



Impact Factor: 4.081

East-West Politics of Difference in Jhumpa Lahiri's novel the Namesake and Kiran Desai's the inheritance of loss

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Abstract:

In the history of literary studies, the concepts of orient and occident have always been conflictual, and since the advent of post-colonial literary theory, these concepts polarized the entire academic and literary world, making sectorial as well as geographical divisions, thereby breaking the world order from a fixed center to center-less space. It is also admitted fact that this stance of post-colonial theory provided much needed rationale for the emergence of marginal discourse, but we cannot also deny numerous allegations labeled against the approach of looking at literary works only through oriental perspectives. However, it is beyond any doubt that the sinful, historical relationship between the colonized and the colonizer has been so exposed by the post-colonial theory that marks of contempt and envy are quite evident in the writings, emerging from third world nations. The emergence of large scale third world works, either point fingers at the West, or lament on the treatment colonized subjects received while encountering the so called "civilized" colonizer. In the midst of such volatile environment, the Indian diasporic fiction, acts as a melting pot to synthesize the conflicting notions of two opposing poles. In an age, where fundamentalism, religious intolerance and the cultural conflicts between East and West are ever growing, Indian diasporic fiction apart from highlighting cultural differences also makes it a point of pride to celebrate diversity by breaking shackles of mental and geographical borders. In this context, the present paper is an attempt at looking through the diasporic lens to study how the novels like "the Namesake" and "The Inheritance of loss" deal with East-West cultural conflict in order to synthesize the opposite poles together in an everlasting mutual bond of communal harmony.

Keywords: cross-culturalism, dual identity, alienation, exile, globalization

Introduction: We in India have a short history of English fiction but have produced great writers whom we can genuinely boast and feel proud of. In a country where there is diversity not only of religion and languages but also in the pattern of everyday life and social systems. The huge corpus of national literature possessing the flavor of Indianess not only brings the people of different regions together but also promotes social harmony in the distant and alien lands. The Indian English fiction has not only opened and enriched the countries reservoir of knowledge and new ideas but also played an important role in the progress, prosperity and an intellectual mind set of the global world.

The shadow of fiction overshadowed poetry and drama in a sense that since its inception, this genre produced legendary novelists in the likes of Salman Rushdie,

Arundhati Roy, Amitav Gosh, Aravind Adiga, Anita Desai, Jhumpa Lahiri, Kiran Desai, Rohinton Mistry and others respectively. Among these broad spectrum of novelists, the current paper, as stated above, will try to study how a synthesis of East and West is carried out in the fiction of two immigrant novelists-Jhumpa Lahiri and Kiran Desai .The aim of the study will be to place Jhumpa Lahiri and Kiran Desai amongst the diasporic writers who have gained immense success critically as well as in popular circles. In the last section of the article, special attention will be given how these writers connect local with the global context by exploring the impact of colonialism and globalization on Indian culture and how far are they able to transcend the confines of their singular immigrant experiences and emerge as novelists whose artistic quest can be seen in larger human terms.

Discussion:

Literature of Indian diaspora consists of the huge body of works mostly equally nourished by both male and female contemporary novelists, with creative and imaginative ideas. As the women are more sensitive and prone to subtle changes in the world around, they also experience and intricately record these experiences with minute details. The two Indian women diasporic novelists, Jhumpa Lahiri and Kiran Desai are no exception in this case. They have rendered in fiction both trauma and triumphs of immigrants, living in distant lands surrounded by an alien culture. Their creative powers helped them achieve fame and glory globally. Jhumpa Lahiri Pulitzer prize winner of 2000 is regarded as the original and innovative writer of the diasporic dilemma and dreams. Similarly, Kiran Desai, a Booker prize winner of 2006 possesses a unique power of creativity, showing the tales and tragedies of individuals and families of different cultures and religions placed either in the backdrop of rural India or in the tempting and promising cities of America. The postmodern fragmentation is revealed through their protagonists wavering attitudes toward Englishness, and self imposed departures from their homeland and comparisons between mother country. Each of the Jhumpa Lahiri and Kiran Desai's works expand rather than limits the reader's engagement with the text. In their works, both reader and character exit the world they know and move towards a mutual goal, the reader engaging with a narrative plot while the character crosses a geographical one.

The reason behind increasing critical attention these two post-colonial and peripheral writers demand globally is that their art of storytelling, handling of diverse characters ,weaving of different plots together and their very intimate use of language which makes the reader to suspend her/his judgment and aesthetically enjoy the marvelously woven plots. All these literary qualities among other factors make these two Indian diasporic fiction writers as a worth reading. Also, the examination of East-West conflict in these two South Asian women novelists becomes at once compelling as well as contemporaneous because much of today's theoretical focus remain on such issues as multiculturalism, alienation, hybridity, displacement, cross-culturalism, globalization, economic in-equability, and fundamentalism. As their works exemplify the synthesis of immigrant woes and wedlock's, loss and longing, alienation and belonging, homelessness and motherland, real and imaginary, sense and sensibilities,

local and global and center and periphery, they need to be explored realistically. The utopian tenor of diaspora, and new era and season of discovery of India and abroad is carried out through their non linear narration and hybrid language. They give voice to the voiceless polygon of cultural and psychological forces rooting and de-rooting, assimilating and alienating the whole community of diasporas.

Born to educated middle class Bengali parents in London, Jhumpa Lahiri grew up in Rhoads island (USA), thus gaining firsthand experience of “living two lives in one” Her life divided among three worlds has made Lahiri very much aware of “the intense pressure to be two things, loyal to the old world and fluent in the new”. She realistically and succinctly portrays her diaspora experience in her first collection of short stories, *Interpreter of Maladies* (which won her the Pulitzer prize for fiction in 2000), again in her first novel *The Namesake* and second collection of short story book *The Unaccustomed Earth*, she shows pains of alienation and duality of living in two worlds and tries to enjoin the two cultures. Infact, in the realm of South Asian diasporic fiction publication in the U.S, no one author can currently lay as much claim to the immortelle of renewal and reinvention as Jhumpa Lahiri. Lahiri has championed in the International critical arena as the quintessential “new cosmopolitan” purveyor of an “ethno-global vision”, interpreter of “immigrant angst” and creator of “different type of expatriate writing” whose work goes beyond labels such as ethnic or diasporic.

Kiran Desai daughter of a renowned novelist Anita Desai (b.1971) is also an American Indian inspiring and award winning novelist writing about East west cultural identity and alienation crisis who herald new era and season of discovery of India and abroad. She has written an exquisite novel which won the prestigious Booker prize Award in 2006 and found a place in the New York Times most notable fiction list. The novel is rich in its stunning prose, complex characters and finely captured sense of place. Her first novel *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*, published in 1998, received wide spread fame and praise. It won the Betty Task Award for the best new novel by the citizens of the common wealth of nations under the age of 35. Eight years later *The Inheritance of Loss* won the Booker prize. This extraordinary achievement makes her the youngest woman ever to win the Booker, a distinction previously enjoyed by Arundhati Roy.

Comparison:

What these two novelists have common with each other is that both express the turmoil caused to immigrants as they try to settle down in an alien land. Both emphasize on contemporary social milieu and cultural crisis in their adapted and native land. They attempt to redefine emerging post-colonial issues of globalization, displacement, identitarianism and isolation. They mix the past, the present and the future and the imperial and colonial in their fiction, dislocating time, subverting the imperial and colonial purposes in the process and finally rejoining the two in a voice in which “India speaks” and offering a synthesis of both culturally different poles.

Comparative Analysis:

When we place Jhumpa Lahiri and Kiran Desai amongst the regional/cosmopolitan/diasporic writers, we generally take their sub-cultural status as a starting point, to analyse how far they are able to deal with the issues of

“identitarianism”, “isolation”, “globalization” and economic in-equability. While analyzing their works, it emerges that both these novelists deal with the characters that migrated from poor third world to the affluent west, but in the process of doing so, they fall victims to the terrible cruelty of the system of immigration and lose their innocence, honesty and basic human dignity.

Jhumpa Lahiri’s “the Namesake” explores the dilemma of Indian immigrants living in the promising cities of America. She describes the hardships of two immigrant generations –the first generation immigrants- Ashok and Ashima and the second generation immigrants- Gogol and Sonia. The first generation immigrants suffer from more acute identity crisis while trying to settle down in an alien land. It is because of the cultural history which they carry to the adopted land enforces them to shuttle between two horizons and live a life of an enforced other. The second generation characters try to build their cultural history in the mainstream culture but their mixed biography makes their task somewhat difficult. The central protagonist in the novel, first named as Gogol, and later as Nikhil, wanted to re-name himself to get accommodated in the host culture without knowing that identity depends much more on the name. He longed for the things which lure him in the new land while as his parents have longed, all these years, for the people they love in India. (Lahiri, 177)

Kiran Desai’s “The Inheritance of Loss” moves between the New York and the Northeast corner of the India; between the sense of loss and the sense of possession; between the big notion of colonialism and the small notion of intimacy. In the novel, the character of Biju is representative of those teeming millions who suffer due to continuing western hegemony in the late twentieth century discourse of global politics and who crowded the American cities to realize their unfulfilled dreams, but eventually they either willingly or forcefully return to their homelands, without fulfilling their dreams. Biju, after experimenting with different jobs and meeting different people in America, finally, disillusioned, hears the call from within and returns to India. But while responding this call, he experiences the bitter realities life offers in an alien land. His social and mental migration from colonial to imperial and sanity to madness form the symptoms of trauma, and recall the social and cultural queerness of the displaced scattered Indian diasporas.

Biju, stayed in America a little more than three years. While working in his last employer Harish-Harry’s kitchen at Gandhi Café, one day he skidded on some rotten spinach and broke his knee. It is there he receives what may be called a series of insults from his employer. He tries to form home elsewhere but ends in suffering from the notion of exile (physical as well as emotional). This is the fate of all immigrants who try to settle down in an alien land. The below dialogue gives a glimpse of the treatment experienced by expatriate communities in all over the world: “My responsibility!... you slip in the kitchen. If you slip on the road, then who would you ask, hm?... I take you in. I hire you with no papers; treat you like my own son now this is how you repay me! Living here rent-free. In India would they pay you?... is it my fault you don’t even clean the floor? You should have to pay me for not cleaning, living like a pig. Am I telling you to live like a pig (Desai, 188)

The course of immigrants stay in a foreign country is not only painful but also self absorbing. Migration from ancestral roots is just like the migration from sanity to madness. The meaninglessness of this kind of endeavour is recorded in the following passage:

“Biju overwhelmed by the sheer emptiness of his life in America which had not added up to anything. He was emptying out. Year by year, his life wasn’t amounting to

anything at all; in a space that should have included family, friends, he was the only one displacing the air” (Desai, 268)

When Biju decided to leave America, he was advised by his well-wishers not to go back. Mr. Kakkar, the proprietor of Shangri-La Travel told Biju about the American hegemony in the new and discriminatory economic system. The economic in-equality between the first and third world countries and the impact of colonialism on Indian culture is summed up in the following passage:

“America is in the process of buying up the world. Go back, you’ll find they own the business. One day, you’ll be working for an American there or here. Think of your children. If you stay here, your son will earn a hundred thousand dollars for the same company he could be working for in India but making one thousand dollars. How, then, can you send your children to the best international college? You are making a big mistake. Still a world, my friend, where one side travels to be a servant and the other side travels to be treated like a king. You want your son to be this side or that side” (Desai, 269)

Similarly, in the novel, “the Namesake”, Lahiri examines different aspects of cultural clash between the East and West. Her characters experiment various tactics to maintain balance between home and host culture. From superficial name change to the more internalized value systems, they feel alienated and secluded from the rest of the world. In “the Namesake” Gogol realizes the futility of the name change and believes that:

“There is no such thing as perfect name. I think that human beings should be allowed to name themselves when they turn eighteen, he adds, “until then pronouns.” (Lahiri, 245)

Conclusion:

The diasporic fiction of these two south Asian female novelists not only brings the issues of alienation and cultural conflict to the fore front but also tries to maintain co-existence between different cultures. Their effort rests on creating the ground for different cultures to groom smoothly. They cross the limits of cultural and geographical borders to connect local with the global context by placing their characters in different social settings. They celebrate cross-culturalism as an alternate to break down social and racial hegemony. By doing so, they are able to transcend the confines of their singular immigrant experiences and emerge as novelists whose artistic quest can be seen in larger human terms. They aspire to recover justice and decency in the world, to recover human measure of universal things.

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