

Quest for Identity in Indian Literature

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Abstract : Identity being multidimensional is a person's conception and expression of their individuality or group affiliations. It is a distinctive characteristic belonging as a unique trait within an individual or shared by members of a social group. The formation of identity however differs in each individual, it occurs as and when a person identifies themselves with significant others especially parents and other individuals who play a vital part in biographical experiences of the person in question. These features may prove to be benign so much so that the person aspires to their characteristics, values and beliefs or malign when one wishes to dissociate from their characteristics (academic journals). The process of identity formation differs from person to person, the real quest for identity begins when the mould that you have placed yourself in is challenged. There is a constant need to identify yourself as a part of a group and develop your identity in a manner that helps you garner acceptance. The objective of this paper is to traverse the journey undertaken by the characters in Jhumpa Lahiri's 'The Namesake' and a collection of short stories named 'Interpreter of Maladies' including 'A Temporary Matter', 'When Mr. Pirzada comes to Dine' and the title story as they embark on their quest for identity

Indian identity is the cultural, social, economic and political belief. Indian identity has a variety of meanings to different people, no two individuals will agree on what it actually connotes. One can opine that India is a hybridized nation. It has the mix of many Indian cultures along with a dash of foreign that adds to its hybridity. Thus the question of Indian identity has become a debatable question. Theorist Erik Erikson has coined the term identity crisis and believed that it was one of the most important conflicts people face during development. According to Erikson, an identity crisis is intensive analysis and exploration of different way of looking at yourself from within (verywell.com).

In almost all cultures and civilizations, woman is at the centre of life with her creative wisdom and myriad forms for her female angst. She has experiences of being patronized, bypassed and ignored. Her feminine psyche has to cope with the pain, rather than privilege, of performing different roles in a male dominated society. Women have the right to celebrate their womanhood; they sing women's dream and speak their bodies. For as long as women did not write they were not heard. Women's writing then, is like raising consciousness. Jhumpa Lahiri was the child of immigrant parents in America, as a child she faced the quest for identity which was unable to provide her with any answers. Her parents strived to bring her up with Bengali culture while on the other hand she witnessed a different culture while growing up. Such second generations feel sandwiched between the country that they originate from and the country of their birth and struggle to maintain ties between both. In the process they suffer from acute identity crisis. This dilemma in Lahiri's mind is reflected through the character of Gogol in 'The Namesake'. The first generation's story is about adaptation and learning along with discovering new things about themselves. The parents try to maintain ties with their home country and try to inculcate within their children the values of their home country. The second generation tends to find themselves between two conflicting realities. They are either fascinated by the host country or country of their birth. In 'The Namesake', this clash can be seen between Ashoke, Ashima and their son Gogol. America in the 1970's did not let a newborn child go unnamed from the hospital. So in order to release his newborn son and wife, Ashoke Ganguli gave his son the pet name of Gogol after his beloved Russian author Nikolai Gogol. Ashoke has great reverence for this author as Gogol is born after his father survives a horrid train accident. Ashoke sees the name of Gogol as a gesture of his rebirth. But this very name which proved to be the first identity of his son, is the first factor that contributed to the problem of identity crisis.

As a child Gogol has got used to his name and even though his parents wished for him to be called by his first name Nikhil in school he is reluctant to accept the new name and asks the authorities to address him as Gogol. This was his first attempt to reject dual identity. This left him with his pet name Gogol. Gradually he began to place the uncommonness of his name which problematizes his identity as he grows up. He wishes to be identified as an American but does not feel the same with his name being Gogol. Gogol fails to understand the emotional significance of his name. When he comes to know about his namesake, the Russian author, he becomes desperate to get rid of it.

"Gogol sounds ludicrous to his ears, lacking dignity of gravity" (Lahiri, 76)

As he enters freshman year at Yale, Gogol becomes Nikhil. He feels relief and a sudden rush of confidence at this transformation. He is finally able to relate himself with the American environment. He begins to walk on grounds that Gogol would never dare trespass on. But a new predicament surrounds him.

"He does not feel like Nikhil" (Lahiri, 105)

With the rejection of Gogol's name, Lahiri rejects immigrant identity nurtured by parents. Gogol is in and out of relationships but he is never satisfied from within. He lives his life the American way; away from his parents, working to sustain himself. He hates everything that reminds him of his past and heritage. But the loss of his actual name wasn't an easy task to forget and when he makes his alternate weekend visits to his parents place,

"Nikhil evaporates and Gogol reenters again" (Lahiri, 106)

Gogol is an outsider in American society whereas he does not feel intimacy with his Indianness either. Even after making great efforts to erase his past, his failure to assert his identity is seen in his relationship with women. He does not want Ruth or Maxine to meet his parents. He goes to such an extent to escape his identity. He experiences a feeling of being in-between. Soon he feels a sense of futility and dissatisfaction about avoiding his roots.

“Without people in the world to call him Gogol, no matter how long he himself lives. Gogol Ganguli will, once and for all, vanish from the lips of loved ones, and so cease to exist. Yet the thought of this eventual demise provides no sense of victory, no solace. It provides no solace at all.” (Lahiri ,289)

In the end he chooses to stick with Gogol is Indian identity as he realizes that everything he has gone through, from the time of his naming to his realization of hope behind the meaningful fragment of who he is. The death of his father brings a great change in him. He learns that he cannot abandon or diminish the importance of either culture but must learn to merge them together. The dilemma of a name cannot be solved by the name on record but the identity of an individual is consistently affected by society which has to be discovered through a process of reflections and negotiations (Chandna). The question of identity is always a difficult one to crack, especially for those who are culturally displaced, as immigrants are, or those who grow up in two worlds simultaneously, as is the case for their children. For immigrants, the challenges of exile, the loneliness, the constant sense of alienation, the knowledge of and longing for a lost world, are more explicit and distressing than for their children. On the other hand, the problem for the children of immigrants, those with strong ties to their country of origin, is that they feel proximity to neither. This can be seen in Jhumpa Lahiri’s ‘Interpreter of Maladies’.

In the first story titled ‘A Temporary Matter’ describes the conflict that a second-generation Bengali originated couple suffers and how a cultural tradition of Bengal saved their marital bond from a split. Both Shobha and Shukumar, though married to each other, are physically united but spiritually across the ocean. Although pregnant, Shobha engages herself in her proof reading job and also prompts her student husband to go and attend a conference in Baltimore which would be beneficial for him. Things take a different turn when Shobha suffers a miscarriage and Shukumar holds his dead fetus close to his heart despite being informed that his wife had persuaded the doctor not to reveal the sex of the child to either of them; this has been a secret that he holds dear to him for the past months. The mechanism of materialistic life has blinded them to the real issues of life. Shukumar broods on how he and Shobha,

“Had become experts at avoiding each other in their three bedroom house, spending as much time on separate floors as possible.” (Lahiri, Interpreter of Maladies ,5)

A change arises when the electricity department announces a power cut for five days, beginning at eight in the night forcing the intimacy of darkness on them. During these power cuts, Shukumar and Shobha start a game to kill time and avoid awkward situations by telling one other something they had never dared to convey before. Their confessions don not communicate their real emotion, but still manage to break the ice and in a weird manner manages to bring them closer. However Shobha’s revelation, on the last day of the power cut, of her plan of living separately shocks Shukumar. In order to hurt Shobha ,he deliberately reveals the fact that their child was a boy and he had held it close to his heart. Somehow this revelation brings them together in a flood of tears underlining the fact that cultural roots cannot be severed so easily. In addition to this, it may also help them relocate their lost identities.

In ‘When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine’, the story is presented from the third person point of view. It showcases the theme of cultural displacement leading to the quest for identity. Lahiri presents how geographical and historical factors may change one’s identity. She also states that politics can change the identity of a community at large. The narrator is a seven year old girl Lilia. Mr. Pirzada is an East Pakistani immigrant who is a lecturer of Botany at Dacca University and comes to Boston on a fellowship given by the government of Pakistan to study of the foliage of New England. The backdrop of the story is the Indo-Pak war in 1971. During his stay in Boston, political unrest breaks in his native country owing to the struggle for autonomy by East Pakistanis. Living in an alien culture, cut off from their homeland, Lilia’s parents have a yearning to associate with people of their nationality . On the basis of cultural proximity, Mr. Pirzada is invited by the narrator’s parents. Lilia, a child of ten years believes that Mr. Pirzada is an Indian, but is soon corrected by her father. Even then, her young mind is incapable of imbibing this distinction.

“It made no sense to me. Mr. Pirzada and my parents spoke the same language, laughed at the same jokes, looked more or less the same.” (Lahiri, Interpreter of Maladies ,25)

During the pandemonium in Decca, created by Pakistani army, everything collapsed. Mr. Pirzada could not contact with his wife and seven daughters. Jhumpa Lahiri has posited two different aspects of culture. It is cultural affinity that creates a bond between Mr. Pirzada and the narrator’s family in the country overseas, on the other hand, clash of culture and language parted the human beings forever in the same geographical region. Lahiri shuns the fanaticism to gain dominance over culture and language. The story ends with the return of Pirzada to Bangladesh and his subsequent reunion with his family that is celebrated in America by the narrator’s parents. Lilia and her parents have different notions of identity; for Lilia, race is the identity whereas her parents consider culture and religion as the root of one’s identity.

In the title story, ‘Interpreter of Maladies’ Lahiri brings her characters, a first generation Indian-American couple Mr. and Mrs. Das, from New Jersey to Konarak in Orissa. The couple is accompanied by their children-Tina, Ronny and Bobby who have never been to India before. They are guided by Mr. Kapasi, a tradition-bound tourist guide cum an interpreter to a Gujarati doctor. We tend to observe the cultures of East and West clash in this story. The family look Indian but dress as Americans do. Mr. Kapasi presses his hands together in greeting, but Mr. Das like a typical American squeezes his hands. Mr. Das and his wife Mina were born in America. Their parents lived in Assansol now and the young couple visited them once in two years. Like the Americans , Mr. Das refers to his wife by her first name. Yet another cultural change we notice is that

“Mr. and Mrs. Das behaved like an older brother and sister, and not parents to their children. It seemed that they were in charge of the children only for the day; it was hard to believe they were regularly responsible for anything other than themselves.” (Lahiri, Interpreter of Maladies ,49) While Mr. Das seems to be more attached to India, Mrs. Das is indifferent in her attitude towards her native country. Her hostility arises mostly because of the hot climate here:

"I told you to get a car with air conditioning", Mrs. Das continued. "Why do you do this, Raj, just to save a few stupid rupees. What are you saving us, fifty cents?" (Lahiri, Interpreter of Maladies ,49)

In this manner the mental conflict runs here on two levels – one, in the personal relationship of Mr. and Mrs. Das and the other, in the too brief emotional exchange between Mr. Kapasi and Mrs. Das. Mina suffers from a malady that is deep-rooted , the secret guilt that her second son, Bobby was not her husband's. She finds Mr. Kapasi is the right interpreter for her malady and speaks out asking him for a remedy by saying something that would make her feel better. Kapasi considers it as his bounden duty to assist Mrs. Das and so he asked,

" Is it really pain you feel , Mrs. Das, or is it guilt?"

(Lahiri, Interpreter of Maladies ,66)

The sense of displacement arises out of a search for identity, but the distancing from one's culture results in loss of identity, thus representing broken, fragmented self image. There is a sense of disintegration depicted in the story, a tension between wanting to belong to the new society and yet wanting to retain the old culture. In the collection, "Interpreter of Maladies", Jhumpa Lahiri subtly presents the saga of a section of humanity that faces loss of identity, the sense of belonging and cultural displacement.

As mentioned in the beginning the concept of identity still remains unanswered. Through the protagonists of the above mentioned stories we see that they are constantly on a quest for their identity which will enable them to find a place for themselves within a community or identify themselves as individuals. Jhumpa Lahiri being a child who was in constant search for her identity adds her personal experiences into her work. The characters resist but eventually give into the changes that are brought in their lives while still undergoing the feeling of loss and the inability to identify themselves. The mere fact that India is an assimilation of influences from all over the world comes into the picture. Cultural hybridisation forms a major element in the moulding of an individual. Hence, it can be concluded that the quest for identity lies in the hands of every person who considers themselves to be Indian in any respect.

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N.B: In the above paper MLA Sixth Edition Format has been used.

