

Existential Crisis of the First Generation Diasporic Women- A Comparative Study of Jhumpa Lahiri's 'The Namesake' and Bharati Mukherjee's 'Wife'

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Abstract

Ours is an age of globalization. The process of interaction and integration between people are increasing day by day and, as such, the spatial boundaries are increasingly becoming redundant. Albeit, man finds himself alienated in an alien land due to the problem of cultural acculturation. This is mainly because there are expectations and reservations from the ends of both the immigrants and the host community as neither of them wants to change but expects the other to change. Jhumpa Lahiri's 'The Namesake' and Bharati Mukherjee's 'Wife' deal with this problem of identity crisis of the immigrants in general. The present paper, however, aims to make a comparative study of the existential crisis of the first generation diasporic women in particular in the aforesaid novels.

Key Words: Diaspora, Immigrants, Cultural Acculturation, Existential Crisis.

Introduction:

The term diaspora which has recently become a trending word throughout the academic world refers to the people who leave their motherland and settle themselves somewhere else either for charismatic future or under compulsion. Needless to say, the term became the buzzing word across the globe with reference to the mass dispersion of a population from its indigenous territories, more specifically the dispersion of the Jews. The history of diaspora, however, is very old. Its root dates back to the tale of Adam and Eve, our first forefathers, on this earth, of say, their expulsion from the garden of Eden by Almighty God. There is no denying the fact that behind man's movement from one place to another, there lies a variety of reasons. In the primitive age, the tribal people, as for example, continually shifted their place of habitats to meet the fundamental needs, of say, food and shelter. With the passage of time and climate and the consequent progress of life in the sick hurry and divided aim age, human needs have greatly changed. In the present age, under most diasporas, there lies an economic, social, political, religious or scientific factor. As a popular literature of the present century, literature of diaspora aims to debunk the bare and bleak realities of the expatriates' lives. As William Safran *observes-*

“...they continue to relate personally or vicariously to the homeland in a way or another and their ethnic-communal consciousness and solidarity are defined by the existence of such a relationship.”(83-84)

There is, therefore, no denying the fact that the questions of identity crisis is a pivotal one to them. There is a feeling of belonging to a no man's land where they virtually feel as if non-existent. The problem is more acute to the women who leave their homeland not in search of a charismatic future of their own but because they want to live in and through their husband as is expected in a society where patriarchy is still operative. Unlike their husbands who can make circles within their workplace, there is a pathetic death-in-life existence having no life force of their own as they live a caged life within the four walls of their apartment in an alien land. Jhumpa Lahiri in her novel 'The Namesake' and Bharati Mukherjee in her 'Wife' have focused light on the problematics of belonging of the first generation diasporic women., of say, how they suffer from physical, social and psychological alienation and the lack of cultural bonhomie as well. In doing so both Lahiri and Mukherjee are critical of the gender discrimination as regards the social and economic relations of power in general in the late 20th century mindset of the Indian middle class. The comparative analysis of the two novels would, I hope, unveil the existential trauma of all women immigrants for the operation of invisible social inhibitions upon a woman in a patriarchal society.

The novel 'The Namesake' by Jhumpa Lahiri deals with the issues of the search for identity and sense of belonging the diasporic people suffer from. There is no denying the fact that the treatment of alienation, the delineation of rootless characters and an awareness of unfortunate predicament of the diasporic people that the novel deals which are essentially hers also. It may therefore be said that 'The Namesake' is a personal tale of on the above said search for identity and the problem of belonging of the authoress also. As because she grew up with ties to three different countries, it created in Jhumpa Lahiri herself a feeling of being rootless and an inability to feel accepted. Lahiri in an interview with Vibhuti Patel relates the problematics of her belonging thus-

It's hard to have parents who consider another place home- even after living abroad for thirty years, India is home for them. We were always looking back so I never felt fully at home there. There is nobody in this whole country that we are related to...we were clutching at a world that was never fully with us.(Lahiri)

Once in a press conference in Kolkata in January 2001, the authoress herself relates the problem of belonging thus-

No country is my homeland. I always find myself exiled in whichever country I travel to, that's why I was tempted to write something about those living their lives in exile.(Lahiri, web)

Again in an interview with Sudheer Apte she further remarked-

I like to write about people who think in a way they can't fully express.

The novel 'The Namesake' centers round the saga of a Bengali family who moves from Calcutta to Boston in pursuit of a charismatic future. The story starts with an arranged

marriage of a Bengali couple namely Ashok and Ashima. Soon after their marriage Ashok and Ashima migrate themselves to Boston only and exclusively for the careeristic pursuit of Ashok. Seemingly it may appear that Ashima is about to enjoy a paradisaical life in Boston, the land of dreams where her aspiration and achievement will go hand in hand. But the truth is just the opposite. Ashok manages to find a job as a university teacher besides his research work. But time began to hang heavy on Ashima. Far away from her husband's workplace, Ashima has to live a life of confinement all alone in an alien land adding years to the age which paradoxically turns to be the starting point of her diasporic trauma:

For being a foreigner Ashima is beginning to realize, is a sort of lifelong pregnancy- a perpetual want, a constant burden, a continuous feeling out of sorts. It is an ongoing responsibility, a parenthesis in what had been ordinary life, only to discover that previous life has vanished, replaced by something more complicated and demanding. (Lahiri 49-50)

As is expected in a patriarchal society, Ashima sacrifices everything in India only to live with her better half who moved to Boston to materialize his own dream of studying abroad. Thus began the agonized beginning of Ashima's life to live in and through her husband burying her own dreams and desires like a typical Bengali bride. Hers was a life changing sacrifice because she had to tear off the dreams she was weaving in her heart of hearts in favour of taking the responsibilities of and obligations as a wife. America was never ever the land of dreams to her; nor she went there with her husband to pursue the 'American Dream.' Therefore, she never felt at home there, but she had to stay there as long as her husband desired. In her heart of hearts there is an element of nostalgia, a craving for identity or roots in a foreign land where she suffers from existential trauma and identity crisis as well.

Both Ashok and Ashima fail to forge a hybrid identity of their own. Together they suffer from the problematics of belonging. While living in an alien land they try to create a small flavor of Bengal and Bengali culture in America and thereby struggle to create an identity of their own. Within the four walls of their home and with their friends they speak in Bengali and try to create their own community there. They also used to throw parties to their friends in order to create a desi identity in the land which was not theirs. They try to stick to their own culture by preparing Indian food, inviting Brahmins for rituals and the like. An atmosphere of home sweet home is tried to be built for their children and for themselves far away from their real home. This sense of alienation from the western culture and the land where they live create a feeling of being rootless among the children also. They can neither co-relate with the place where they are born and brought up, and nor to the place which their parents belong to and about which they are frequently told.

From the very outset of the novel we get a picture of the immigrants struggling hard to forge a new identity. Ashima finds it very difficult to live in America and hers is a homesick heart as is expected:

Before Gogol's birth, her days had followed no visible pattern. She would spend hours in the apartment, napping, sulking, re-reading her same five Bengali novels on the bed. (Lahiri 35)

It seems as if Ashima no longer able to enjoy her life in America, which, however, adds to her feeling of out of place:

...being a foreigner, Ashima is beginning to realize, is a sort of lifelong pregnancy- a perpetual wait, a constant burden, a continuous feeling out of sorts. It is an ongoing responsibility, a parenthesis in what had once been ordinary life, only to discover that that previous life has vanished, replaced by something more complicated and demanding. Like pregnancy, being a foreigner, Ashima believes, is something that elicits the same curiosity from strangers, the same combination of pity and respect. (Lahiri 49-50)

Ashima being a first generation immigrant finds herself in a round peg in a square hole to make herself accustomed to the forged host culture. Pregnancy was a trying time for her in an alien land with no kith and kins to provide her emotional support. Motherhood is a blessed moment for a woman, but to a diasporic woman like Ashima it is but a traumatic experience. Ashima *“is terrified to raise child in a country where she related to no one, where she knows so little, where life seems so tentative and spare.”*(Lahiri 6)

After Gogol, her light life, is born, she expresses her worry and anxiety thus:

“I’m saying I don’t want to raise Gogol alone in this country. It’s not right. I want to go back.”(Lahiri 33)

But somehow she decides to stay there, and this time for the sake of her child. But the question of belonging to her native land haunts her as she very often calls up her ailing grandmother and, as is natural she is never able to tear off her Indianness. Her this condition represents the majority of the women expatriates who are reluctant to forge a change in themselves only to find themselves adopted to the host country where there are socio-cultural, religious and ideological differences.

When Ashok breathes no more, Ashima starts living between in U.S.A. and in India-

Ashima has decided to spend six months of her life in India, six months in the States.(Lahiri 275)

The novelist relates the sudden turn of her life thus-

True to the meaning of her name, she will be without borders, without a home of her own, a resident everywhere and nowhere.(Lahiri 276)

Even though Ashima has got a local habitation and a name in U.S.A., of say, a driving licence and a social security card in America she feels out of sorts there. In spite of gaining social recognition she does not see home there. Even after her final retardation to India she starts suffering from a new kind of existential trauma The novelist well relates the predicament of the immigrants through the character of Ashima-

Ashima feels lonely suddenly, horribly, permanently alone, and briefly, turned away from the mirror, she sobs for her husband. She feels overwhelmed by the thought of the move she is about to make, to the city that was once home and is now in its own way foreign....For the thirty three years she missed her life in India.now, she will miss her job at the library, the

women with whom she worked. She will miss throwing parties, she will miss living with her daughter...she will miss the opportunity to drive...she will miss the country in which she had grown to know and love her husband.(Lahiri 279)

As is Ashima's suffering in 'The Namesake', Dimple in 'Wife', a novel by Bharati Mukherjee also suffers from the existential trauma in an alien land where she feels a stranger. Like Ashima, Dimple too fails to make a metamorphosis from one country to another. Again the novel 'Wife' like 'The Namesake' also bears autobiographical patches. Simultaneously it deals with the themes of transnational identity and trauma of cultural dislocation. As is expected in a patriarchal society, Dimple's father like Ashima's father Mr. Dasgupta also does not take into consideration the consent of her daughter in matrimonial affair. With zero revolt against this subjugation of women by the patriarchal machinery Dimple accepts her father's choice and enters the wedlock with Amit Basu, an engineer with sky kissing hopes and aspirations. Furthermore Dimple suffers from inferiority complex for her black complexion which again in turn points to racism operating in the society. Dimple cries in desperation-

No one would marry an ugly girl like her, no one would make her happy or treat her with respect.(Lahiri, 10)

Dimple hopes against hope that *'Marriage would bring her freedom, cocktail parties on carpeted lawns, and fund raising dinners for noble charities. Marriage would bring her love.*(Mukherjee, 3)

But soon after her marriage Dimple has to become Nandhini as Amit's mother dislikes the name Dimple, and thus began her identity crisis which worsens as she sails to America with her other half. Like Ashima she also feels culturally segregated there. Pregnancy even does not flood her mind with happiness. Instead unlike Ashima she wishes to go for abortion. Whereas Ashima somehow acculturates herself with the American culture and tries to forge a hybrid identity, in Nandhini's case the bewilderment continues and she fails to assimilate with American culture. Whereas Amit expects economic prosperity in the alien land, Nandhini's is a longing for liberation from societal customs and conventions, for love and life. With the passing of time she discovers the dearth of emotion in Amit for her. This is where she stands apart from Ashima for unlike Amit Ashok had unbounded love and sympathy for Ashima. Ashok also suffers from a hangover for the Bengali culture. Both Ashok and Ashima try to create an identity of their own in the alien land by throwing parties to their friends, preparing Indian food, wearing Indian sari and inviting Brahmins to rituals like annaprason. But on the other hand Amit fails to make out Dimple's needs, expectations. Instead he simply assigns her behavior as 'culture shock' which, he says, happens to Indian wives living in America. Thus, living far away from her own land Dimple's suffering is all the more poignant unlike Ashima's. She feels isolated, rootless, depressed, insecure, unexpressed and unaccepted. Like Ashima she also finds herself in a round peg in a square hole and fails to cope up with the strangers who do not understand her rituals, culture and the like. But unlike Ashima who against her wishes accepts her lot for the sake of her children

and her husband amidst her feeling of being rootless, Dimple devises a plot to put an end to her life somehow. She thinks of ‘...garbage bag, set fire to sari, mode of synthetic fibre, head in oven, neck wrist with broken glass in sink full of scalding dishwater, starve, face on bread knife where thinking of Japanese samurai revivals.’ (Mukherjee, 154)

Amit’s unfeeling nature, lack of love, mutual understanding and support towards his other half – all and sundry rob of her womanliness and this in turn triggers her to be violent towards society as well as family. She stabs Amit several times violently. Even the attitude she displays to blood stain killing is not emotional. She neither suffers from guilt consciousness. Instead she just watches her regular TV serials. She even ruins herself by taking a destructive path. The socio- cultural segregation, Amit’s apathetic attitude towards her emotional crisis and the consequent psychological turmoil changed her view and vision of life. The internal hemorrhage in her heart of hearts made her evolve inwardly from a docile, obedient, submissive and typical Indian wife into a repulsive, dejected, psychotic, sick and furious murderer in order to obtain individual freedom.

Conclusion: So to conclude, the plots of the two novels differ depict the sandwiched experiences of the diasporic women leading to their existential crisis. The main cause of suffering of both Ashima and Dimple is , of course, their feeling of being rootless due to the lack of cultural acculturation. By analyzing these two novels one can understand the plights of the first generation diasporic women. Both the novels deal with the issues like identity crisis, the problematics of belonging they suffer from, love and nostalgia for their homeland, East West cultural conflict, trauma of pregnancy and the like. Ashima overcomes her trauma somehow with the passing of time and adjusts herself and accepts USA though for the sake of her children’s golden future, but Dimple fails to overcome the crisis. She puts herself and her husband to a horrible tragic end raising big big questions about the lack of cultural bonhomie and co-operation they suffer from in an alien land.

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