

Postcolonialism and Identity Crisis: A Study on Jhumpa Lahiri's "Mrs. Sen's" and "The Third and Final Continent"

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Abstract:

The positive impact of post colonialism is the cultural mix of the major character with the colonizer creates a new culture and arise a question of diasporic identity. This paper will explore the theme of identity crisis in Jhumpa Lahiri's short stories, "Mrs Sen's" and "Third and final Continent". With the advent of globalization the movement of people from one place to another becomes prominent, results a large number of migrations. It creates syncretism in regard of identity. Jhumpa Lahiri is one of the renowned writers who have been documenting Indian diasporic experience. Being an Indian American herself, she addresses the state of immigrants through her stories. Her stories deal with the condition of Indian origins that have migrated to foreign land and lack a sense of belongingness. The idea of home, in this sense, becomes a mythic one where there is no possibility of returning back despite revisiting homeland. In the story "Mrs. Sen's" and "Third and Final Continent", as a consequence of migration, the characters are found in a state of evolving process of identifying self through assimilation and rejection of culture. After leaving their homeland, some try to negotiate with the new culture where some resist to it. In the process, there is a constant flux in their identity creating a new in between space for them, a space which neither abandon the original identity, historical experience, memories nor accept the new found identity completely. For the purpose of the study, the concept of identity crisis is taken into account through theoretical lens of hybridity, liminality proposed by Homi K Bhaba.

Keywords: migration, identity crisis, diaspora, culture, hybridity.

Introduction:

It is through identity a person gets recognized and a person's identity is highly influenced by the culture of the society- "Cultural identity... is the matter of being as well as becoming...what we really are...what we have become"(Hall 115)". In today's world where people are moving from here to there for the sake of better livelihood, fixating into one identity has become problematic. Homi K Bhaba also emphasizes in his study how monolithic identity is never possible in post colonial discourse. Displacement results encounter of multiple cultures hence affecting one's identity. The problem of identity thus in diasporic literature is found as a prominent theme. The experiences faced by the immigrants are documented by many Post colonial writers. Jhumpa Lahiri is one of them. She herself is a child of Indian immigrants and has personal knowledge of the issue of identity caused by displacement. She documents such knowledge and experience through her stories. "Mrs. Sen's" and "The Third and Final Continent" are two short stories published in her collection, *Interpreter of Maladies*. Both the stories deal with East-West encounter of culture because of displacement where the character are in a state of evolving process of identifying self by assimilating, adapting the culture of the host country, at the same time unable to reject their root culture also. So, they are found in a space of in between negotiating their identity. This paper is an attempt to study the issue of identity in this context through the lens of Post colonial study by taking Jhumpa Lahiri's two short stories "Mrs. Sen's" and "The Third and Final Continent" as primary texts.

Objective:

This paper attempt to draw a brief outline of the post colonial theory and its impact on the literary fictions by pointing out and analysing and understanding some of its major markers, such as – resistance, reclamation, of cultural odentity, subalternity, ambivalence, East-West, us-them binarism, and hybridity, etc. it must be noted that these concepts are still growing and the last word yet to be said about them.

Methodology:

The methodology applied in this paper is absolutely with secondary sources. Further the paper will be purely descriptive and analytical.

Definition:

The term ‘postcolonialism’ though widely used, generally implies –after colonialism, but as we know, conolialism/hegemony/domination ever ends and perhaps began with Adam and Eve. Colonialism is more and more a process of colonizing the mind than a mere process of political subjugation. Much after the overthrow/withdrawal of historical colonialism, the master country (Britain, France, Poturgal etc.) continued (and still continue) to influence/dominate the estwhile colonies culturally, intellectually, and economically.(Robert Young; 2003-3). Postcolonialism is a cultural and intellectual response to and protest against this sort of domineering attitudes of the West. It is more and more concerned with the process of de-colonizing themind set of the post colonial natives and unburdening it of its colonial baggage. As against the colonial concept of hegemony, the post colonialiss emphasize the conceit of cultural hybridity, plularity, and heterogeneity. Post colonialism is thus a name for a critical theoretical approach in literary and cultural studies which offers a critique of empire and its aftermath, but it also designates a politics of transformational resistance to unjust and unequal forms of political and cultural authority anywhere and everywhere.

Discussion:

Jhumpa Lahiri’s “Mrs. Sen’s” and “The Third and Final Continent” are the stories of two Bengali immigrant families who have shifted from Culcutta to America. Their experience as a diaspora is woven by Lahiri. The male characters in the short stories are the Indian Bengali immigrants who have shifted to America for the sake of their jobs and they are taking their wives with them. The cultural difference between India and America has caused them to struggle when they are in a phase of observing their host country. It is through guidebook they started to get familiarized in the newly shifted land- “I read every article and advertisement, so that I would grow familiar with things.....” (Lahiri) While the husbands have been displaced for their working purposes, on the other hand, wives are serving their duty as a wife by accompanying their husbands. In case of wives, the feeling of aloofness and alienated is more recurrent making them to live a life of exile. The feeling of alienation has conquered to their mind as in America, it is a foreign land surrounded by strange culture and in case of India, it is the land which they had left and now are miles away from them. They are alien both in America and in India. It becomes difficult for them to cope with multiple stresses of two different cultures. They have to reconstruct gender identity and locate themselves in the host culture as for they suffer from double dependence.

The immigrants initially observe the host country and their culture followed by adjusting to it gradually- “In a week I had adjusted, more or less.”(Lahiri,2). However, they are unable to dislocate their roots despite dislocating the place of their origin. The sense of belongingness here is not a case of geographical location but psychological one. The idea of home here becomes an imaginary state where the immigrants can never return despite revising their homeland. It remains as a bundle of nostalgia and memories. Their longing to connect to their roots are visible through their repeated use of the word ‘home’, which actually is referred to their homeland- “By then Eliot understood that when Mrs. Sen said home she meant India, not the apartment she sat chopping vegetables.” (Lahiri, 116) In a way or other characters try to recall and relive the moments shared with their dear ones back in their home. But it is only through memory and nostalgia that they can imagine their home. Though they are in a state of adjusting and assimilating to the host culture, the historical experiences of their past in their homeland always lingers to

them positing them in a complex space- “Could I drive all the way to Calcutta? How long would that take, Eliot? Ten thousand miles, at fifty miles per hour?” (Lahiri, 119)

Immigrant’s attempt to maintain a tangible link with homeland by continuing tradition of their origin is vivid throughout the story. Mrs. Sen’s have a blade, a typical curved Indian blade which was hinged on to a narrow wooden base and with a serrated crest and specifically brought from India. She uses it daily while chopping her vegetables. It has become like a ritual for her that emphasizes her loneliness, being distant from home and her isolation in America. The two families in the story are seen strictly adhering to the tradition of India. They refrain from bringing footwear inside the house, a major practice followed by Indian. Food habits and attires are integral part of tradition. Female characters like Mrs. Sen and Mala wear sari and appear as a typical Bengali women in a foreign land. The home-cooked foods provide them a feeling comfort in a land where people mostly consume ready to eat food and both the Indian families here are fond of traditional food. Their obsession to fresh fish is clearly a symbolic of giving a sense of belongingness to their home. In case of Mrs. Sen, fish is like a means of asserting her identity as an Indian. Nevertheless, fish in America never tastes like fish in India for Mrs Sen. Yet, she negotiates that at least fresh fish is far better than the preserved fish found in the supermarket. She finds an alternative to fulfill her need. Through her, Lahiri presents how food habits are very crucial to Indian. In a land of unknown, Mrs. Sen steps out of her comfort zone when her husband no longer retrieve her fish from the market. Driving is something that she hates; it is in a way symbolic to her attitude towards American way of life that she tries to resist. She says “At home, you know, we have a driver”(Lahiri, 113). Though she is learning to drive, she is not confident enough to drive alone. She is still in a phase of adjusting to it. But her longing for fish, which can give her a sense of comfort in alienated world, is so strong that she is ready to take risk and drives to the market in order to meet her purpose. She meets an accident in her way to get fresh fish from the market. It illustrates her complex state of meeting native identity by assimilating host country’s culture but the end result here is none other than but a failure. She fails to establish her identity either as Indian or as American. It is not only the story of Mrs Sen but her experience and condition is the story of every diasporic community. The space where they belong to now is the space of liminality where they are following the historical legacies and their present geographies and social realities. Bhaba describes this kind of subjects as split, decentered and unstable one.

As a result of their stay in the host country, at the end, the immigrants ultimately determine to reside there-“We are American citizens now, so that we can collect Social Security when it is time. Though we visit Calcutta every few years, we have decided to grow old here” (Lahiri). However, they remain as a ‘hybrid identities’, being indifferent to both the host country and the country of their origin. The fear of losing one’s identity is an issue not only encountered by them but their children also face such anxiety. As the first generation retains their connection to their homeland, they also want to transfer this connection to the second generation. But it is different in case of the second generation of migrants. They are far removed from their roots since they are more familiar with the culture of host country for being born and brought up in that country. They are connected to their roots only through the narratives delivered by their parents. The image of culture is formed based on the information transmitted by the first generation. In “The Third and Final Continent”, the narrator’s son is the second generation of Indian immigrants. His parents are in dilemma that after their demise, he can no longer attach himself to Indian identity- “So, we drive to Cambridge to visit him, or bring home for a weekend, so that he can eat rice with us with hands, and speak Bengali, things we sometime worry he will no longer do after we die ” (Lahiri). Hence, defining identity is more complicated for second generation. Though they legally become citizen of host country and fit more into the culture of the host country, in a way or other, they face crisis of identity as their parents perceive their country of origin as home. Lahiri admits in an interview as she herself is a second generation of Indian immigrants- “the question of identity is always a difficult one, but specially for those who are culturally displaced as immigrants are who grow up into two world simultaneously”.

Conclusion:

To conclude, here it is that Jhumpa Lahiri’s the said two short stories “Mrs. Sen’s” and “The Third and the Final Continent” deal with the issues and perspective that appear prosaic but raise questions about culture, identity, the position and condition of the subject in an Americanized neo-colonial world. Bhaba has explored this condition existing between two cultures and yet inhabiting a space that belongs to

none. The short story writer, though being American forms part of the diaspora of writers who may be identified with and analyzed in post colonial framework. During their stay in the displaced country and interaction with the host culture and subjectivities, mode of thinking of diaspora is also influenced by these leading to intervene of multiple the cultures. The plurality of identity thus is emerged leaving them in a crisis to choose between them.

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