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Cultural Assimilation in the works of Jhumpa Lahiri

Abstract

The aim of this research paper is to highlight and understand the assimilation process displayed by various characters in the works of Lahiri. Lahiri discusses the tussle of adoption, adaptation and assimilation between her characters with special reference to the first and second generation Bengali immigrants.

“Assimilation refers to part of the adaptation process initially proposed by Jean Piaget. Through assimilation, we take in new information or experiences and incorporate them into our existing ideas.”

So what does assimilation mean these days? Assimilation in Latin means “simulare”. It means to make similar. Immigrants are expected to become like other Americans, a process metaphorically defined as a melting pot. But that means in practise remains unsettled. Americans as a whole have always been a heterogeneous population – racially, religiously and

regionally. So the question arises as in, how does an outsider fit into such a diverse nation? For some immigrants, assimilation is based on pragmatic considerations like achieving some fluency in the dominant language, some education or economic success, some familiarity with the country's history and culture. For yet others, the whole idea of assimilation is wrongheaded and integration – a dynamic process that retains the connotation and individuality is seen as the better model. It's a "salad bowl" than a "melting pot". Each ingredient keeps its flavour, even as it mixes with others.

The consensus on whether assimilation should be about national principles or national identity. Those who believe in assimilation emphasize a belief in the constitution, rule of law, in life, liberty and pursuit of happiness, ethics and equality. But for those who believe that assimilation is a matter of identity, it means abandonment of all traces of your heritage.

Keywords - Immigrants, Assimilation, Jhumpa Lahiri, Indian Bengalis, Identity, Culture.

Cultural Assimilation in the works of Jhumpa Lahiri

1. Introduction

Definition of Assimilation

Assimilation means to mix, to gel, to blend with the people and culture, we use assimilation when one set of people from a particular culture tries and assimilate with a different culture from a different country. People migrate from one country to another in the prospect of good careers, money, better living conditions, safety and security. The reasons to migrate may vary from social, political, economic to educational ones. The countries preferred by immigrants are affluent ones offering a lot of opportunities to the immigrants. The Indian diaspora writers have dealt at length with the cultural perspectives and the inner conflict resulting from nostalgia, in betweenness, memory, alienation and identity crisis.

Lahiri's work combine the emotional, physical and psychological aspects of the immigrant's psyche and bares the truth displayed by her exemplary writings which marvellously capture and minutely observed depict the nuances of the characters in her stories. "Her stories bring out the predicament of Indians who trapeze between and across two traditions, one inherited and left behind and the other encountered but not necessarily assimilated" remarks Aruti Nayar. As we understand the process of assimilation defined in the Encyclopaedia of Social Sciences, it says, "Assimilation is the name given to the process or processes by which people of diverse racial origins and different cultural heritage, occupying a common territory, achieve a cultural solidarity sufficient at least to sustain national existence".

Alba and Nee in the book, *Remaking the American mainstream* (2003) opine that America's immigrants "may not intentionally seek to assimilate, (but that) the cumulative effect of pragmatic decisions aimed at successful adaptation can give rise to changes in behaviour that nevertheless lead to essential assimilation". (Alba and Nee)

Assimilation thus is not a single process but an ongoing one with different individuals and groups progressing at a different pace. The assimilation of an immigrant is termed complete, "as soon as he acquires the language and social ritual of the native community and can participate without encountering prejudice in the common life, economic and political". (Park in Gordon 1964)

Jhumpa Lahiri on Assimilation

"The question of identity is always a difficult one, but especially for those who are culturally displaced, as immigrants are, or those who grew up in two worlds simultaneously, as is the case for their children." - Jhumpa Lahiri

Lahiri says she never "felt at home" as she had to always struggle and trapeze between India and America. She says it's difficult to have set of parents who consider another place as their

“home”. As a family, Lahiri’s even after living abroad for thirty years always kept looking back, as a result of which Jhumpa never felt fully at home.

“I didn’t grow up there; I wasn’t a part of things. We visited the place often but we didn’t have a home. We were clutching at a world that was never fully with us.” Lahiri’s absence of belonging is evident.

“No country is my motherland. I always find myself in exile in whichever country, I travel to, that’s why, I was tempted to write something about those living their lives in exile. “Lahiri’s Pulitzer prize winning book, *Interpreter of Maladies* has the principle idea of exile discussed throughout. It is a convincing and a minute portrayal of Indian immigrants who are sandwiched in two cultures – the American dream and their Indian culture. Her characters display the tug and war of emotions, loneliness occurring as a result of dislocation, cultural displacement, and a sense of identity loss. This loss is a result of leaving behind friends and family, the heat and dust and migrating to a land of American dreams, strangers and new customs.

Jhumpa Lahiri through her writings brings forth the lives of the Indian immigrants, struggling, adjusting, adopting and in some cases assimilating. The protagonists are always on the tenterhooks and do a tight rope walking between the tradition of the host country, the existing new culture and future prospects which the new homeland promises.

Interviewing with Bookforum, she admits, “The thing, I took for granted when I was growing up is that, I was living in a world within a world. It was a tight world but I knew a lot of people and was privy to the whole spectrum of types, personalities and characters. To me, they don’t represent immigrants or any one specific. They just represent the human condition.

Lahiri has convincingly narrated through her writings that though the first generation was wallowing in nostalgia and memory, the second generation immigrants were on the tracks of assimilation and ready to inculcate the culture of the new land. She says it is very taxing and

challenging for the immigrants to combat with the distress of loneliness and nostalgia than their children who feel neither one thing nor the other. In her collection, *Interpreter of maladies*, there are nine stories depicting the conscious struggle of the first and second generation Indian migrants to the United States. The themes range from battling the sense of alienation to finding love, longing and loss of hope which testifies the Indian immigrant experience particularly of Lahiri and her friends who experienced this.

The stories, “Real Durvan”, “The treatment of Bibi Haldar” are all set in India, especially Calcutta which help her weave the stories as she relies on the memories of her parents to depict an India she did not know. The first two stories are women centric who live on the edge and are exploited by their own people. Her stories are dotted with the details of India and everything Indian.

In “Real Durvan”, the character Boori Ma is a sweeper who is deported to Calcutta after partition. She is lamenting her fate in a voice, “brittle with sorrows, as tart as curds and shrill enough to grate meat from a coconut”. Lahiri brings out poignantly the sadness of Boori Ma with gentle sympathy. Boori Ma was ‘crouched instead in doorways and hallways and observing gestures and manners in the same way a person tends to watch traffic in a foreign city” (Lahiri “Interpreter of Maladies”).

The title story, *Treatment of Bibi Haldar* presents a shop girl who dreams of getting married one day. The story underlines the idea of sexuality. It is understood that Bibi who was an older woman suffering with fits of seizures should marry to get cured. After this prescription, people around start associating her as a sex object.

Lahiri’s another set of stories, “When Mr. Pirzada came to Dine”, “Mrs. Sen and The Third and Final Continent” presents the immigrants internal conflict to belong to a new country and its culture while retaining the roots of their home country. In “When Mr. Pirzada came to Dine”, Lahiri talks about the little girl Lilia who in so many ways echo’s Lahiri’s growing up years.

In “Mrs. Sen”, Lahiri talks about the character Mrs. Sen, who is in the in betweenness of two cultures. She revisits her nostalgia by reading the letters over and again which she receives from India, dressing up always in Indian clothes, refusing to drive, buying and cooking the perfect Bengali fish so on and so forth. She shares her loneliness with the American boy, Eliot, whom she babysits in the US and Eliot here acts as a catharsis and as a catalyst in keeping Mrs. Sen sane and functional.

The next story, “A Temporary Matter”, is about a young couple in the US, Shobha and Shukumar, who lose their child as a result of a miscarriage. They both can never come to terms with this loss and are drifted apart by the communication and the emotional gap which never gets bridged. Shobha, who is working walks out on her student husband which is contrary to the Indian mind set of the gender specific roles. In her story, “Sexy”, she talks about a western woman Miranda, who has an affair with a married Indian Bengali man. They both absolutely have no qualms about their relationship and are very much in love and awe of each other. Extra marital liaisons are not validated by the staunch Indian culture which believes in the sanctity of marriage ties which last a lifetime.

“The Blessed House” is an interesting story of a second generation immigrant who along with her husband moves into a new house in the US. Twinkle is very excited about the newfound statues of Christ and artefacts related to Christianity. For Twinkle, the house is a blessed house but her husband finds no fulfilment. He detests his wife’s interest in the artefacts as a matter of pride and nothing worthy. Families are ruined because of lack of love and understanding and the only saving factor is tolerance. At times, thoughts are violent and lurk like molten lava. Jhumpa Lahiri attempts to show that in the new socio cultural context, individuals are swept into sea of change, holding on to the tether edge of life more precariously than the preceding generation.

Conclusion

Assimilation is never perfect and always takes time. One portion of National Academy of Sciences (NAS) Sept 2015, titled The integration of Immigrants into American Society finds that assimilation occurs through a process called “ethnic attrition” which is caused by immigrant inter marriage with natives, either of the same or different ethnic groups. Assimilation is also accelerated with the second or third generation Americans marrying those from other, longer- settled ethnic or racial groups.

The children of the intermarriages are much less likely to identify ethnically with their more recent immigrant ancestors and due to spousal self-selection, they are likely to be more economically and educationally integrated as well. American identity in the United States is not based on nationality or race explaining some of the better assimilation and integration outcomes here.

“Assimilation refers to part of the adaptation process initially proposed by Jean Piaget. Through assimilation, we take in new information or experiences and incorporate them into our existing ideas.”

The concept of diaspora gives birth to new issues and concepts. Multiculturalism is one of the important concepts often used with diaspora. The process of immigration resulted in the multicultural society. The migrant carries culture wherever he goes. The migrated community has to live with the two cultures at the same time. One is of the origin, and one is of the host culture. They cannot fully assimilate the new culture as they cannot get rid of their own culture completely. This results in bi-cultural society, which eventually leads to the formation of multi-cultured society. Particularly, in this age of globalisation, no country can limit itself to one culture and one religion. Nowadays, these limitations are outdated. The society has become multicultural. This new society is dealing with new qualities in personal life and ways of life.

In multicultural society, different cultures came into contact with each other. Their ideologies are different. Their behaviours are distinct. The physical appearance, language, clothing style and overall lifestyle of the immigrants can be quickly located among the native people. The configuration of multicultural societies obviously gives birth to the much discussed term of multiculturalism. Due to the number of reasons for cultural interactions, we are heading towards the end of mono cultural society. In the present age, no country can maintain single culture. The free trade and globalization movement occupied even the most remote corner of the world. It leads to multiculturalism.

Generally, the term multiculturalism refers to the state of both cultural and ethnic diversity within the demography of a particular social space. In general, a multicultural society is created when people from different countries migrate to one place. In such a multicultural society, there is no official culture. Instead, all cultures respect each other. Multiculturalism can also be described as a policy aimed at encouraging the interaction of people from various cultures in a country to enhance reciprocal respect for one another as well as give equal rights and opportunities.

The meaning of multiculturalism depends largely upon the background in which it is discussed. In Canada, it is taken as a political policy while in America it is regarded as a social as well as political movement. It can also be illustrated as a social ideology as this concept involves an exchange of different cultures. This exchange may be non- violent or may give birth to social strife and violence. As a social ideology, multiculturalism becomes a positive force for generating socio-cultural harmony, mutual tolerance and respect for different ethnic groups and their distinct cultures.

Issue of cultural assimilation emerges as one of the concerns in the works of Jhumpa Lahiri. She herself has faced this problem of duality of culture. She was raised by the parents who belonged to the first generation of migrants and so had more emotional and real association

with Indian culture. Jhumpa Lahiri belonged to second generation and therefore she was more adoptive and open to assimilate the influences of American Culture in her personality. It is to be understood that this does not completely free her from dilemma of cultural identity. Many of her characters also face the same challenges of cultural assimilation. She has authentically and realistically rendered the cultural experiences of immigrants through the medium of her fictional characters. Adapting to new culture is inevitable necessity but at the same time giving up the native culture completely is impossible. Jhumpa Lahiri's character belong to the multicultural world. Their roots are in India but their present experiences come from the reality of the western world. Therefore, it is to be understood that diasporic reality is neither static nor singular in nature. It is dynamic and pluralistic. Lahiri beautifully captures this emotion in her works.

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