

Cross Cultural Conflicts in Jhumpa Lahiri's 'This Blessed House'

Dr.CHANDRA MOHAN, Assistant Professor cum HOD of English, E. R .K. Arts & Science

College, Erumiyampatti, Dharmapuri, Tamil Nadu, India.

Abstract

The present paper attempts to discuss about the difficulties of immigrants' cultural adaptations in the alien countries. Emigration results in assuming various cultures. Cross cultural conflicts are spoken by many contemporary writers. Among them Jhumpa Lahiri is a notable writer who speaks of cultural conflicts in practical manner through her novels and short stories. Her portrayals of characters are distinguished as two categories. Some characters adopt new cultural circumstance whereas some remains in the same state. This current paper aims to deal with the cultural complications of a newly married couple existed in the short story 'This Blessed House'. This short story is from Jhumpa Lahiri's short story collection *Interpreter of Maladies*. The cultural intricacies of a newly married couple Sanjeev and Twinkle in alien land is vividly presented by the author. Here the character Twinkle actively involved in arranging the Christ statue in their new house. Her husband Sanjeev cannot assimilate with her. Both of them came from Indian origin but he hesitates to adopt the new one. The clash in embracing Christianity from Hinduism is pictured by the author through this short story. This cross cultural conflict leads them towards misfortune.

Keywords: Cross cultural conflicts, complications, circumstance, diasporic issues, immigrant, cultural intricacies, hesitate, misfortune

Human being's discernment about his environment is from his own culture. At ancient times civilization grew with certain beliefs. These values stay firm and solidly in the society in the names of culture. Culture reflects individual person and social group's life set up. Human

beings' relationship with culture is defined in P.J. Philip's article "Emerging Issues in Culture Relations in an independent World" as, "We perceive the world so to speak through the paradigmatic lenses of our culture, it has a deep and profound influence on us- on the way we see ourselves and our relations and role in the world" (70). Culture gives a valid meaning under individual's socio- cultural group. The persons who migrate to new land struggle to adopt the outlandish culture. They long for their homeland cultural practices. They miss their roots and fail to find their own identity. This attitude ends with cultural collision. According to Susan Stanford Friedman the word roots mean, "roots, signifying identity based on stable cores and continuities; routes, suggesting identity based on travel, change, and disruption" (153).

Diaspora is inescapable which leads these characters towards afflictions. The term is common all over the world. But the first wave of diasporic issues can be employed to Indian immigrants. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin describe the term as, "Diaspora is voluntary or forcible movement of people from their homelands into new regions" (68). 'Diaspora results in alienation, marginalization and fragmentation. Diaspora gives way for hybrid culture and assimilation. In case of Diaspora a new and diverse cultural milieu arises.

Jhumpa Lahiri is an Indian immigrant writer and incredible story teller. Lavina Dhingra and Floyd Cheung in their essays coined Jhumpa Lahiri as 'Universal writer' and quoted in preface as, "eloquently, perceptively, and subtly sheds light on *both* universal dimensions of human experience *and* more specific Bengali, postcolonial, Indian, diasporic, South American Asian American and Asian American politics" (xvi). Further they pointed out the characteristics of her characters as, "more nurturing, giving, and forgiving than the several self- absorbed, childishly- selfish, or somewhat egoistical second generation Indian American female characters

... the spiritually rootless, emotionally lost, culturally alienated and geographically dislocated second- generation Bengali Americans females” (142-43).

Lahiri’s short story ‘This Blessed House’ is gracefully pictured with immigrant experiences of the newly married couple Sanjeev and Twinkle. The nine short stories accumulate in *Interpreter of Maladies* are entwisted with cultural assimilations. The short story ‘This Blessed House’ portrays the difficulties of a Hindu’s adaptation of Christian culture. Lahiri’s remaining stories of this collection reflects Hinduism whereas this story replicates Christianity. The characters of these short stories are possessed with nostalgic feelings of Indian life style. They picture different grounds of Indian immigrants. The role of every character illustrates the American life of Indian immigrant. Their inconvenient situations and battle for independent survival is vividly narrated in this short story. Salman Akhar’s view about immigration is:

Immigration from one country to another is a complex psychosocial process with lasting effects on an individual’s identity. The dynamic shifts, resulting from an admixture of ‘cultural shock’ and mourning over the losses inherent in migration, gradually give way to a psychostructural change and the emergence of a hybrid identity. (105)

Lahiri’s stories narrate the importance of marriage and its connection with the Indian culture. The story ‘This Blessed House’ states about the complexities of marriage and adjustment in leading a felicitous life. Sustaining association with husband and wife becomes a challenge in alien land. As they possess different personalities they are unable to shape themselves in assuming the practical life. In Aruti Nayar’s article “An Interpreter of Exile” the characteristics of Lahiri’s works as, “Lahiri negotiates the dilemmas of the cultural spaces lying across the continents with a master’s touch. Though endowed with a distinct universal appeal, her stories do

bring out rather successfully the predicament of the Indians who trapeze between and across two traditions, one inherited and left behind, and the other encountered but not necessarily assimilated” (3).

Sanjeev and Twinkle is a newly married couple, immaturity and distinguished views are found among them. Brada- Williams shares his views about Lahiri’s short stories as, “A sense of exile and the potential for and frequent denial of human communication that can be found in all of Lahiri’s short stories” (454- 55). At the opening part of the story the love bonding goes smoothly. The collision arises when they found Christ statues in their house. The house they rented was engrossed by Christians. They left many statues at the house. Sanjeev wants to throw away the relics whereas Twinkle cherishes and protects them. He grieves over the attitude of his new wife. Robert Cohen explains the difficulties of immigrants’ adaptation as, “... acknowledge that the old country _ a nation often buried deep in language, religion, custom or folklore _ always has some claim on their loyalty and emotions” (ix).

Twinkle is born to an Indian immigrant California couple; she can easily acclimatize to the American circumstance whereas Sanjeev the first generation immigrant from India cannot bear the mentality of his wife and adaptation of other religion. Homi K. Bhabha remarks Huddart words as,

I’ve been arguing against the multiculturalist notion that you can put together harmoniously any number of cultures in a pretty mosaic. You cannot just solder together different cultural traditions to produce some brave new cultural totality. The current phase of economic and social history makes you aware of cultural difference not at the celebratory level of diversity but always at the point of conflict or crisis. (124)

The loss of his mother land and conventional practices problematizes his alien life. In the words of John Mcleod the identity of one person arises from his past living community as he quotes, “their sense of identity borne from living in a diaspora community (is) influenced by the past migrant history of their parents or grandparents” (207). The author has captured the traumas of immigrant and analyses the effects and consequences. The idols and images are associated with their pride. Sanjeev believes that the statues will tint his own religion. At present he is the citizen of America and works in an international company but he cannot make adjustment with religion. Twinkle comments Sanjeev as, “They can’t fire you for being a believer. That would be express grief or joy of any kind, and one whole neighborhood and half of another has come to share the news, to help with arrangements” (116). Religion is more influential strength in human life as it shows his identity towards this world. It frames his ethics and attitudes, compromise is intolerable in religion. People are afraid of losing their originality which exists in the form of religion. Twinkle has more white friends but she agrees to have an arranged marriage with an Indian born. This shows her nature of adjustment towards circumstances. But Sanjeev cannot give up his ego as a male. Taubman details ego as,

... ego or self, then, is an alienated fiction that unfortunately constitutes both our madness and our compass as we navigate through life. It is our madness because such an ego limits and freezes us; it is our compass in that we cannot do without the ego or versions of the ego that constitute us, for without them we fall into psychosis. We speak then, from our unconscious but with and through our ego. (6)

The first statue ‘a white porcelain effigy of Christ’ was detected by Twinkle from a cupboard above the stove. She was flabbergasted on seeing that and shown it to Sanjeev. He said

straight away, “Throw it away.... And at the very least get rid of that idiotic statue”(136). She admires ‘the frozen folds of its robes’ and declares it as an elegant thing. He gets annoyed and said, “We’re not Christians,” (137). She disobeys his words and straight up her shoulder and kisses the statue, “She planted a kiss on top of Christ’s head, then places the statue on top of the fireplace mantel, which needed, Sanjeev observed, to be dusted” (137). The character of Sanjeev is blended with perfection. He concentrated with trivial things. At the opening part of the story Sanjeev is introduced to readers as, “He was Kneeling on the floor, marking, with ripped bits of a Post- it, patches on the baseboard that needed to be retouched with paint” (136).

Twinkle expects Sanjeev to undust the statue but he ignores it. This tendency creates disappointment towards her. In addition to this statue she identified many Christianity related things in that house. “... collection of Christian paraphernalia... a 3-D post-card of Saint Francis... a wooden cross key chain... a tile trivet depicting a blond, unbearded Jesus, delivering a sermon on a mountaintop... a small plastic snow- filled dome containing a miniature Nativity scene...” (137). The concealed objects found by Twinkle gives excitement to her but nothing to Sanjeev. An argument occurs between them, Sanjeev asked her to invite the realtor to remove the statues but Twinkle informs him about the importance of those statues for the users.

They planned for a house warming ceremony. They wish to invite their colleagues for celebration. Sanjeev feels despondency on seeing the attitude of his wife. She remains passively at home without doing anything. As a normal Indian husband he expects his wife to follow the household works. Alien cultural adaptation results in emptiness and the adaptors are forced to follow the new one. Sudeep Sen narrates in his article about Lahiri’s stories as, “Cultural adjustment and maladjustment, belonging and not- belonging, the subtle loss of mother tongue or more appropriately its metamorphoses as it is influenced and imbued with textures of new syntax

and intonation, these are among the various aspects explored in her stories” (172). Twinkle’s mind is filled with Christ statues. She searches for the next one. She unhides many statues from their house and lawn. Sanjeev realizes her enjoyment in searching new statues which were left out by their former house owner. Sanjeev finds hard to live with her and be disappointed not to marry an Indian traditional girl. The term “Christian Paraphernalia” symbolizes the clash occurs between them in their married life at the end.

Sanjeev wants Twinkle to live with him forever. Initially he does not bother about the Christ statues or Virgin Mary’s. He was impressed by the elevation of the house and rented it. On the weekend Twinkle identified one more statue which is a huge one. On seeing it she shouted in delight. “Behind an overgrown forsythia bush was a plaster Virgin Mary as tall as their waists, with a blue painted hood draped over her head in the manner of an Indian bride” (146). He advised her to through it away but against his wish she placed it in lawn. He tries to convince her “Twinkle, I can’t have the people I work with see this statue on my lawn” (147). She disregards his words and placed it there. She replies, “This is our house. We own it together. The statue is a part of our property” (149). These kinds of attitudes create a crack on their relationship. The bitterness identified in diasporic life is narrated by Ihab Hassan as, “the more interactive the globe, the more populations move, jostle, grapple- this is the age of diasporas- the more questions of cultural, religious, and personal identity become acute...” (37).

On the party day she takes a dishtowel to cover the bread basket and looks the Ten Commandments printed on it. She is surprised on seeing it and says with a smile to Sanjeev as, “Face it. This house is blessed” (144). Around thirty people attend the party. The party begins at 5.30 the whole house glitters with light which made the statues attractive. The party members enquired about the statues and praised Twinkle for arranging in a wonderful manner. A visitor

asked, “I noticed the statue outside, and are you guys Christian? I thought you were Indian” (151). These words hurt Sanjeev. But Twinkle eagerly answers about her searching and findings. The guests too started to search for the new statues in the house. In Lahiri’s *Interpreter of Maladies* the cultural conflicts and values of human mind is noticeable in modest manner. Twinkle finds delight in finding new statues whereas Sanjeev gets irritation on seeing his wife’s behavior. The English people who come to the house are also started their search for Christianity oriented sculptures.

After the function they unpacked the gift boxes. To Twinkle’s surprise she finds a huge solid silver bust of Christ. The lines states that, “a solid silver bust of Christ, the head easily three times the size of his own. It had a patrician bump on his nose, magnificent curly hair that rested atop a pronounced collarbone, and a broad forehead that reflected in miniature the walls and doors and lampshades around them” (156). Twinkle starts to realize her husband’s hating towards it. Sanjeev is not headstrong; he is flexible towards his wife. The problem is that he cannot come out from the religious practices imposed on him. He struggles to shape himself with the environment. Leon Mann explains the characteristics of not fitting with foreign things as,

A state of embarrassment is caused giving rise to uncomfortable self-consciousness in a situation in which the individual is aware that negative attention and critical judgment is focused on himself as a result of inappropriate actions which label him as either clumsy, low status or deficient in proper breeding and good manners. Embarrassment is particularly excruciating if the audience is of superior status, people whose high regard is valued by the offender.

(72)

Sanjeev accepts to keep the statue in their bedroom with half- heartedly for a day.

Twinkle's heart aches on his attitudes. Lahiri has spoken about cross cultural complication in married life. The character Mrs Sen in Lahiri's short 'Mrs Sen' is direct opposite to Twinkle. Twinkle easily adopts every circumstance and finds delight and enjoy it. But Mrs Sen struggles at every situation. She cannot compromise with food, costumes and mannerisms. Like Sanjeev she aches to follow the alien practices and always dreams about her past Indian life. She remains in the same state at the end of the short story. People alike Sanjeev and Mrs Sen are filled by their motherland conventional practices. They cannot change themselves at any circumstances. At the same time, they are not against to modernism. Their life seems to be a battle up to the end.

Sanjeev expects his wife should behave as a typical Indian wife. He is afraid of following the principles of new culture. Stuart Hall narrates how culture has its connection with human being, "common historical experiences and shared cultural codes which provide us, as 'one people', with stable unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning" (393). Sanjeev is a typical Indian husband who expects a devoted Indian wife serving to her family. In Jain's words, "Women are expected to be docile homemaker. But their girlish charm may not be a quality an Indian husband in the diasporas may admire or tolerate in wives" (2315).

Twinkle according to Lahiri is, "excited and delighted by little things, crossing her fingers before any remotely unpredictable event, like testing a new flavor of ice-cream, or dropping a letter in a mail box". These immigrants' life is treed with both Indian and American cultural practices. Sanjeev does not find a way to convert her as an Indian conventional wife. Twinkle open mindedly accepts other cultural and social life styles which cannot be tolerated by Sanjeev. He cannot show any reactions towards the feelings of his wife. Twinkle is generous and

innovative but Sanjeev is submissive. This short story brings out the cultural conflicts and irrational faith underlie among the immigrants.

Works Cited

- Akhar, Salman. A third individuation: Immigration, identity and the psychoanalytic Process. *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*. 1995.
- Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, (eds). *Key Concepts in Post- Colonial Studies*. Routledge, 1998.
- Brada-Williams, Noelle: Reading Jhumpa Lahiri's Interpreter of Maladies as a Short Story Cycle. MELUS 29.3/4(Fall/Winter issue), 2004.
- Cohen, Robert. Global Diaspora: An Introduction. UCI Press, 1997.
- Dhingra, Lavina, and Fleud Cheung. "Introduction: Naming Jhumpa Lahiri Bengali, Asian, American, Postcolonial, Universal?" Naming Jhumpa Lahiri: Canons and Controversies. New York: Lexington, 2012.
- Economic and Political weekly- Volume 41. Sameeksha Trust. 1999.
- Friedman, Susan Stanford. *Mappings*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1998.
- Hall, Stuart. "Cultural Identity and Cinematic Representation". *Framework*. 1989.
- Hassan, Ihab. *From Postmodernism to Post modernity: The Local/ Global Context*. 20 July 2010.
- Huddart. David. *Homi K. Bhabha*. Noida: Routledge, 2006.
- Mann, Leon. *Social Psychology*. New Delhi: Wiley Eastern, 1985.
- McLeod John. *Beginning Postcolonialism*. New York: Manchester University Press, 2000.
- Nayar, Aruti. "An Interpreter of Exile" (Spectrum) *The Sunday Tribune*, May 28, 2000.
- Philip. P. J. "Emerging Issues in Cultural Relations in an Independent World", *Topics in Culture Learning*. 1976.

Sen, Sudeep. "Six Seasons Review".

Taubman, P. Unpublished Paper. "The Symbolic." Class handout EDSE 508, 09.23.07.