

THE PERPETUAL SEARCH FOR IDENTITY AND PSYCHOLOGICAL CONFLICTS IN THE WORKS OF JHUMPA LAHIRI'S THE NAMESAKE AND NINA MCCONIGLEY'S COWBOYS AND EAST INDIANS: STORIES- A STUDY.

R. Saravhanpriya

P.hD Research Scholar

Department of English

Ethiraj College for Women

Email: priyaniketanz@gmail.com

Abstract

*Literature moved into a new phase with the emergence of diaspora that got widespread globally. Diaspora is an umbrella term which falls under two main categories. The first one is the forced migration, here the people were forced to move from their homeland to the host land due to several reasons during the post- colonial period. The next category of diaspora focuses on the people who moved out of their homeland willingly for materialistic reasons. The diasporic literature deals with emotions, search for identity, nostalgia, clash between cultures, return to homeland, alienation, rootlessness, psyche of both the author and the readers. Here the authors deploy their characters in the backdrop to depict their inner thoughts and emotions about their homeland and the host land through immigrant experiences in their works. The current paper deals with Jhumpa Lahiri's novel, *The Namesake* which records the life of the Indian immigrant family that moved to America after independence. This study aims to evaluate the theme of diaspora along with identity crisis and psyche of the immigrants by juxtaposing it with a contemporary short stories collection - "Cowboys and East Indians" by Nina McConigley which is based on the similar theme of diaspora, identity crisis, nostalgia and loneliness in the life of the immigrants.*

Keywords: Diaspora, Cultural clash, Nostalgia, Alienation, Immigrant experience.

Introduction

Diaspora involves the migration of people from the home land to host land. The reasons for their migration could be influenced based on the country in which they resided. Migration can be further delved into two categories, in the first one it is the forced or imposed migration which mostly happened during the post- colonial periods. In this case it was totally a fresh land for the immigrants and so they felt alienated, displaced, metidentity crisis, very importantly nostalgic, exile and cultural clash. In the later one the people migrated from their home land to host out of their

willingness for materialistic reasons here they ended up uprooted. Nicholas Van Hear opines “The notion of diaspora straddles some of the most fundamental and problematic divides in the migration field. Among these is the distinction between so-called ‘voluntary’ and ‘forced’ migration, or in broad terms between labourer economic migrants and refugees or forced migrants” (Van Hear, 34). To define diaspora in particular, diaspora is a vast concept with an expanded meaning, it also faced several transitions in each stage. The diaspora during the historical period and the diaspora in the contemporary era are not the same, there was gradual change in each phase. So, it was strenuous for the theorists to coin a proper definition for diaspora. Stephan Dufoix in his book *Diasporas* points out “In the space of about fourteen years, ‘diaspora’ has evolved into an all-purpose word used to describe a growing number of populations. Both in the media (television, print, and radio) and in scholarly publications, it has replaced such terms as ‘exile’ and ‘foreign community’.” It is “Diaspora” now means “ethnic community by state borders” or “transitional community” (Dufoix, 31).

The field of Literature is one of the influential medium through which diaspora is conveyed. Here the diasporic writers deploy their character in the backdrop to portray their emotions and connections with their home land through their immigrant experience that covers all the diasporic elements.

Moving on to Diaspora in India, it is more about the loss of identity and nostalgia of the homeland. Indian diasporic writers do not cut their relationship rather, there is a search for continuity through the ancestral impulse. But it is also necessary to accept that not all India authors look at their homeland in a pure way, they rather positively criticize it and wait for the homeland to welcome them, there is love for the homeland but there is also a hope that they bear for their homeland to improve. “---they continue to relate personally or vicariously, to the homeland in a way or another, and their ethnic-communal consciousness and solidarity are importantly defined by the existence of such a relationship.” (Safran, 123). The works by the diaspora writers highlights the concepts of cultural assimilation, identity crisis, displacement, rootlessness, nostalgia and alienation. To mention there are many Indian diaspora writers like Anitha Desai, Jhumpa Lahiri, Amitav Gosh, Shashi Tharoor, Vikram Seth, Rohinton Mistry, Bharathi Mukherji, Anithadesai, Nina McConigley, Mira Jacob and Neela Vaswani. Based on their immigrant experience the diasporic writers can be delved into two categories in the first one, the writers would have spent half of their life in the home land and the latter half of the life in host land. Here the writers always tend to be very nostalgic as they always try to establish a connection to their home land. Moreover, after settling in the new land they search for their identity in an abrupt way which leads psychological conflicts in them. In the later one, they were born and brought up in the host land here they end up uprooted. Jhumpa Lahiri and Nina McConigley are one such authors whose autobiographical

characters are in continuous search for their identity which consequently leads to psychological conflicts in them.

Search for identity and psychological conflicts in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* and in select work of Nina Mc.Conigley's *Cowboys and East Indians : Stories*

During the process of migration, the immigrants tend to search for their identity, for them their home land is symbol of their identity and culture. Many theorists opine that identity is returning to history. Hall states “--- if we translate this essentializing conception to the stage of cultural identity – is it that ‘collective or true self hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed “selves” which a people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common” (Hall,1990). So, when exposed to a new land they attempt to identify themselves in the new culture which leads to cultural assimilation and followed by psychological conflicts. Not all the protagonists in literary work have achieved to identify themselves however, some have fascination for the western characters and culture and have handled it convincingly in their works. Lawrence Grossberg points out that

Diaspora links identity, to spatial location and identification, to ‘histories of alternative cosmopolitanisms and diasporic networks’ (Clifford, in press). --- Identity is ultimately returned to history, and the subaltern’s place is subsumed within a history of movements and an experience of oppression which privileges particular exemplars as the ‘proper’ figures of identity (Grossberg,92).

Jhumpa Lahiri is an Indo-American author who writes in a way to portray the stories from the perspective of traditional India and the perspective of the west. Most of her protagonists are a subject of Indian women who are living abroad and facing a kind of loss in terms of identity. They are in a dilemma of what they should choose to do in accordance with their culture and of the present country that they are living in. Therefore, they are in a situation of mixed incomplete identities; of their homeland and the host land which leads to the arousal of psychological trauma in them. Her idea is not to just find an identity, the protagonists eventually accept the way they end and, in the way, that they finally find themselves in. Lahiri belongs to the second generation of Indian Diaspora whose ongoing quest for identity never seems to end.

Jhumpa Lahiri’s first novel *The Namesake* won Pulitzer prize for fiction in 2000 which made her a literary celebrity. It dealt with the lives of the Indian immigrants in America and their perpetual search for identity. The novel revolves around the Bengali couple Ashoke and Ashima and their son Gogol Ganguli. The identity crisis began with the naming ceremony of their first-born son Gogol which led to the cultural assimilation and psychological tension in the novel. Gogol was born in an American hospital, for few days he was nameless child. It is not that his parents did not name him, it was because his parents were waiting to name him according to the Bengali

traditions, they were waiting for a letter from his great-grandmother which carried the name. But the hospital forced the couple to name the baby by intricating them to the fear of 'red tape'. "For they learn that in America, a baby cannot be released from the hospital without a birth certificate. And a birth certificate needs a name" (27) here the phrase 'cannot be released' symbolises the cultural pressure on the immigrants. Fearing the rules in America the couple breaks the cultural stereotype and names the baby as Gogol Ganguli, here lays the first step for the identity crisis which travels throughout the novel. In the American culture this nomenclature may sound alien, like wise Ashima feels a sense of alienation for her son as there were no grandparents or relatives around him, they felt alienated in the new place, new culture and her longing for home land is reflected here. The name Gogol is named by Ashoke in gratefulness of surviving the train wreck, here the train wreck may also symbolise the political stature in Indian society which brought fear in them and made them to flee to an immigrant land.

Later when Gogol turns eighteen he changes his name to Nikhil even more shorter to Niki. When he announces his decision, there is grave silence in the dining table. This affects the psychology of his parents, here the grave silence symbolises the fading Indian culture in Gogol. "Then change it," his father said simply, quietly, after a while. "Really?" "In America anything is possible. Do as you wish" (100). He does this because he identifies himself with his 'Name' in the society, he did not like the name given by his parents, they symbolise the Indian identity and culture. So, he rather creates a new identity to face the American society. Mishra points out "--- the power of name of as markers of identity, the writer takes the readers through the life of Gogol Ganguli, a second- generation U.S. immigrant" (Mishra, 68). Hence the name contributes fragile bridge between the generations and his perpetual search for identity continues and never seems to end.

Moving on to the analysis of Nina Mc.Conigley's *Cowboys and East Indian: Stories*, she is also one such author who used her autobiographical characters in the backdrop to project the identity crisis and diaspora through the immigrant experiences in her stories. It is a collection of ten stories that were earlier published in reputed literary magazines like *Virginia Quarterly review*, *Slice magazine*, *The Asian American literary review* and few more in United States which also which won the prestigious '2014 Pen Open Book Award'. Here she wrote about the rarely mentioned rural immigrant experiences, to quote her words "I also think the rural immigrant experience is just one that is so completely different when you are in place like Wyoming" (Mc.Conigley). Her short story *Dot and Feathers* is similar to Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* where the nomenclature is used as a bridge for the identity crisis.

In *Dot and Feathers* the protagonist SinduThayagarajais a foreign exchange student, she changes her name to Cindy even before starting from India to America. "By the time SinduThayagaraja came to live in Wyoming, she was calling herself

Cindy" (57). For her name symbolized the Indian culture, she was fascinated about the new American culture. She started to search for a new identity in the new place through a new name. She resided with the Jewells and was soon exposed to the western culture and explored the new culture keenly and started accumulating in her life which brought an immense change in her psychological behaviour. When the Jewells and the neighbours were out for celebrations and night outs by chance Cindy began to baby sit, and slowly started to examine the houses of the families she baby sits for and became kleptomaniac, fascinated by fake velvet couches, overstuffed recliners, pumpkins on the front porch, tubs of yoghurt and dill pickles in the refrigerator, she lies down on someone's bed and wonders how it feels to sleep. The cultural impact and the inferiority complex that developed within her were the reasons of such behaviour. The white girl Mari mistook Cindy for tribe because of her appearance "White people were mean to you. What tribe are you? "No. There are two kinds of Indians. Some wear dots, others wear feather. You're a feather Indian. I wear a dot" (63). Here the dot personifies the Bindhi worn by Indian women, which draws the cultural difference of the East and the West. Throughout the story Cindy tries to search for her identity but at the end she fails to succeed in it and rather the cultural shock created the longingness to flee to homeland and found herself totally displaced in a new culture.

Conclusion

The Indian-Americans of the first generations are aware of the cultural differences here they attempt to adopt to the new culture but a psychological battle arises when the modern meets the tradition. On the other hand the second generation Indian- American feel uprooted and dislocated. The identity crisis is evidently mapped in both the works *The Namesake* and *Cowboys and East Indian: Stories*. It clearly implies that the characters have been subjective to biculturalism, dual existence, search for identity, double consciousness, social oppression, racism through appearance and colour, thoughts of exile, exotic, sense of not belonging to a particular group and constant fight against cultural memory.

Bibliography

Dufoix, Stephen., et al. *Diasporas*. University of California Press, 2008
 Knott, Kim and Mc.Loughlin Sean ed *Diaspora: Concepts, Intersections, Identities*. Zen Books, New York and London, 2010.

Lahiri, Jhumpa. *The Namesake*. Happer Collins Publishers, India ,2003.
 Mc.Congileys, Nina. *Cowboys and East Indians: Stories*. Kindle Edition., Curtis Brown Unlimited, 2015.
 Mishra, Binod & Kumar, Sanjay ed. *Indian Writings in English*. Atlantic Publishers, India, 2006.
 News. "Nina McConigley's Book 'Cowboys and East Indians' Wins PEN Award' 20 Aug 2014,
www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/nina-mcconigleys-book-cowboys-east-indians-wins-pen-award-n182446. Accessed 3 feb. 2020