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Gender Sensitivity And Cultural Alienation Portrayed In The Select Novels Of Jhumpa Lahiri

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Abstract

Diasporic literature has emerged as an affluent genre of post modernism with the sociological implications of Diaspora being incorporated into literature. Gender and gender roles are not determined biologically but are socially constructed to a large extent. Gender hence can be different from what is biologically assigned. Globalization has led to changes in the social and cultural patterns of life. Diaspora creates a sense of not belonging to one particular place. The struggle for identity caught between these two vicious circles of gender and diaspora as presented in the select novels of Jhumpa Lahiri is the focus of the present paper. Jhumpa Lahiri, considered as one of the representatives of the Indian Diaspora, portrays the struggle of individuals for their identity. The characters of Lahiri's novels, especially the ones in diaspora often struggle to cope with the new and most of the times shockingly different gender roles and stereotypes in their new abode. Jhumpa Lahiri's feminist approach varies from that of the other Diasporic writers that she presents a different image of Indian woman and her marginalization in the cultural context. The paper attempts to throw light on the gender sensitivity and the sense of cultural alienation experienced by the characters due to shift in gender roles.

Key words: Diaspora, Culture, Gender, Gender Roles, Identity.

Introduction

The word 'Diaspora' takes its origin from Greek, 'dia' meaning through and 'speirein' meaning to scatter. So, etymologically Diaspora means 'dispersal' and involves anything dispersed between two countries or two or more cultures. Both the cultures exist and are embedded in the mind of the migrant simultaneously. One doesn't fade away with the addition of another as the influence of the past is reflected often in the present. The past is invoked to indicate a certain contrast, which must be incorporated and controlled in the present life in order to negotiate the network of social relations in the immediate world. The past, thus, becomes a part of the present consciousness of the diasporic subject. Literary works, written particularly by second generation diasporic writers, concentrate more on synchronic dimension than on diachronic one. It is quite natural that they approach the narratives from comparative perspectives, both from the points of view of cultures and generations.

Women in India generally experience the feeling of being caught between two worlds in terms of both home and culture because of the rituals and traditions associated with marriage and the cultural variations owing to regional differences. The inner psyche of the emotions resulting from these experiences is well projected and reflected in the themes of the writings of the Indian women authors. The prominent theme of the Indian women writers based in the USA, Canada, Britain, and other parts of the world is basically that of the difference in cultures. Some are recent immigrants, while others, such as Jhumpa Lahiri, are second generation immigrants. They are caught in a whirl of alienated consciousness as they are constantly reminded of not belonging to the place they are born in and are being brought up.

Expatriate representation has been questioned on several counts. Most expatriate writers have a weak grasp of actual conditions in contemporary India and tend to recreate it through the lens of nostalgia, writing about 'imaginary homelands'. The reflections are mostly from the memory of what they have heard. Distancing leads to objectivity, but it can also lead to the ossification of cultural constructs, and even if memory is sharp and clear, the expatriate is not directly in contact with the present reality of India. These authors write about their situation in cross-cultural contexts, expressing a state of 'in-betweenness'.

As diaspora leads to a sense of non-belongingness, identity crisis and struggle for establishing a position thus feeling confident about their existence are the major themes of the diasporic writings. The personal experience or understanding of the writers is reflected in their characters. The south Asians immigrating to the US experience identity crisis as there are lot of variations in terms of language, culture and social conditions. They find it very difficult to accept the new life and be a part of the new culture and environment.

Jhumpa Lahiri Vourvoulis (born Nilanjana Sudeshna) was born in London, in July 1967, and brought up in South Kingstown, Rhode Island. Even though she was brought up in America, she became very close to her Bengali heritage from an early age. Lahiri has traveled extensively to India and has experienced the effects of colonialism here as well as experienced the issues of the diaspora as they exist.

She feels strong ties to her parents' homeland as well as the United States and England. Growing up with ties to all three countries created in Lahiri a sense of homelessness and an inability to feel accepted. Lahiri explains this as an inheritance of her parents' ties to India,

“It’s hard to have parents who consider another place ‘home’ even after living abroad for 30 years, India is home for them. We were always looking back so I never felt fully at home here. There’s nobody in this whole country that we’re related to. India was different-our extended family offered real connections.”

Yet, her familial ties to India were not enough to make India “home” for Lahiri,

“I didn’t grow up there; I wasn’t a part of things. We visited often but we didn’t have a home. We were clutching at a world that was never fully with us. Lahiri described this absence of belonging, “No country is my motherland. I always find myself in exile in whichever country I travel to, that’s why I was tempted to write something about those living their lives in exile“.

Interpreter of Maladies:

The idea of exile runs consistently throughout Lahiri’s Pulitzer Prize winning book ‘Interpreter of Maladies’. The book is a collection of nine short stories, all of which revolve around the difficulties of relationships, communication and a loss of identity for those in diaspora. The stories’ themes include marital difficulties, miscarriages and the disconnection between first and second generation immigrants in the United States. The stories are set in the northeastern United States, and in India, particularly Calcutta. The book brings to light many of the issues dealing with identity crisis faced by the Diaspora community. The book contains the stories of first and second generation Indian immigrants, as well as a few stories involving ideas of otherness among communities in India. No matter where the story takes place, the characters struggle with the same feelings of exile and the struggle between the two worlds by which they are torn. The stories deal with the always shifting lines between gender, sexuality, and social status within a diaspora. Whether the character is a homeless woman from India or Indian male student in the United States, all the characters display the effects of displacement in a diaspora.

The question of identity gets pronounced when these culturally displaced immigrants and those who grow up in two worlds simultaneously, and their children are struggling hard to adjust. Lahiri says that to please her parents and meet their expectations, to meet the expectations of her American peers, and the expectations she put on herself to fit into American society was not easy. Lahiri says creating characters who also struggle with the immigrant experience has helped her confront the truth of her life.

Analysis of ‘A Temporary Matter’, ‘Sexy’ and ‘This Blessed House’

Lahiri's objective in opening her collection with "A Temporary Matter" is to start from nothing; the story is clearly about a failed relationship. By starting with a defeat, Lahiri seems to foretell that her stories will be about the hardships of communication and relationships, but that each has the possibility of success.

‘Sexy’, taking a mid-position among all other stories, can be considered as the most thematically different and yet significant story of Lahiri’s collection based on the fact that unlike other stories its protagonist is an American rather than an Indian female. What then makes this story relevant to the present study is that together with the other two stories – which dealt with the trauma of the identity-crisis in the lives of Mrs.Sen, a female Indian immigrant in America, and Bibi Halдар, a marginalized subaltern female of Indian Origins in Calcutta – the story of Miranda, a female American in Boston, can provide a structural balance. The story seems to suggest that in the diasporic identity-crisis process which occurs as a direct result of the clash of two very different cultures, it is not always the immigrant Other who is victimized but also the native Self can fall prey to the process of Othering.

“This Blessed House” tells the story of a young four-month-old married couple, Sanjeev and his wife Twinkle, who have just moved into a new house and are in the process of ‘unpacking their boxes’ (Lahiri 151). This house moving can itself be allegorically read as a movement into America, which is not after all an empty space but contains within it elements of culture – the here and there Christian artifacts the couple discover upon arrival. Interestingly, fixed in this diasporic situation, these two characters exhibit cultural identities in a state of fluidity and constant transformation. Belonging to different generations of immigrants though, Sanjeev and Twinkle seem to be at different stages of their transformative identities and therefore display “the disconnection between first and second generation immigrants in the United States”. Twinkle’s parents have long lived in California and seemingly, she (belonging to the second-generation immigrants) is simply an American of Indian origin. This very temporal difference and variation in exposure to the culture of the Other makes Twinkle to be an embodiment of hybridity – a stage which is yet to come for the first-generation female immigrants like Mrs. Sen or even for the first-generation male immigrants like Twinkle’s husband, Sanjeev, who has come to America as a college student and his parents still live in Calcutta. As “a more recent immigrant” then, Sanjeev like Mrs. Sen is a manifestation of limitation and is, therefore, a stage behind Twinkle.

When Mr. Pirzada came to dine:

‘When Mr. Pirzada came to dine’ is not only a story about a man living away from his family in a foreign country but it is also about a child’s understanding of what it means to miss someone dear. Like most of her stories it is based on real life experience and the autobiographical element dominates it. Mr. Pirzada belongs to Dacca in East Pakistan, a regular guest at dinner time as Lilia’s parents were fed up with the monotonous life of America.. Lilia was aware of the history of Partition when Hindus and Muslims set fire to each other’s houses. Therefore it fills her with surprise that Mr. Pirzada and her parents spoke the same language, laughed at the same jokes and looked more or less the same. Another interesting thing about him that Lilia notices is his silver watch set to local time in Dacca. This shows his bonding to his homeland. He feels connected with his country and feels just as a guest in America.

The all-important postscript of the story appears to be the fact that Lilia is made keenly aware of what it means to miss someone you love which precludes regional and religious disparities. On that night of celebration Lilia misses Mr. Pirzada very much. She says, ‘It was only then raising my water glass in his name, that I knew what it means to miss someone who was so many miles and hours away, just as he had missed his wife and daughters for so many months’. (42)

Analysis of ‘Mrs. Sen’s and ‘The Third and Final Continent’

Mrs. Sen, the titular character of Lahiri’s story demonstrates the power that physical objects have over the human experience. During the entire story, Mrs. Sen is preoccupied with the presence or lack of material objects that she once had. Whether it is fish from her native Calcutta or her special vegetable cutting blade, she clings to the material possessions that she is accustomed to, while firmly rejecting new experiences such as canned fish or even something as mundane as driving a car. While her homesickness is certainly understandable given her lack of meaningful social connections, her item-centric nostalgia only accentuates the fact that the people she meets in America are no barrier to her acclimation. The man at the fish market takes the time to call Mrs.Sen and reserve her special muff. The policeman who questions Mrs.Sen after her automobile accident does not indict her. For all intents and purposes, the people in the story make it easy for Mrs.Sen to embrace life in America. But despite this, Mrs.Sen refuses to assimilate to any degree, continuing to wrap herself in saris, serving Indian canapés to Eliot’s mother, applying vermilion in her forehead and putting off the prospect of driving. By living her life vicariously through remembered stories imprinted on her blade, her saris, and her grainy aerograms, Mrs.Sen resists assimilation through the power of material objects and the meaning they hold for her. The following lines depict her identity with India, and how she feels that her feelings, just like sarees, are folded and closed in the closet.

“She flung open the drawers of the bureau and the doors of the closet, filled with saris of every imaginable texture and shade, brocaded with gold and silver threads. Some were transparent, tissue thin, others as thick as drapes, with tassels knotted along the edges. In the closet, they were on hangers; in the drawers they were folded flat or wound tightly thick scrolls”. [125]

In contrast to depictions of resistance to Indian culture found in several of the stories in Lahiri's collection, "The Third And Final Continent" portrays a relatively positive story of the Indian-American experience. In this story, the obstacles and hardships that the protagonist must overcome are much more tangible, such as learning to stomach a diet of cornflakes and bananas, or boarding in a cramped YMCA. The protagonist's human interactions demonstrate a high degree of tolerance and even acceptance of Indian culture on the part of the Americans he meets. Mrs. Croft makes a point of commenting on the protagonist's sari-wrapped wife, calling her "a perfect lady" (195). Croft's daughter Helen also remarks that Cambridge is "a very international city," hinting at the reason why the protagonist is met with a general sense of acceptance. In this story, the only reason the narrator even meets Mrs. Croft is because he is an employee of MIT, a venerable institution of higher learning. Whereas prior to the INS Act of 1965, Asians were often seen as a yellow menace that was only tolerable because of their small numbers (0.5% of the population), by the time the Asian immigration boom tapered off in the 1990s, their reputation as a model minority had been firmly cemented, building a reputation for Asian Americans of remarkable educational and professional success, serving as the cultural backdrop in Lahiri's 'The Third and Final Continent'. By ending on a cultural tone of social acceptance and tolerance, Lahiri suggests that the experience of adapting to American society is ultimately achievable.

Analysis of 'Interpreter of Maladies', 'A Real Durwan' and 'The Treatment of Bibi Haldar':

These three stories take place in India. The story 'Interpreter of Maladies', centers upon interpretation and its power. The interpreter has power as a vehicle of understanding. Mr. Kapasi's work enables correct diagnosis and treatment by understanding the pains and troubles of patients—effectively, he enables the saving of lives. Mrs. Das looks for this understanding from him, seeking absolution for the secret of her adultery. In confessing to Mr. Kapasi, she endows him with a sort of priestly power, expecting her confession to draw out forgiveness and consolation. Interpretation also becomes a means of communication and connection, something for which both Mr. Kapasi and Mrs. Das yearn. Both feel a disconnect from their spouses and their families, unhappy and dissatisfied with their lives.

The stories, "A Real Durwan" and "The Treatment of Bibi Haldar" are both examples of the effects of globalization in India. They do not have anything to do with diaspora but how globalization has caused many women to be or to be on the path to poverty. Although the Indian government officially eliminated the caste system in 1949, it is still a part of the social structure in India because of its deep-rooted tradition in history. Because a person is usually born into a caste, the caste rarely changes from generation to generation. Most women in poverty are in lower castes. The women who are lucky to be employed are paid poorly and exploited for their long hours of labor. Women are seen as "replaceable and disposable". Many women enter the "unorganized, underground economy". In this type of economy, there are extended hours, horrible conditions, poor wages, and they are treated unfairly. Both Boori Ma and Bibi Haldar were a part of the unorganized, underground economy because they were paid in food and shelter instead of legal, monetary compensation.

Boori Ma was thrown out of her building because the community saw her as inferior and unequal. Furthermore, women's poverty is a direct link to the lack of access to education and legitimate healthcare. If Bibi Haldar had access to proper healthcare and a good doctor, her illness may have been diagnosed correctly and she would have received the right medication.

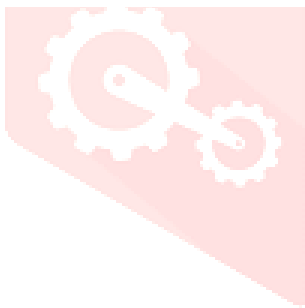
Conclusion:

The gender roles in her novels are very well defined. Many of her characters depicted in these situations hold onto role definitions that American readers find stereotypical of Indian culture. Such generalizations (and the sometimes-ironic reversals of them) act as literary tools that add to her most sympathetic characters and her most poignant storylines. She often toys with the reversal of gender roles, especially as they relate to husband-and-wife roles within marriages. In India, a strict set of guidelines dictates how husbands and wives act both publicly and privately, whereas in America, such guidelines are not as clear-cut and, oftentimes, are thrown out altogether. Lahiri's married characters often deal with confusions of marriage roles in relation to cooking, working outside the home, and bearing children. According to Lahiri's generalizations of Indian marital culture, women are solely responsible for cooking and doing household chores, as well as becoming completely domesticated with the arrival of children. Men are, according to such guidelines, responsible for working and providing their families with a monetary income. Many of Lahiri's characters, specifically the ones in the diaspora, must cope with new and sometimes shockingly different gender stereotypes and roles in their new homelands. Generation gaps, culture shock upon moving away from the "homeland" and questions of sexuality play their roles in Lahiri's interpretations of gender and what it means to Indians in Diaspora.

'The Interpreter of Maladies' can be viewed as a reflection of the trauma of self-transformation through immigration, which can result in a series of broken identities that form "multiple anchorages." Lahiri's stories show the diasporic struggle to keep hold of culture as characters create new lives in foreign cultures. Relationships, language, rituals, and religion all help these characters maintain their culture in new surroundings even as they build a "hybrid realization" as Asian Americans.

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