

Expatriate Sensibility in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* and Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*

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Abstract:

Hybridity marks the life of the expatriates, provoking them into an expatriate sensibility. They are caught in the thresholds which makes them feel dislocated both in their motherland and the migrated land. Cultural identity is reinforced by contact and this is seen in the behaviour of the immigrants who tend to form their own cultural societies. Memory is assumed to exert greatest influence on the expatriates. The pain of exile and homelessness is complexly entwined with the doublevision of looking forward and yearning backward. This article highlights a comparison of the expatriate sensibility visualized in the works of Jhumpa Lahiri and Kiran Desai. Caught in the grim realities enforced by cultural conflicts, both these writers envision the insider-outsider conflict as vital to expatriate sensibility.

Key Words: Hybridity, Expatriate sensibility, Cultural identity, Memory, Homelessness, Alienation and estrangement, Cultural displacement.

Cultures travel, take root or get dislocated and individuals internalize nostalgia or experience. Writers living abroad live on the margins of two societies, and cultural theory are today being created by people who live on the margins. The characters in the novels of the expatriate writers are obsessed with 'insider-outsider' syndrome, which leads to the development of expatriate sensibility. This provides a bifocal vision as these writers present the expatriates fractured and de-centered self, and the expatriate's vision with the intensity of nostalgia and play of memory. The real strength of the modern literary imagination lies in its evocation of the individual's predicament in terms of alienation, immigration, expatriation, exile and his quest for identity.

There is only a thin line of demarcation between the terms 'expatriation' and 'immigration'. While 'immigration' denotes the country into which one has ventured as an immigrant, 'exile', 'emigrant' and 'expatriate' are sad prefixes denoting this 'state of exclusion'. In other words, the expatriate lives on his 'ex' status while the immigrant celebrates his present in the new country. The 'expatriate sensibility' has been accepted as a legitimate literary term in post-colonial literatures. The impulse to take the literary journey home, towards 'history', towards 'memory', towards 'past' is the result of the expatriate's long journey from home. Faced with rejection, the expatriate clings to his ethnic identity. Nostalgia is identified as the

real reason for the expatriates need to evolve ethnic origins. Caught between two worlds, the expatriate negotiates a new space. An anxious sense of dislocation is a characteristic of expatriates. At the same time, they suffer the anxieties of 'homelessness' and the impossibility of going back. Expatriate sensibility can be described as a state of mind and emotion which includes a wistful longing for the past. It is often symbolized by the pain of exile and homelessness. There is a complex view of the double vision of the expatriate – both a looking forward and a yearning backward. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialized past, they are subject to the continuous 'play of history culture and power'. Cultural identity is reinforced by contact and this is seen in the behaviour of the immigrants who tend to form their own cultural societies. When one is severed from one's basic culture do to distance, freedom, or to travel then one resorts to a number of subterfuges to retain one's hold on the basic culture. The adjustment problems of both first and second generation Indians who have settled in America, the tension between adhering to Indian culture and imbibing American culture, between upholding family tradition and subscribing to the individual freedom and the realization that one is an outsider though one is born there, all constitute the elements of expatriate sensibility. It is more inclined towards the contemporary experience in the host society.

An attempt has been made to explore into the lived experience of the expatriate subjects in Jhumpha Lahiri's *The Namesake* (2003) and Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006). Both these novels represent the feeling of the first and second generation Indians, which is an impact of migration. This sensibility results from the self caught up between 'heartland' and 'stayland', between 'roots' and 'branches'. Jhumpha Lahiri and Kiran Desai belong to the second generation of diasporic women writers leading to a bifocal visioning in characters, instability and displacement depicted in their works.

Memory serves as an element which helps the expatriate subjects reconsolidate the past into the present. The strategy of recollection reduces the distance between the alien country and the homeland. Though through the recollection or flashback techniques, the past incidents of the native land are reflected in an immigrant – expatriate's mind. In Lahiri's novel *The Namesake*, the role of memory in the process of change is often used by the writer in an effective way. The novel centers around Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli and their children Gogol and Sonia form an image of the Indian culture from information transmitted by their parents and their occasional visits to Mecca of Bengali culture, Calcutta. This contributes to the reason why the opening of novel is with Ashima recalling her homeland fondly.

In the foreign country like USA and other multicultural societies, each immigrant endeavors to retain his or her ethnic identity rather than to imp into 'melting pot'. (The American concept of 'melting pot', a term used by sociologist John Peter to convey that Canada is the Plethora of different ethnic, languages, regional and religious group) Ashima, in an advance state of pregnancy eating puffed rice with lots of spice and lemon finds its taste is not the same as the ones that are sold in Calcutta's side walk. Her husband Ashoke is an MIT Engineer who has migrated to Boston to wipe out the memories of a train accident he had met with. Soon he finds that the pull of homeland is so strong that he returns to India to marry a Bengali girl. Ashima is thus put into a situation where she is compelled to leave the homeland but finds herself 'adjusting' to her new surroundings. She feels strange and lost in this country

and reading the same five Bengali novels again and again. The thought of bringing up her child in an alien land terrifies her “to raise a child in a country where she is related to no one, where she knows so little, where life seems so tentative and spare” (6). The child is named Gogol after the Russian writer Nikolai Gogol. It was Gogol’s short story ‘The Overcoat’ that Ashoke was reading when he met with the train accident on October 20, 1961 and Ashoke strongly believes that it was because the rescue party found the book drop from his hand that he got a second birth. For a year he was bed-ridden before he could get well. This incident led him to name his son as Gogol, but his son never realizes the cause of his name and struggles to identify either with the Americans or with the Indians.

Alienation and estrangement are inherent aspects of the migrant in which the individual’s identity is torn between the old and new worlds of experience. Ashoke and Ashima’s circle of Bengali acquaintances grow and the cultural spirit of Bengal is recreated whenever the friends meet. While the parents continue to maintain a solidarity with the community, Gogol continues to search for his own identity for a set code that will not make him feel an ‘insider – outsider’. In order to overcome his identity as an outsider, he dates with a girl assuming the new name, Nikhil. Discussing this incident with his friends, he soon finds for himself that it was Nikhil and not him who was the hero of this brave story. Prior to his departure for college, he officially changes his name to Nikhil only to find that his new name is a burden to him and even when his parents use this name he feels “that he is not related to them, not their child” (106). Ashoke and Ashima cannot think of Pemberton Road as their home, but Nikhil refers to his New Haven hostel as his home. The uprootedness felt by the Bengali immigrants, is well reflected upon. Gogol and Sonia, American born and educated want to be accepted as Americans, but this results only in an ‘outsider – insider’ conflict in them.

Throughout the novel, the second generation settlers learn about their culture and country from the first generation immigrants. Ashoke and Ashima tries to bring up their children in the Indian ways but had to concede to their children’s demands of celebrating Christmas and having an American dinner once a week. Gogol’s relationship with Ruth for the first time makes him realize the feeling of loss and longing for the lost which persuades him to attend panel discussion about Indian novels written in English and ponder on the question of identity. Lately, Gogol realizes the real meaning of his name.

Caught in the threshold of two cultures, the immigrants suffer a sense of cultural displacement. Added to this, Ashoke and Ashima who symbolize the first generation settlers want their children to do well and get good jobs. The American dream looms in their eyes and they want their children to exploit the situation and derive maximum benefit even while following the Indian moral and cultural conducts. This becomes impossible for Gogol and Sonia who chart their own lives, is illustrated by resulting failure of Gogol’s married life. Ashoke dies and Ashima decides to sell the house on Pemberton Road, So that she would spend six months in India and six months in the states. “True to the meaning of her name, she will be without borders, without a home of her own, a resident everywhere and nowhere”. In the Christmas Party celebrated at Pemberton Road after the death of Ashoke, Gogol searching for his father’s Camera comes across the book by Nikolai Gogol. As the party goes on downstairs, he sit back to read the book only to reach the ultimate realization that he is an outsider having an insider’s

insight. The expatriate pendulates between one's own root and one's new transplanted position is well evident from Ashima's decision and Gogol's transformation.

Crossing the national boundaries, a recurrent issue of second generation diasporic writers becomes evident in the writings of Kiran Desai but with a development of hybrid identity. *The Inheritance of Loss* spans between two continents and three generations Kiran Desai, by setting her narrative into two parallel venues – New York of contemporary America and Kalimpong, a Small Indian town at the foothills of Mount Kanchenjunga in the Himalayan ranges – has brought into relief the commonality of problems of the two hub of human insurgency, one taint and the other vocal and strident. Set in 1980s in India it recounts an intensity absorbing story. At its centre, is a family of a retired judge and widower, Jemubhai Patel, who was once a student of the Cambridge University but presently living with his granddaughter, Sai who lost her parents in an accident in Moscow. It also pictures his cook, Nandu whose only son Biju is an illegal immigrant in a restaurant in New York to fulfill a materialistic longing for prosperity, but always pre-occupied with the thoughts of his father and childhood days in village in India. The thoughts, actions, aspirations, dreams, memories and sufferings of the two main protagonists, Jemubhai Patel and Biju, as migrants in London and New York, respectively, represent the expatriate consciousness. After the completion of his graduation Jemubhai went to England for higher education but there he feels acutely lonely and sad. In a completely alien west world he feels hesitant to go out and talk and deal with people comfortably. Kiran Desai precisely portrays the suppressed psyche of young Indian – a feeling involved in expatriation – among the White Britishers by picturing Jemu's consciousness of his brown colour, Indian accents, pronunciation and the despising discriminatory racial looks of the whites.

Kiran Desai has portrayed the impact of the politics of globalization and post colonialism on the economic structure of the once colonized nation. Biju migrates to New York visualizing high standard of living and wealth but soon finds the pitiable and humiliating disgraces awaiting him in the new land. Biju epitomizes the plight of the illegal immigrant who has no future in his own country and who must endure deplorable conditions if he is to work illegally in United States. The narrative pictures how the immigrants view Americans. Other minor characters such as Father Borty (a Swiss priest who runs an unlicensed diary) and Uncle Potty share the sense of loss and alienation in their environment and experiences, clinging to 'old ways' unable to adapt to the new. The pain of the unfairness of the world creates a expatriate sensibility in Jemubhai Patel and Biju. They all reconsolidate the past and present through the element of memory and nostalgia. Longing is perhaps the only thing that the characters in the novel do best – longing for home; love and acceptance but rarely achieve it. Alienation creates a state of mental misbalance, estrangement and inability to adapt to the alien land.

Concluding, it can be said that identity crisis along with the insider – outsider conflict is a hall mark of expatriate sensibility. This sensibility changes in course of time and this creates a great difference in the perspectives of the first and second generation expatriates. The challenges of exile, the loneliness, the constant sense of alienation, the longing for a lost world are more explicit and distressing in the first generation expatriates as evident in Ashoke and Ashima in *The Namesake* and Jemubhai and Biju in *The Inheritance of Loss* than for the next generation

represented by Gogol, Sonia and Moushmi. Both the novels beautifully portray the sadder aspects of our existence, the frustrations and guilt that are unwavering aspects governing a family. The web of experiences transforming Ashima Gogol, Biju and Jemubhai Patel is the success over the crisis of dual identity. The new self they discover in themselves, negotiating the obsessions of east and west together contribute to an expatriate sensibility in these characters. The shifting designation of home and its spatial politics do not bother them any more as the world around them is fragmented. The characters of both these novels live in a world of nostalgia, centered on a sort of homesickness, bearing the pains of uprooting and re-routing, the struggle to maintain the difference between oneself and the new unfriendly surroundings. The stories do not offer any solutions for the problems faced by expatriates but point out certain crucial moments turn out to be moments of revelation creating a double vision in them – both a looking forward and a yearning backward. Expatriate sensibility, according to George Steiner, can be seen to occur in every person's life no matter where you lived, even if you lived in the same place all your life, you would look at the past, at the lost moments, lost opportunities and lost loves. This feeling of the expatriates could be summarized with the help of epigraph of Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* as:

...My name is someone and any one
 I walk slowly, like one who comes from
 So far away he doesn't expect to arrive.

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