had learned Mr. Pirzada was not an Indian, I began to study him with extra care, to try to figure out what made him different. I decided that the pocket watch was one of those things” This plot shows the importance and confusion of identity in a small child’s psyche. Lilia couldn’t understand the difference in political borders. She observes and comprehends the way an individual looks like and social conduct. She was not bothered with the reason behind the partition of India, formation of Pakistan, Hindu-Muslim plot, but what interests her is the similarity in cultural heritage of her father and Mr. Pirzada that includes their physical appearances, food habits, clothing, languages etc. Lahiri’s attempt to draw the plot of India-Pakistan in terms of identity is commendable here. Lilia saw Mr. Pirzada maintaining a pocket watch to view the time in Dacca. This shows how he was living a dual life, one in America alone with his work and another in Dacca where his heart is with family.

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