

Cultural conflicts in select Diaspora Novels: Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* & Jumphah Lahiri's *The Namesake*

K. Saravanan

Assistant Professor of English
PSR Arts and Science College
Sivakasi, Tamilnadu, India.

Abstract

People are identified by their culture basically. When we know the new culture it will enrich our knowledge but adopting the same and living in an alien land will affect our freedom of thought and life. Folks move from one place to another for all kind of betterment. Change of whereabouts and language from one to other drag the people to a further complicated world. They drop all their hopes towards the newness and try to adjust or struggle for their life in the unexpected circumstances. Man Booker Prize winner, a famous Indian Diaspora writer, Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* discusses different kind of losses take place by man's displacement. The characters Biju, Sai and Bela represent the pain and affliction of departers. They are longing for identity and want to create a comfort zone in the alien soil leads them frustrated. Jumphah Lahiri, the Pulitzer Prize winner, put across the same expatriate sensibility in her novel *The Namesake*. The protagonist Gogol and others Ashoke, Ashima migrate to another country still wants to follow their culture and traditional values there. These novels traced the concept of cultural identity with rootlessness and ancestral expectation. The present paper deals with identity predicament in the basis of cultural conflict through the characters' strife of unfamiliar terrain.

Keywords: Expectations, Displacement, Cultural Conflicts, Acceptance.

In ancient time the human race has created certain principles to lead a group of people. After being civilized people started to think their own. They scattered as many groups and frame their own rules and conventions. These rules have a strong base of topography, an inclination of elders, lifestyle and belief. They created many rules based on accepted ethics and creeds

which are different from other groups but leads them towards their own righteous life. Culture is come out from principles of moral-ethical values of humans. Then culture becomes an important part of people's life. Practising the same cultural values for a long time makes people obstinate in their ways of life.

People believe strongly that culture is an ultimate identification. But our ancestors have taught us that culture is made for better and moral life except to disagree with others. Acceptance is the chief idea that is repeatedly taught in all religions and cultures. Accepting diversity is the key factor to live a peaceful life. But it is not easy to admit by the people who narrowly follow their culture strictly without knowing the aim of it. They are merged with their cultural practices in every event of their life. If they couldn't perform any rituals due to an unfavourable situation, feel bad about their responsibility. Apart from the hypothetical question of right or wrong they ardently follow what they have been taught by the name of culture from their early ages. In the base of these ideas, notion and theory 'diaspora' is coming from the culture and social formation. It is a phenomenon concerns uprooting, the chiefly compulsory or voluntary exit of people from the homeland. It has reminiscence for the land they left after and for its ethnicity.

There are different kinds of diaspora situations such as socio, cultural, economic and political dimensions. Society has spread its wings all over the world. So the people are moving from one edge to another edge of the world for different reasons such as gaining monetary status, acquiring education, new experience and as guest etc. Such people are happy to get a status, new culture and language with glittering identity. But they remain as a long-standing guest for many years. Knowing to get a precarious balance in all emotions and cope with the new people around us is the successful modus operandi of those who stayed far away from their mother country especially Green cardholders. Basically, those people are following two mantras, one is acceptance, moving forward is the rest. Jumpha Lahiri's novel *The Namesake* proves the same concerns by polychromatic and pianissimo tone characters like Ashoke, Ashima, Gogol, Sonia and Maxine etc. It gives an array of dimension for assimilating new culture.

Ashima Bhaduri is a typical Bengali girl in Calcutta who is ready for marriage and accepts Ashoke, "earning a Ph.D. in Boston, researching in the field of fiber optics". The Bengali style marriage ceremony was enjoyable with decorated bride and bridegroom. The ritual of hiding face with betel leaf and bent low, circling seven times are proving their rich

cultural background. Ashima's home is filled with siblings, aunts, cousins, uncles and children especially neighbours proves her sociable lifestyle. She doesn't know anything about Boston and country life. Simply she recites few stanzas of William Wordsworth's poem "The Daffodils" and accepts to marry him. Ashoke and Ashima are attached to family very much. Ashoke is always spending his holidays with family members especially with a grandfather who inspired him to read a wide variety of books particularly Russians. Nikolai Gogol is one of his favourites. Ashima is raised up in the crowded relatives' ambience.

After reaching Boston Ashoke and Ashima have started a new life. Ashima is progressively adopting the new circumstance and strives a lot to overcome loneliness. Ashoke, an educated and understandable husband helped her to learn how to accept new situations. In the days of less communication facilities, aerogramme is the only way. It takes much time to receive an answer letter. So she makes an acquaintance with Bengali families around her. After the delivery of a baby boy, they couldn't leave the hospital without naming the baby. They are eagerly awaited for a letter from India to name a baby. Ashima's grandmother has posted a letter earlier that contains one name for a boy and one for a girl. But it is not received in time. So they named him Gogol.

Ashima is exhausted physically by childbirth and mentally by the absence of parents and relatives. Maya, Dilip, Dr. Gupta, Alan and Judy, Amber and Clover are visited for Gogol. They are the only substitutes for the expected surroundings of Ashima.

Without a single grandparent or parent or uncle or aunt at her side, the baby's birth, like most everything else in America, feels somehow haphazard, only half true. As she strokes and suckles and studies her son, she can't help but pity him. She has never known of a person entering the world so alone, so deprived. (Lahiri, 2009:24)

Ashima has faced many difficulties in caring for a newborn baby without anybody to help. She really missed her parents since she doesn't know how to feed, clean and hold the baby. She herself learned all necessary works for Gogol. Though Ashoke helped Ashima back to work with a busy schedule. Ashima, worried a lot and wants to go back where her people are living for raising Gogol but she convinced. Ashima missed her relatives in 'annaprasan' (rice ceremony) function though it is done by Bengalis in Boston. She couldn't enjoy the important ceremony well. Since the proximity of neighbours is not equal with her kith and kin. There is some solace she received from the social contacts. Circumstances are forced her to do her duties which also makes to surpass the apartment boundary for enlarging

the neighbourhood in Cambridge especially the grocery shop. She felt acute pain while she comes to know her father was deceased a day back by a sudden heart attack. Though they have planned to go to India, leave earlier. Ashima is terribly disturbed after the much effort to take a flight and her mind does not even recollect the image of her mother and brother Rana. It proves that she is completely disconnected from her families in India.

Nothing is rapid than time. The Gunguli family is again migrating to the suburbs since Ashoke's next level as Assistant Professor. Ashima is not ready for another migration. As a woman, she couldn't avoid it. The city doesn't have basic facilities, which makes her drive a new car. New life will be a happy and thrilled one while receiving restful occasions. But in Ashima's life all the happenings are forceful and compulsory she thinks. That makes her see life as a permanent burden. "For being a foreigner, Ashima is beginning to realize, is a sort of lifelong pregnancy – a perpetual wait, a constant burden, a continuous feeling out of sorts" (Lahiri, 2009:49)

Gogol and Sonia, children of Ashoke family who grow up in America as American born Indians, wants to identify themselves as natives. They are following Bengali tradition and culture in-home while celebrating birthdays and poojas. The cultural clash between native and adopted should be concluded by one side that prioritised by Gogol and Sonia as American. It is accepted that one wants to mingle with surroundings, having friends for enjoyment needs oneness with society. So that they want to identify themselves as American is also the reason for Gogol to dislike his name which is difficult to pronounce by native speakers. Before knowing the sentiments behind the name he changed his identity as Nikhil. They feel displaced when they visit India only. Many uncomfortable situations like sweating, stomach upset, overcrowded home, make them realize that their comfort zone is America. The same emotion is uttered by first-generation characters Ashoke and Ashima in an alien land but their comfortable place in India. As the novel centred Gogol many of Sonia's emotions are missing. Gogol's life with Maxine and Moushumi makes him realize the importance of culture. Though he changed his name, attire, culture he couldn't adopt some western way of life. As he lost many valuables started to realize the importance of freedom in life. The same issue is discussed in one of the award-winning novels of Kiran Desai.

Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* discusses the displacement and cultural conflict through the character Biju. He is working in New York as an illegal immigrant. When Biju joined a restaurant learns many names of countries and capitals with famous places around

the world. He comes to know that Indians are working in nearly all important parts of the world and feels proud about it. Indians are hard workers and preferred for the job rather than other country workers makes them feel satisfied. The cook's son Biju wants to fulfil his father's desire to become a rich man by earning a colossal sum abroad. As an illegal immigrant, Biju hardly gets a reasonable job and residence. Kitchen basements are the only place where many immigrant workers like Biju stayed dodgy. He moves from one restaurant to another for trivial reasons in the city. He has worked in Pinnocchio's restaurant, Chinese Joint, a bakery in Broadway accommodate him only in basements with a meagre salary.

Biju couldn't forget his culture since he had a chance to cook beef in Bridgette's restaurant. Eating and cooking beef is not entertained in his culture moreover it is considered a sin in his Indian culture. He has met some people who adjusted to other cultural practices but food habits. Saeed, a friend of Biju, dislike eating pig because of Zanziber rather than a Muslim. Biju gets rejected by many restaurants as he cannot cook beef, couldn't speak Gujarati, usage of hair oil ultimately. "Good-bye, Baby Bistro. "use the time off to take a bath," said the owner. He had been kind enough to hire Biju although he found him smelly". (Desai, 2006:23)

These things make him abhor of staying in an alien land. But his friendship with Saeed gives solace and knowledge about Green card and the existence of illegal immigrants vastly. Everyone, illegal or legal immigrants work hard for increasing their financial status. For that, they sacrifice freedom of everything. Biju is not able to move and think freely like Saeed. He couldn't follow in his footsteps to get a Green card and earn money since it's all against his traditions. Biju gets disappointed whenever the thought of the future and present hits the mind. For relaxing he roams in a place where homeless people reside. He gets angry at his father for making him walk alone in an alien land. But he liked to fly abroad for earning.

In America Biju learned many lessons which are new and hard to accept. He has gained the knowledge of no one is deserved to receive help in this alien land even his mother country people. Saeed's mother has given his phone number to all the friends and relative circle for getting help from him. But he hides his identity and won't help anybody. Biju thinks that it is a merciless act but Saeed takes it a chance to stay longer here. Saeed: "Those boys, let them in, they will *never* leave. They are desperate. *Desperate*. Once you let them in, once you hear their story, you can't say no, you know their aunty, you know their cousin, you

have to help the *whole* family, and once they begin, they will take *everything*. (Desai, 2006:98)

Biju's father also gave his phone number to village people for help. While receiving emergency calls from known people Saeed will disconnect the call or make friends say 'Saeed is not working here. Saeed advised Biju that no one is a friend here and keep your things separate from fellow beings. Biju and Saeed have lost their job at New York Bakery. But Saeed managed to join a new job quickly at the Banana Republic. Though they are close he left without any words. This incident confirms Biju that no one is a companion here. Closed ones will disappear suddenly by changing their names and contacts. We can't trace them out. They will ignore it though we find them. It proves Biju that living in a western country without papers is a curse. Being humane and following culture will yank us to unyielding danger. Biju dislikes this uncertain life and recollects his memories of his native life with his grandmother and nature. He missed the serenity of his village terribly. He wants to go back to India and meet friends. But he met Saeed again and come to know that he married *toys*, a waitress, for getting Green card by fake papers. Though he would like to do the same he couldn't. Biju continued on his way, tried to smile at female American citizens: "Hi. Hi." But they barely looked at him. (Desai, 2006:123)

Biju joined in Gandhi Cafe, which suits him to cook basil samosa, tikka masala, tandoori grill navrattan vegetable curry, dal makhani serve with goat cheese and mango margarita. The owner Harish-Harry, Indo-American, running the business with his wife Malini and a daughter. Biju gets the kitchen basement as usual for staying but free of cost. As the work goes well he thinks about the possible ways of getting Green card and make money as much as he can. Biju learns that Harish-Harry's daughter, an American born Indian wants to follow the Whites' lifestyle rather than the parents' culture presumably Indian. Even Harish and Malini are strict with her, she won't want to help their business. Though her parents are yelling she replies softly as "I didn't ask to be born," she said. "You had me for your own selfish reasons, wanted a servant, didn't you? But in this country, Dad, nobody is going to wipe your ass for free." (Desai, 2006:149)

But Harish cared for his daughter though he had strict principles and aim to compete with the business rival Mr. Shah. Malini and Harish work very hard to uplift their business with kind heart and humanness. Biju thinks that their daughter is lucky to have such parents. He also enjoyed the feeling of being luckiest while he got a visa even after he was cheated by

a concern of fake travels. He suffered a lot to get visa. Exactly ‘after three years from the day he’d received his visa,’ the misfortune happened to Biju, a lucky boy, that he slipped and badly wounded on his knee. There is no medical aid he could afford because of the great expenditure. He is recovering slowly with some help in cooking. Receiving advice of returning home country makes him homesick. But Biju cared about his Green card-present condition of walking by stick makes to pitying himself. He thinks that he will miss many unaffordable things if he decides to go back to India. While thinking about his father he couldn’t imagine his return. Biju’s friend Saeed and cooking father are the predominant reasons for his stay even after much trouble. He couldn’t contact his father when he heard that Darjeeling is in trouble. Because of the bad connection not able to speak with his father and get a chance to talk with the watchman makes him to feel bad that he couldn’t speak professedly. Though he is not well enough he said that ‘YES. EVERYTHING ALLRIGHT’. His emotions are overflowed and shed tears for his innocent father as well as his present condition. He decided to go back to India only by increasing inconvenience and nostalgia.

Kiran Desai has deeply discussed the reminiscence of an immigrant worker and the losses that occurred in his life of alien land. As human beings’ chief aim is to make money travel beyond the boundaries offers financial assistance and a good deal of knowledge. The character Biju undergone many sufferings and longs for freedom and native experience. He is aware of several new ideas, cultures, and survival strategies to sustain in an extraterrestrial land. Through the important characters Biju, Sai, Cook, Nimi and Gyan, Kiran Desai proved that culture is the basis in every aspect of our life. It gives freedom of thought which is expressed through the elated way of life and accepted attitudes. Immigrant characters and native characters are longing for identification. As early said culture is ardently followed by the people who want to create their own identity. Adjusting and changing culture is indirect affects one’s individuality. All the characters feel alienation in the host country or mother country. Hiding identity is the reason behind all sorts of problems. The characters Biju, Jemubhai and gyan are faced many difficulties only by pretending what they are not. Making money is a necessary action for a good life but adjusting cultural practices for it is unwise. It gives frustration and dissatisfaction even we earned a lot. Jumpha Lahiri also discussed the same emotion in the debt novel ‘The Namesake’. The characters Ashoke, Ashima and Gogol are personified as alienated character in a foreign country. The nostalgic effect of the character Ashima is sprinkled throughout the novel. The lifestyle of an immigrant family and

the effects of cross-culture are portrayed through the sequence of the incumbents who are playing their role in alien soil.

These two novels have analysed the estrangement and uprootedness of characters and how they handled it efficiently is magnificently engraved by the writers Jumpha Lahiri and Kiran Desai in *The Namesake* and *The Inheritance of Loss* respectively. We can find many similar sequences of development in the characters of both novels. The principal characters are deracinated from their native country and have peripatetic nature for seeking solace. Biju and Ashima long for the nativity. Though they couldn't afford it successfully managed to live amidst complicated situations. The first generation characters are the sufferers. They are Ashoke, Ashima, Biju, Harish and Malini etc. tried to get solutions through depression. After a period of time, they learned to adjust and live with nostalgic effect. Gogol, Soniya, Moushumi, the daughters of Harish are the second generation characters who liked the western culture since they are growing up with it. From their point of view changing the name and asking for money from parents is the right choice. As early said a particular set of people, first-generation characters, need to accept the reality and required to mingle with second-generation people. Gogol and Sonia suffer only after reaching India. On the contrary, Ashoke and Ashima feel happy when they reach India. Both are requiring a born country ambience. Adopting both cultures and stick with the mother culture is an open choice. As grownups, the first generation people are choosing the first option. After accumulating much experience only the younger generation is realizing the benefits of culture and identity.

References

- Lahiri, Jumpha. *The Namesake*. Harper Collins Publishers, 2009.
- Desai, Kiran. *The Inheritance of Loss*. Penguin Books, 2006.
- Iyengar, Srinivasa. *Indian Writing in English*. Sterling Publishers, 2000.
- Ryan, Michael. *Literary Theory*. Atlantic Publishers, 2007.