

Cultural Sensibility towards Bengali in Jhumpa Lahiri's The Namesake

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Abstract

Every conscious person feels the necessity of his native cultural consciousness to sustain the values of life. It becomes a psychological mechanism which adds many fold advantages by draping a cover of satisfaction over frustration. It is man's existential dilemma which compels to adopt dominant culture of the land where he migrates emotionally he fails to transfer him to alien culture. The Bengali Culture forms a considerable part of Indian culture remarkable for myths, legends, vedic beliefs, tolerance, unity in diversity and universality. The prominent Bengali female authors like Sarojini Naidu, Toru Dutt, Sunity Devi, Bharti Mukherjee, Mahasweta Devi, Jhumpa Lahiri and many more have thrown literary focus on Bengali cultural consciousness in their writings. For instance, Ancient Ballad and Legends of Hindustan of Toru Dutt offers the reader a medley tales from Puranas and Sanskrit epics as well as from folklore. Bengali Dacoits and Tigers of Sunity Devi presents the graphic descriptions of life in the villages of Bengal and customs and conventions prevalently at the time in Bengali Society. An attempt has been made in this paper to study Bengali cultural consciousness in Jhumpa Lahiri's The Namesake. Jhumpa Lahiri in her writings based on cross-cultural themes proves herself unable to forget her Bengali cultural origin. Through her considerable creative talent she tries hard to suggest that Bengali cultural significance is recognized for its ethical and spiritual value not only in India but in the western countries too. And it is the spiritual aspect of Indian culture which keeps the Indian out of fear in foreign lands. Lahiri's much debated novel „The Namesake“ (2003) deals all about a Bengali Family attempting to the best they can by not transforming into American but at the same time retaining their Bengali custom and heritage. The protagonist Ashoke a Bostonian scholar in M.I.T. and his wife Ashima suffer nostalgia and very often desire to be back to Kolkata to enjoy Bengali life-style.

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Introduction

Cultural consciousness is marked with a change in one's practice, habit, mode and manner of living. Every conscious person feels the necessity of his culture in his exile to sustain the value of life. But it is his existential dilemma which compels him to adapt the dominant culture of the land where he migrates but emotionally he fails to transfer himself to the alien culture. The consciousness of native culture works as a controller of moral sensibility. Native culture creates a condition for satisfactory life for these self exiled. It becomes psychological

mechanism which adds many fold advantages by draping a cover of satisfaction over frustration. Cultural consciousness helps a man in self-judgment, self-guidance and self-determination. Women novelists such as Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Bharati Mukherjee, Mahasweta Devi, Chitra Banerjee, Jhumpa Lahiri and others have dealt with Bengali cultural consciousness in their fictional works. Jhumpa Lahiri who is supposed to be a recent entrant into the world of Indian female writers tackles Bengali Cultural consciousness in prestigious Pulitzer Prize winning story collection Interpreter of Maladies (1999) brought her

immediate name, fame and recognition. She recounts the lives of Indians and Indian-Americans who are caught between the culture they have inherited and the world in which they find themselves. Lahiri herself struggles to understand Bengali culture. For instance, she stated, "I always say that I feel that I have inherited a sense of that loss from my parents because it was so palpable on the whole time I was growing up the sense of my parents had sacrificed in moving to the United States and in so many ways and yet at the same time remaining here and building a life and all that entail"¹. Her second story collection *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008) again establishes her as one of the most excellent diasporic writers of Bengali origin. It mirrors the conflicting situation of Indian and American cultural milieus which the older generation settled long ago in America have to face and indulge themselves in reminiscence and nostalgia of their far off country called India. In the title story of the book there is a character like Ruma's father who is seventy and who wishes his grandson to keep the Indian culture vibrant through at least Bengali:

"What color is it ". Her father asked.

" Red"

"And in Bengali?"

"Lal"

"Good"

"And neel, Akash cried out, Pointing to the sky."

Cultural Sensibilities

This research paper aims at projecting the Bengali cultural consciousness in Lahiri's debut novel *The Namesake* (2003) adapted as a major Hollywood movie directed by Mira Nair. It explores the Juxtaposition of Bengali and American culture, rootlessness of tradition, familial expectation. Lahiri analyses the emotional struggle, hardship and frustration of a Bengali couple that has settled in America attempting to do the best that they can buy not only transforming themselves into true Americans but at the same time retaining their Bengali customs and heritage. Further it examines the theme of immigration, collision of cultures and importance of name. The first generation immigrants do their best to retain homeland culture and try to pass it on to the second generation. But the second generation immigrants face cultural dilemma and try

to fit themselves into a culture so different from that of their parents.

The novelist very pertinently initiates her novel with references pertaining to Bengali cultural consciousness. The female protagonist Ashima and her husband Ashoke seem to be in the depth of Bengali culture and tradition. They maintain a tangible link with homeland by continuing tradition and outward manifestation of its cultural tradition. At the initiation of labour pain Ashima calls out to Ashoke but without mentioning his name. She considers a husband's name as something intimate and therefore not to be spoken. So, "she utters the interrogative....., which translates roughly as „Are you listening to me ?"

In Bengali culture children are given two names: 'daknam' or pet name which is used by friends and family. Later on pet name is paired with good name or 'bhalonam' for identification in the world. It appears on envelopes, in telephone directories and all other public places. Names in Bengali culture bear much significance, meaning and sometimes future course of action too. Ashima means she who is limitless without border. Ashoke is the name of an Indian emperor and means he who transcends grief. In Bengali culture it is believed that a name should assert a moral purpose, dignity and enlightened quality. Ashoke and Ashima believe that good names will bring good fortune for their son and daughter. Ashoke names his son Gogol due to the circumstances of his survival in a train accident during which he was reading the work of the Russian writer Nikolai Gogol. In the hospital he rejects the proposal of the compiler Mr Wilcox to name the baby after his ancestors because: "This tradition does not exist for Bengalis, naming a son after father or grandfather, a daughter after mother or grandmother. This sign of respect in America and Europe... would be ridiculed in India."

Retaining the significance of Bengali language in mind Ashima teaches Gogol to say Baba, Dida, Dadu, Mamu, Mesho. She teaches him to memorize the four line children's poem of the Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore. She provides him the concept of Hindu deities "....adorning the ten handed goddess Durga during pujo, Sarswati with her Swan and Kartik with his peacock to her left, Lakshmi with her Owl and Ganesh with his mouse to her right." Ashima sends Gogol to Bengali language and

culture classes every other Saturday at the home of other Bengali friends.

The cultural consciousness among Bengali immigrants helps them to determine the solidarity of their motherland. On Sundays the Bengali gather at one another house, drink tea sing song of Nazrul and Tagore, and discuss the film of Ritwick Ghatak and Satyajit Ray. Ashima and Ashoke do their best to hold on to their Indianness, a concept of their culture they go to attend Kathakali dance performance or a sitar recital at memorial hall. The Bengali immigrants having strong religious consciousness worship „Shakti known as Mother Goddess, a symbol of creator, generator and destructor. Their spiritual consciousness keeps their mind without fear and head high in foreign lands. Cultural ethics provides them self control, feelings of approval and rights to rectify their attitude to get assured in life in quest of peace. This haunting belief in mind encourages a Bengali immigrant to visit Calcutta (Kolkata) during Puja.”

Lahiri's focus on food seems to be one of her literary tools to explain Bengali culture. “There is no baptism for Bengali babies, no ritualistic naming in the eye of God. Instead the first formal ceremony of their life center around the consumption of solid food.”⁷ Many Bengalis staying at different cities of the United states visit the Gangulis on Gogol's Annaprasan day. In mutual support and communal fellow feeling many of them become Gogol's honorary Uncles and Aunts to celebrate the occasion. Culture becomes a moral Guide for the Bengali. They practice it as essential philosophy in life without which life for them appears dreary. Bengali women follow Hindu custom and tradition. Ashima's mother prohibits her “to eat beef or wear shirt or cut off hair or forget her family the moments in Boston.”⁸ Putting on vermilion in the parting of women's hair after marriage, erasing it after husband's death and not uttering the first name of husband are the marks of respect of a Hindu wife for her husband. They love their language even in a hybridized atmosphere. They teach their children how to respect and behave with elders. Bengali women like to wear sari, men prefer to wear dhoti and topi on festive occasions. The second generation immigrants contaminate Bengali cultural consciousness by practicing style immorality, free – sex, kiss and frivolity. As Gogol belongs to the

second generation immigrants, he tries hard to model himself differently from Bengali culture. In his view Russian name has nothing Indian about it. Hence it is suffocation for him to accept the irrelevant and absurd name. Despite his parent's best efforts to keep him Indianised, Gogol starts behaving like his American friends. For instance, he starts smoking with his friends, attending parties at late hours at night dating the American girl Ruth. But he manages to get good grades and gets into Yale University where he learn about his namesake and starts hating his name.

But Bengali cultural consciousness overpowers Gogol after the death of his father. He draws himself away from Maxine and devotes a good part of his time to his mother and sister. He tries to connect himself with his father's past. As per Bengali culture and tradition Ashima erases vermilion pastes from the parting of her hair and discards wedding bracelets. After the funeral, the mother and the son take mourner's diet for ten days without meat and fish. On the tenth day Gogol shaves of his hair with disposable razor and offers a penitential party to family friends to mark the end of the mourning period. Gogol is asked to sit in the front of his father's photograph where the priest recites the Mantras in Sanskrit. Through all the cultural rituals, Lahiri justifies that one can detach from one's motherland but cannot be emotionally detached from one's cultural past. Gogol and Ashima plan to travel to Kolkata and scatter Ashoke funeral ashes in the Ganga for the purgation of the departed soul and pay tribute on Ashoke death anniversary by standing “..... in front of the photograph and drape a garland of rose petals around the frame and anoint his father's forehead with sandal wood paste.”

Conclusion

Thus, Jhumpa Lahiri, a Bengali by origin, British by education and American by citizenship has better understood Bengali cultural consciousness and handled the complexities of the Bengali immigrant's experience. Her Bengali characters on their migration enjoy similar experience like her.

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