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The Namesake in the Light of Postmodernism

Dr. Vipul Solanki

Marwadi Education Foundation's Group of Institutes - Rajkot



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I

Today, the world has become a small village. Development in the field of information and technology has made our world a smaller place. As a part of this change, cultural changes and cross-fertilization have become natural in the New Age or Postmodern Age. It has been aptly reflected in Jim Powell's observation:

“An art's brochure for almost any major university might appropriately feature a photomontage representing its season of cultural offerings from around the world. The montage might feature a female dancer with East Indian head, a male Navaho left-leg, the right hand of an Afro-American modern dancer, a torso half covered by a suit and tie, and the other half festooned with eagle feathers with one arm displaying a sacred Tibetan hand gesture, another muscled arm pounding a rhythm on a Japanese drum, and two more female arms in a lyrical dance pose from India.” (Jim Powell)

Multiplicity is the true nature of postmodern age and culture. “In postmodern age, it is difficult to get through a day, without confronting many different realities” (Jim Powell). Post modern age is an ‘age of cultural mixing’. “The world that has been converted into a global village has become a federation of cultures... all the world's cultures, rituals, races, databanks, myths and musical motifs are intermixing like a smorgasbord” (Jim Powell). Hence, amalgamation of cultures has become an identity of postmodern age. This confluence of cultures has influenced the different aspects of humans' lives deeply. Jim Powell observes,

“The New Ager (postmodernist) sees no contradiction in attending a Quaker meeting in the morning, eating a Zen macrobiotic breakfast, sitting for Chinese, Taoist meditation, eating an Indian Ayurvedic lunch, doing a Chero-Kee sweat before Tai Chi, munching down a soyburger for dinner, dancing in a full moon witching ceremony with her neo-pagan Goddess group and then coming home and making love with her New Age boyfriend according to Hindu Tantric principles.” (Jim Powell)



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This change in contemporary culture and society has influenced literature remarkably. Uma Prameswaran, an India English writer, is of the view that 'the assimilation and acceptance of diversity is a necessary tool for cultural synthesis.' She considers it a direction in which literature can play an important role'; since

“...literature not only reflects persistence and change in the society but can lead society into a better appreciation of its multicultural and ethno-centered fabric.”

Joya Chakravarty is of the view that 'cultural identity today has become heterogeneous and hybrid. This amalgamation of cultures is primarily pioneered by the Diaspora writers. They migrate from one country, from one culture and represent their own culture on foreign land. The Diaspora writers analyze the world with more than one perspective.'

Jhumpa Lahiri is one such writer who mirrors the postmodern multicultural trend of life in her works. Her Pulitzer Prize winning collection of short stories *Interpreter of Maladies: Stories of Bengal, Boston and Beyond* (1999), her debut novel *The Namesake* (2003), another short story collection *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008) and the recently published novel *The Lowland* (2013) present a mélange of cultures. Her works focus on the lives of Indians or Asians who have migrated abroad, most America. Her writings talk about the Indian immigrants (both first and second generation) on the land of western countries. She is a type of writer who constantly brings into play the setting of Indian cultural and social life on foreign land and themes of immigration and plural identity. She reveals an assimilative consciousness in her fiction. Her major subject for projection is the bi-cultural experiences. Her writings lay-out a blueprint of multicolor situation. She portrays a world which rests on geographical and cultural discrimination and amalgamation which is the prime feature of postmodernists. Lahiri's works depict the interaction between the host and the native cultures.

Lahiri shows that one is born in a culture, in a place and it is from this cultural point that one takes off and contributes to the world. America and West have always been idealized by the Indians. When qualified Indians migrate to America as Ashoke Ganguly in *The Namesake* then the adjustment problem begins between the tradition one has inherited and the day to day life one encounters there. There is a gradual adjustment and assimilation and then a hybrid culture comes to the fore. Gradually one develops respect for another culture even though one's own culture remains ingrained within oneself. This situation creates a picture of culture within culture and that is aptly represented by Lahiri in *The Namesake*. In India itself too many cultures have crossed and blended with each other and have produced hybridity that cannot be unmixed. In the same way, the globe is becoming such a place like India where different cultures are



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crossing and blending with each other. That is the true picture of postmodern age which is aptly narrated and showcased in *The Namesake*.

Different Indians having their own different cultures in India itself migrate to America that creates a culturally hodge-podge kind of society with the prime elements of American culture. One of these families is Ashoke and Ashima Ganguly, a Bengali family moved to America in search of better life and new world. Lahiri continuously goes back and forth and gives the glimpses of different cultures and produces a collage. She paints a picture of an Indian woman Ashima Ganguly in her Indian dress code, with her Indian psychology, her likes and dislikes, her love for her Indian family, the Bengali market, music, dances, stories, food and plenty of other things with the tint of American culture. Like her, Ashoke is a young Indian, well settled in America, an Indian teacher teaching white skin students, his childhood, his graduation from Indian university and plenty of other things. Both are placed among the Americans on the far away land with Indian culture, Indian food, Bengali language, various traditions like food, clothes, living together in a family, naming the new born baby etc.

The story revolves around Ashoke and Ashima and their children Gogol and Sonia. Among themselves also or in the same family also the cultural differences are evident. As Ashoke and Ashima are more upholding the Indianness and their progeny reflect the assimilation of American and Indian ways of life. The attitude and outlook of Ashoke and Ashima on handling the problem in a foreign country differ from that of their children. Ashoke and Ashima try to bring up their children, the way it is done in India. Sonia and Gogol try to assert their individuality, and Gogol goes to the extent of reminding his parents that he is eighteen. Every other Saturday, Ashoke and Ashima send Gogol for Bengali language and cultural classes. And they conceded to Sonia and Gogol's demand of celebrating Christmas and having an American dinner once a week. Gogol and Sonia are adhered to Indian culture and value system at home while in public the American code of conduct is followed. The new generation Gogol, Sonia and Moushumi want to chart out their own lives in America. Gogol's shifting in with Maxine is an assertion of his independence and his desire to completely merge with the American culture. In the same way, Sonia also gets married to an American Christian guy Ben. Gogol is a name given to Nikhil by his parents which also represents the tints of Russian culture. This shows the postmodern life style. It forms a collage of cultures and reflects its impact on literature, primarily Indian English literature.



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Lahiri's debut novel *The Namesake* deals with the immigrants of the first generation and second generation in the United States. It primarily asks questions to one's identity as the stable cultural identity has lost in the merged cultures and new trends of life caused by the development of science and technology. The modernists were constantly in search of a centre as because of the development of science and reason during the 20th century the central symbols, institutions and beliefs of western culture disappeared. There were dark waves of nothingness, a void and vacuum. Like that, Ashoke also loses his hope in India and that creates vacuum in his life. He leaves India in search of a centre. He is lead to America, a centre of his new life. As the modernist was marked for being nostalgic about the earlier period which was full of faith and a tone of lament for the loss of an undisputed center/authenticity, both Ashoke and Ashima too, primarily Ashima, always feel vacuum or void on the land of America in the same way.

It seems as if they have lost their centre that is their own culture. And they are constantly looking for a centre to fill up the vacuum. So the first generation is more in mood of modernism.

A case is different with Gogol and Sonia, a second generation of immigrants. It seems they are living and leading a Post-modern life. They are no more striving for a centre or Indian culture. They represent heterogeneous post modern way of life as Gogol and Sonia assert their own individuality. Gogol is not even eager or sensitive towards their home at Pamberton Road. He refers to his New Heaven Hostel as his new home. He doesn't feel even uprooted in that. Gogol and Sonia, American born and educated, want to be accepted as Americans only. Moushumi is also having love-affair with a Frenchman Dimitri after her marriage with Gogol. For her, there is nothing serious about it as it is not something new to American way of life.

Thus Yeats, Eliot, Joyce, Ashoke and Ashima sought to restore a deep new centre. While post-modernist like John Cage, Gogol, Sonia and Moushumi often see no reason for a centre. They are happy where they are. Gogol's world is very much different from his parent's world. Gogol wants to be in a world where he can be free from Bengali adjectives, and his inherited Bengali background. Sonia gets married with Ben and Gogol once was having love-affair with Maxine, a Christian American girl and Moushumi is also having love-affair with Dimitri even after her marriage. They lead their lives like a yuppie, meeting their parents once a week. That reflects a new trend of life that is a mixture of Indian and American cultures, the postmodern multicultural life.



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“Post-modernists use as much as difficult language to understand and most books on post-modernism [in post-modernism] are written in this obscure tongue. . . Post-modernist relies upon using as many slashes and hyphens and parenthesis and whatever other kind of marks your computer can make possible.” (Jim Powell)

The Namesake has also been written in the same way. The story is told by a third person’s omniscient narrator who describes Gangulis’ lives from 1964 to 2000. The tone of the story is tragic. The language is a pleasant sounding fusion of English from all the three continents: Asia (India), Europe (England), and USA (Boston). Lahiri is very much conscious about the use of language. Her target audience comprises people from USA as well as from South Asian countries. Amalgamation of both the cultures is also found as tone of her themes in India, but her descriptive style has more of American quality. Not just semantically, her narration also provides a typical syntactical variation. She uses a chain of phrases and clauses that are put together with the conjunction and or comma or slash.

Her theme of the novel is characterized by compression. She chooses details that are multi-valued and multi-layered, pregnant with connotation and denotation. One of the chief features of modern fiction writing is sophisticated, stylistic approach towards writing. Post-modern writers are artistically more self-conscious. They focus more on technical aspect. Lahiri has evolved her own style, mostly flashback, by changing the mode of narration from past to present and again reversing it. She describes the chunks of time from past, present and future with the help of ‘flashback’ and ‘stream of consciousness’ techniques. Intertextuality is also evident in this novel as one of the traits of postmodern literature. She quotes Dostoyevsky as saying “we all came out of Gogol’s overcoat.” Further she quotes the Nikolai Gogol from his story ‘The Overcoat’ as the preface of the novel.

As the novel is the literary work of today’s era, it mirrors the present postmodern way of life. Postmodernism is reflected in this work in terms of cultural *mélange*, transformation of generation, narrative techniques, use of language and intertextuality. The novel is a remarkable work in this of postmodern age and aptly reflects the new way of life with the traits of postmodern literature.



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