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MULTI-CULTURAL DIMENSION OF CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY: EXPLORATION IN  
KIRAN DESAI'S 'THE INHERITANCE OF LOSS' AND JHUMPA LAHIRI'S  
'THE NAMESAKE'

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ABSTRACT

Multiculturalism" is the co-existence of diverse cultures, where culture include racial, religious, or cultural groups that is manifested in customary behaviours, cultural assumptions and values, patterns of thinking, and communicative styles. Immigrant minorities include permanent settlers who possess their own language(s) and culture(s) which are distinct from those of the host society.

From the perspective of cultural hierarchy, this paper mainly discusses the influence on the Indian people of the novels 'The Inheritance of Loss' by Kiran Desai and 'The Namesake' by Jhumpa Lahiri. In the last two decades, there has been an astonishing flowering of Indian women writings in English and the literature of the period in published both in India and in the entire world. The authors are mostly western educated who express in their writing their discontent with the repressive tradition and culture that entrap entire mankind in the shackles of 'unidentified and suppressed individuality'.

Along with the continuous cultural domination of the West from colonial days to the current globalizing world, the tension which comes into existence with the colonialism has not been weakened in the postcolonial world. This can be observed in both the writers that the cultural tension or conflict is not only between the British and the Indian as the previous colonizer and the colonized, but in a larger scale between the Indian and the Western culture which is not anchored in the United States. Britain to the U.S., it is always the domination of the western culture that set India in a cultural predicament. There remains the identity crisis which many of the Indians face despite multicultural reactions which endeavours to revitalize indigenous culture and its values. In Kiran Desai's 'The Inheritance of Loss', despite political freedom, cultural differences are directly manifested through the characters. They fail to assimilate new culture and give up original culture in totality.

The Indo-American diaspora Jhumpa Lahiri document the trauma of the protagonist on different context. The novel shows how the immigrants face cultural dilemmas in the foreign system. Lahiri shows that the immigrants in their enthusiasm to stick to

their own cultural beliefs and customs gradually imbibe the cultural ways of the host country too.

Both above mentioned novels mainly surround the theme of multiculturalism, globalisation, terror and identity in the lost world and this paper focuses on some of these themes. It looks at the concept of globalisation in the light of post coloniality to show how nations and cultures are universalized.

Key words- multiculturalism, immigration, globalisation, generation gap, identity, loneliness

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In the last two decades, there has been an astonishing flowering of Indian women writings in English and the literature of the period is published both in India and in the entire world. The authors are mostly western educated who express in their writing their discontent with the repressive tradition and culture that entrap entire mankind in the shackles of 'unidentified and suppressed individuality'.

Along with the continuous cultural domination of the west from the colonial days to the current globalizing world, the tension which comes into existence with the colonialism has not been weakened in the postcolonial world. This can be observed in both the writers (Kiran Desai and Jhumpa Lahiri) that the cultural tension or conflict is not only between the British and the Indian as the previous colonizer and the colonized, but in a longer scale between the Indian and the Western culture which is not anchored in the United States. Despite the power shift in the western world after the Second World War from Britain to U.S., it is always the domination of the western culture that set India in a cultural predicament.

Jhumpa Lahiri's 'The Namesake' and Kiran Desai's 'The Inheritance of Loss', both the novels mainly surround the theme of multiculturalism, globalization, terror and identity in the lost world. 'Multiculturalism' is the co-existence of diverse cultures, where culture include racial, religious or cultural gaps that is manifested in customary behaviour, cultural assumptions and values, patterns of thinking, and communicative styles. Immigrant minorities included permanent settlers who possess their own language(s) and culture(s) which are distinct from those of the host society.

The novel 'The Namesake' shows how the immigrants face cultural dilemmas in the foreign system Lahiri shows that the immigrants in their enthusiasm to stick to their own cultural beliefs and customs gradually imbibe the cultural ways of the host country too. She explores the fashionable themes of racial and cultural identity. "Its theme of dislocation and the pain of building a new life in a different world shows that in building the new life, something must also be destroyed"<sup>2</sup>. Jhumpa masterfully explores the themes of complexities of the immigrant experience and foreignness, the clash of life-style, cultural disorientation, the conflicts of assimilation, and the tangled lies between generations and paints a portrait of an Indian family torn between the pull of respecting family tradition and the American way of life.

Lahiri, the Bostonian, is a true-blood Bengali. In spite of having lived all her life in the U.K. and U.S.A., she shows the subtle nuances of typical Bengali life and culture, like the back of her hand. While her Pulitzer-winning collection of stories 'Interpreter of Maladies' is mainly based on her experience in Kolkata, her novel 'The Namesake' powerfully depicts the disillusionment of the Bengali immigrants to the US, whose children grow up rootless-alien to the culture of their country of origin, not completely comfortable in the society in which they actually live.

"Jhumpa Lahiri's stories do not revolve around the "Indian ness" of the characters. India is always in the background, but the characters and their emotions are simply human."<sup>1</sup>

Lahiri often toys with the reversal of gender roles, especially as they relate to husband and wife roles within marriages. Whereas in India, a strict set of guidelines dictates how husbands and wives act both publicly, in America, such guidelines are not as clear-cut and, oftentimes, are thrown out altogether. Lahiri's married characters often deal with confusions of marriage roles in relation to cooking, working outside the home, and bearing children. According to Lahiri's generalizations of Indian marital culture, women are solely responsible for cooking and doing household chores, as well as becoming completely domesticated with the arrival of

children. Men are, according to such guidelines, responsible for working and providing their families with a monetary income.

Ketu H. Katrak reads .....”Lahiri’s stories show the diasporic struggle to keep hold of cultures as characters create new lives in foreign cultures. Relationships, language, religion and rituals all help these characters maintain their culture in new surroundings even as they build a “hybrid realization” as Asian Americans.<sup>2</sup>

What is more important is the fact that however deep and wide ranging the experience of meeting different people and living in different places may be, Lahiri in her own inimitable style convinces us through her characters that there is always something new, something unexpected in life. How true the narrator is when she says, “There are times I am bewildered by each mile I have travelled, each meal I have eaten, each person I have known, and each room I have slept. As ordinary as it all appears, there are times when it is beyond my imagination.”<sup>3</sup>

The story begins in 1968. ‘The Namesake’ takes the Ganguli family from their tradition bound life in Calcutta through their fraught transformation into Americans. On the heels of their arranged wedding Ashoke and Ashima settle together in Cambridge, Massachusetts. An engineer by profession, Ashok adapts far less warily than his wife, who resists all things American and pines for her family. She remains the typical lady in spite of her physical location in Cambridge, for so many years. At the beginning, when she is in the labour and her water breaks, Ashima calls out to Ashok, her husband. However, she does not use his name because this would not be proper. According to her, “It’s not the type of thing Bengali wives do.....a husband’s name is something intimate and therefore unspoken.....cleverly patched over.”<sup>4</sup> From the statement we are shown how important privacy is to Bengali families. Ashoke is forward-thinking, ready to enter into American culture if not fully at least with an open mind. His young bride is far less malleable. Isolated, desperately missing her large family in India, she will be at peace with this new world.

Soon after they arrive in Cambridge, their first child is born. According to Indian custom the child will be given two names: an official name, to be bestowed by the great grand-mother, and a pet name to be used only by family. But the letter from India with the child’s official name never arrives, and so the baby’s parents decide on a pet name to use for the time-being. Ashoke chooses a name that has particular significance for him: on a train trip back in India several years earlier, he had been reading a short story collection by one of his most beloved Russian writers, Nikolai Gogol, when the train derailed in the mid of the night, killing almost all the sleeping passengers on board. Ashoke had stayed awake to read his Gogol, and he believes the book saved his life. His child will be known, then, as Gogol. But Gogol, because of some circumstances cannot adjust between these two cultures, resulting it always haunts him to be called Gogol. He finds his strange name a constant irritant, and eventually he changes it to Nikhil. Gogol knows only that he suffers the burden of his heritage as well as his odd, antic name.

Gogol’s rebellion against his past reaches a crescendo the summer before he leaves for college. For many years, Lahiri tells her readers, Gogol had been uncomfortable with his name. Children teased him, teachers mispronounced the name, and Gogol, himself, saw the name as a burden. He often wonders how he can truly fit in with his American friends- or American girls-with a strange name like Gogol. Even worse, he feels none of his father’s affinity for Nikolai Gogol, the Russian author for whom Gogol is named. Perhaps it is inevitable; therefore, that Gogol must change his name. Still, the scene of Gogol marching into a Massachusetts courtroom shortly after his 18<sup>th</sup> birthday and telling the presiding judge that he “hates the name Gogol” seems like betrayal to his past. But for Gogol, now known as Nikhil, the new name is a salute to his future-a future without having to justify or explain his confusing name.

Gogol, it seems, believes that switching his name can erase the complications of his past. But Lahiri knows better. While the characters in the novel slowly learn to accept Gogol by his original name symbolizes that a simple name change does not alter the fabric of a person. Indeed, her refusal to acknowledge Gogol’s new name is not an act of disrespect. Rather, it is a symbol of something that Gogol must one day learn for himself: the past cannot be erased. The past is woven into the fabric of our beings.

Like every American kid, Gogol eventually moves away from home. He does not hate his parents. Far from it, he is very devoted to them. But the things they say do not interest him and their Indian way of life means nothing to him. He detests the way they hold on to Indian tradition and functions that are of no importance to his American mind. He hates it when his parents whisk them off to Calcutta. A place the couple still consider home, for months together, disrupting his entire schedule. In spite of his yearly sojourns to Calcutta, he does not feel bound to India as they are.

Unfortunately his parents fail to understand him too, though they do try to give him the best of both worlds by religiously celebrating every Indian and American holiday. Ashima teaches Gogol 'to memorize a four line children poem by Tagore, names of deities at the same time when she goes to sleep in the afternoon she switches the television to channel-2 and tells Gogol to watch 'sesame street' and the electronic company "in order to keep up with the English he uses at nursery school"(54). Though initially Ashoke did not like the celebration of Christmas and thanksgiving but as Gogol recalls that ".....it was for him, for Sonia (his younger sister) that his parents had gone to the trouble of learning these customs"(286). Their own children groomed to be 'bilingual' and 'bicultural' face cultural dilemmas and displacement more though forced to sit in pujas and other religious ceremonies along with the children of other Bengali families. Gogol and Sonia, like them, relish American and continental food more than the syrupy Bengali dishes and enjoy the celebration of the Christmas.

'The Namesake' is a novel that celebrates the cultural hybridity resulting from globalization and the interconnectedness of the modern world and rethinks conventional immigrants' experience. Lahiri is aware of the existing problem of cultural diversity in the multicultural United States, and she argues that the struggle to grasp a transnational identity becomes an urgent issue for immigrants in this environment.

Gogol does not think of India as his country or 'desh', he sees himself as purely American. Though Gogol considers himself an American, he is brought up by between two diametrically different cultures. He struggles to reconcile his dual culture. On one hand, he is fascinated with the free and happy lifestyles of his American girlfriend, Maxine. On the other hand, he feels a sense of obligation towards his parents. Lahiri's character attempts to form a multiplicity of identities in a process of cultural formation.

Kiran Desai's 'The Inheritance of Loss' also revolves around ideas of race, and cultural identity; it focuses mainly on Indian culture and how it has both integrated with and influenced Western culture. As her early life demonstrates that she herself has been a part of multicultural society. She lived in India until the age of 14, and then went to England for a year, and finally became a permanent resident of the U.S., and thus apparently got to discover the lifestyles and the associated tribulations of the three countries. The opportunity of close interaction with three countries has been her inspiration for this novel, but the familiarity with the three distinguishing cultures might have played some role in the development of the script.

In colonial days, the western language and culture were equated with power, and were therefore greatly admired among Indians. In this way, the re-stratification of Indian society by English education resulted in the establishment of cultural hierarchy- the western culture occupied a predominant position compared to the native culture. The fundamental reason for the British colonists accepted this superiority so as to constitute its imperial power. On the one hand, the imperial centre wanted to instil this kind of cultural hierarchy in its colonizers so that it would sustain the colonial power.

For Indians, the acceptance of cultural hierarchy may be even more troublesome. It leads to some long-lasting personal dilemmas that are hard to resolve. One of them is the identity crisis. The judge Jemubai may be the best example. He was born in India but went to England to receive the college education. The judge's life in London was one of loneliness and humiliation where "he retreated into a solitude that grew in weight day by day. The solitude became a habit, the habit became the man, and it crushed him into a shadow"<sup>5</sup>. The judge had no family in England, no real friends, no one to talk to, no one to help him or support him; he was utterly and miserably alone as that giant squid which Sai read about in the beginning of the novel, "theirs was solitude so profound they might never encounter another of their tribe"<sup>6</sup>. He felt himself to be hated and mocked of by the English who said, "Phew, he stinks of curry"<sup>7</sup>. And he became so introvert that he started hating himself, his skin colour, and anything that made him Indian, his true identity. He started escaping away from it. Thus he used

powder to hide his real self and to lighten his complexion. The judge's hatred grew to such an extent that "He envied the English. He loathed Indians. He worked at being English with the passion of hatred and for what he would become; he would be despised by absolutely everyone, English and Indians, both"<sup>8</sup>. The judge's education in England caused him so much pain and suffering that he desperately tried to become as English as could send him to England.

When the judge returned home, it became clear how terribly his encounter with the English altered his cultural identity. Nimi, his wife whom he barely knew embodied everything that was Indian and that he despised. He seduces her after she is caught to have stolen his precious powder puff to "teach her the same lessons of loneliness and shame he had learned himself"<sup>9</sup>. Eventually, the judge sent Nimi back to her family where she gave birth to a daughter before she died. The judge's encounter with the English culture is so humiliating and filled with such strong feelings of resentment and anger that he becomes doubly displaced when he returns home. He is neither European nor Indian, and becomes an immigrant in his own self.

We can perceive the attempt to resist western domination from the young people such as Biju, Gyan, and Sai, though the resistance is hardly effective. They are a little different from the judge and the cook who accept the existing cultural hierarchy whole-heartedly and make no effort to resist. They try to resist but they are still trapped by the influence of the West. Biju is sent to the U.S. by his father with a travelling visa. After his visa is expired, Biju works illegally in the basements of the New York restaurants with many other illegal immigrants from the Third World. Biju comes to the U.S. with his, or rather his father's 'American dream', since it is always his father who tells Biju how modern the U.S. is and how easy to get rich there. Throughout the novel, Biju is fond of modernity of the U.S. which he does not have the chance to experience though he is in the States. However, being in the west reveals to him another side of it, that is, the disorderly and uncivilized side. The presupposed cultural reality of the West begins to collapse. One day, Biju amazingly discovers that Indian men in New York restaurants order beef without hesitation. The behaviour is certainly against Hindu observance, but it seems they do not care at all. He at once feels repulsive towards this disorderly situation "one should not give up one's religion, the principles of one's parents and their parents before them. No matter, what. You had to live according to something"<sup>10</sup>.

Sai too becomes a westernized Indian growing up in the house removed from cultural influence, which the judge creates. Sai comes to live with her grandfather, she studies in a convent school where English is the teaching language and the English culture is what she learns. She leads a relatively lonely life in her grandfather's mansion until she meets Gyan, the Nepali tutor. The different backgrounds in which they grew up lead to diverse attitude towards the western culture and finally threaten their relationship. Gyan is aware of their different backgrounds when first dining with Sai, because Gyan uses his hands without a thought and Sai eats with a fork. Gyan is not familiar with the western way of eating later when he dines at the judge's house, his awkwardness with the fork and knife is shown again. Interestingly, he feels ashamed of it.

The sense of inferiority surging in Gyan is a result of his fondness of the western style yet his unfamiliarity with it. Annoyed about feeling inauthentic in the western culture which Sai and her grandfather are immersed in, Gyan retreats to his own culture so as to refuse the approaching of any other culture. Joining GNLF (Gorkha National Liberation Front), he submits to "the compelling pull of history and found his pulse leaping to something that felt entirely authentic"<sup>11</sup>.

Among Nepalese, he recovers a feeling of identification by mocking on the judge's mimicry of the western lifestyle. In fact, even those participants in insurgency are not un-influenced by the western culture. They wear T-shirts of American brand and admire Bruce Lee, an icon of martial arts in Hollywood. As now-a-days, more and more parts of the world are cross-related, rendering cross-cultural exchanges and influences inevitable. Gyan's relationship with Sai breaks up in series of quarrel beginning from Christmas, which indicates his own dilemma in the encounter of two cultures sai sharply points out Gyan's fondness of the West and it is hypocritical and stupid for him to take refuge in the Nepali culture for a sense of authenticity. When fighting on Christmas day, Gyan argues that it is completely nonsense for a non- westerner to enjoy such a holiday, while Sai insists that it is only an excuse for a party, which shows her broad-mindedness towards a different culture. Grown-up in the

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convent school, Sai, like her grandfather, speaks English better than Hindi and has a lifestyle more English than Indian. But that does not mean she is an Anglophile like her grandfather.

She refuses to accept the idea that the Indian culture is inferior. She feels humiliated and angry after she reads a paragraph written by an English writer, which advises all the gentlemen, whether or not they have required the habits and manners of the European, not to enter into the compartment reserved for Europeans. The writer suggests that Indians should enter the one set apart for them because of their race. This is a piece of writing full of the sense of superiority as the colonizer intending to inoculate Indians with the colonial mentality, Sai feels angry about it and at the same time realizes the lasting domination of the western culture after the independence. She has grown up in the hybridity of two cultures and she accepts the difference of them peacefully.

However, the novel also shows by the end, that it is possible to change or bend an identity into one with respect and appreciation for all people. As the world continues to integrate and the boundaries of the countries and cultures disappear through globalization, it is becoming more and more unacceptable and politically incorrect to separate people based on race, wealth, origin, religion, gender, language or any other distinguishing human trait.

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