

Cross Cultural Identities in Jhumpa Lahiri's *the Namesake* and Kiran Desai's *the Inheritance of Loss*; a Comparative Study

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Indian Women writing in English is being recognized as major contemporary current in English language- Literature. The likes of Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh and Anita Desai have won worldwide acclaim for the quality of their writing and their imaginative use of English. The Indian writers in English are writing, not in their native language but in a second language, and the resultant transcultural character of their texts. Traditionally, the work of Indian Women Writers has been undervalued due to patriarchal assumptions about the superior worth of male experience. The factors contributing to this prejudice is the fact that most of these women writers have observed no domestic space. The Indian women's perceptions of their aspirations and expectations are within the framework of Indian social and moral commitments. Indian Women Writers in English are victims of a second prejudice vis-a-vis their regional counterpart's. Proficiency in English is available only to writers of the intelligent, affluent and educated classes. Writer's works are often therefore, belong to high social strata and cut off from the reality of Indian life.

The majority of novels written by Indian women writers depict the psychological sufferings of the frustrated homemakers. This subject matter is often considered superficial compared to the depiction of the replaced and oppressed lives of women. Indian writing in English is now gaining ground rapidly. In the realm of fiction, it has heralded a new era and has earned many laurels both at home and abroad. Indian women writers have started questioning the prominent old patriarchal domination. They are no longer puppets in the hands of man. They have shown their worth in the field of literature both qualitatively and quantitatively and are showing it even today without any hurdle. Today, the works of Kamla Markandaya, Nayantara Sahgal, Anita Desai, Jhumpa Lahiri, Geetha Hariharan, Shashi Deshpande, Kiran Desai and Manju Kapur and many more have left an indelible imprint on the readers of Indian fiction in English. A major development in modern Indian fiction is the growth of a feminist or women centered approach, that seeks to project and interpret experience, from the point of a feminine consciousness and sensibility.

Jhumpa Lahiri is a Bengali American author whose debut short story collection, *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) won the 2000 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. Immediately her's is a popular name worldwide known for her ability to engross the readers in the different dimensions of the stories. Her first novel *The Namesake* (2003) brought her more laurels to fix a permanent place among the leading women writers. The novel was adapted into the popular film of the same name directed by Mira Nair. Lahiri is a member of the President's committee on the Arts and Humanities, appointed by the U.S. President BarakObama. She was born on July 11, 1967 in London, the daughter of Bengali Indian immigrants, her family moved to the United States when she was at the age of three. She grew up in Kingston, Rhode Island, where her father Anar Lahiri worked as a Librarian at the University of Rhode Island. Lahiri's mother wanted her children to grow up knowing their Bengali heritage, so her family often visited relatives in Calcutta. These frequented visits make her understand the condition of her homeland and its culture. In 2008, *Unaccustomed Earth* was published. It is a collection of short Stories.

Since 2005, Lahiri has been a Vice President of the PEN American Center, an Organization designed to promote friendship and intellectual cooperation among writers. In February 2010, she was appointed a member of the committee on the Arts and Humanists along with five others. Jhumpa has also had a distinguished relationship with The New Yorker Magazine. In 2013, her latest novel *The Lowlands* was published and was

immediately short listed for Booker Prize. But the air of fortune does not fly on her side; she now lives in Fort Greene, Brooklyn with her husband Alberto Vourvoulias-Bush, a journalist who was once a Deputy Editor of TIME Latin America and her and two children, Octavia (b.2002) and Noor (b.2005). She was awarded a number of reputed organizations.

Kiran Desai is one of the notable writers of today. She was born in India on September 3, 1971 in Chandigarh. She was gifted from her birth as the daughter of a famous Indian author Anita Desai. She spent the early years of her life in Pune and Mumbai. She did her education in Delhi and England, before moving to the United States to study Creative Writing. Kiran is an Indian writer who settled permanently in the United States.

Kiran Desai first came to literary attention in 1997; her excerpts found an honorable mention in Salman Rushdie's edited anthology *Mirror work: Fifty Years of Indian Writing*. In 1998, came her celebrated debut, *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*, which was published to unanimous acclaim in over twenty-two countries and went on to win the Betty Trask Award, a prize given by the Society of Authors for the best new novels by citizens of the Commonwealth of Nations at the age of 35. In 2006, eight years later, with *The Inheritance of Loss*, Kiran became well known worldwide. Her Booker Prize winning second novel *The Inheritance of Loss* is a magnificent masterpiece of humane breadth and wisdom, comic tenderness and powerful political acuteness.

Literary representations and critical writings on immigration usually concentrate on different aspects of legal immigration and on the relationship between the white and the marginalized immigrants. In fact, the fear of being swamped by waves of unwelcome immigrants- legal or otherwise –has been palpable all through history. This paper aims at dealing with the quest for Cross cultural identities of characters in both novels.

The Namesake

In August 1968, Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli welcome their brand new baby boy into the world. Only in order to be released from their hospital in Cambridge, Massachusetts, they must break with Bengali custom and give their son an official name on that pesky birth certificate. Ashoke has got this one covered. He names their son Gogol, after the Russian novelist. Apparently Gogol saved Ashoke's life when he was injured in a train crash in India, back in 1961. And by Gogol we mean his books – not the man himself. The Gangulis eventually move to Cambridge, Massachusetts, where they raise Gogol and, a few years later, their daughter Sonali. Growing up, Gogol gradually realizes that his name is quite unusual, and he really doesn't like that. He doesn't like that at all. Annoyed by the Bengali customs of his parents, Gogol totally embraces American popular culture. The summer before he leaves to attend college at Yale, he officially changes his name to Nikhil.

Everyone but his family calls him Nikhil. He graduates from Yale and Columbia, and gets a job at a fancy pants architecture firm in New York City. He also starts dating and he chooses girlfriends who are Anglo-American, with backgrounds completely different from his own. Soon, he begins a Serious Relationship with a girl named Maxine. After a while, Gogol feels as if he is a part of her family, which sounds really nice until you realize this means he is totally ignoring his own family in order to adopt their lifestyle. To make matters worse, his father dies during this period of neglect and Gogol is wracked with guilt. He promptly dumps Maxine and starts hanging out with his family a lot more.

After his father's death, Gogol reconnects with Moushimi Mazoomdar, a friend from childhood who is now a graduate student in French at New York University. With Moushimi, Gogol finally feels comfortable with his Indian-American identity, and after a year of dating, they get hitched. If we are hoping for happily ever after, well then we will be disappointed, because Moushimi has an affair with a guy named Dimitri Desjardins, and Gogol and Moushimi divorce. Suddenly, it's Christmas Eve, 2000. Now single, Gogol helps his mother pack up the family home and prepare for her last Christmas Eve party. While packing, Gogol comes across the book of Nikolai Gogol's short stories that his father gave him for his fourteenth birthday. Now, many years later, Gogol finally begins to read the book.

The Inheritance of Loss

The Inheritance of Loss is a book about the rigid class systems that exist in India and abroad amongst Indians, and the struggles that the people face within these classes after colonialism. The book takes place in a town called Kalimpong, which is near Darjeeling in the north-westernmost point in India. The story begins in the high northeastern Himalayas in Kalimpong. Sai, a seventeen year old, lives with a judge, his dog and his cook. It is a turbulent time, filled with dissatisfaction among the population of Indian-Nepalese, who want to separate and have their own country apart from India. There is an insurgency to draw new borders that will create peace in theory, yet violence is the tool to create this peace. They are robbed by members of the Gorkhaland National Liberation Front, who take their food, liquor and guns. This introduces the political struggle that the region is facing, as well as the breakdown of the social fabric.

The judge is Sai's grandfather, who took her in after his daughter and her husband were killed in a car accident. He takes her in order to pay off the spiritual debts that he incurred from abandoning his wife, and later

killing her, as well as shaming his father. He fights with his guilt throughout the book, making it seem as though he will one day change his rough exterior and learn to love again. Sai falls in love with her tutor, whose name is Gyan, and throughout the story they fight to accept the natural love they have created. Their love is doomed from the beginning because he is an ethnic Nepali, and she is an upper-class, Western-educated Indian girl. The cook watches over them to make sure that Gyan does not take advantage of Sai's good heart and at the same time worries about his own son in the U.S., whose name is Biju.

Biju is the typical Indian immigrant who gets a visa to the U.S. and stays illegally, working for slave wages in the kitchen basements of New York City. There he is used and abused by his bosses and is run ragged by one in particular, who also happens to be Indian. Upset with the way his life is turning out, and by how much he misses his father, he decides to leave the U.S. with his earnings and return back to his home and his father. Throughout the book, the political situation worsens and each person deals with it in their own unique way. All of them are consumed with guilt for how they have lived their lives thus far and desire to change their existences.

Both Jhumpa Lahiri and Kiran Desai have Indian roots and both of them have accepted USA as their adopted country. They also belong almost to the same age group. Therefore, there are lots of similarities and dissimilarities in their mental outlooks and their perception of the world. This is obviously reflected in their settings, themes and characterization respectively. With knowledge of the theme and characters' response to the varied situations, we find ourselves in a better frame of mind to compare the nature of conflicts in the two famous writers. A comparative study of Jhumpa Lahiri and Kiran Desai on the point of class and cultural conflict is quite challenging and intellectually stimulating. The characters of both writers, apart from the class to which they belong, seem to face the onslaughts of a diasporic world where rootlessness, alienation and sense of belonging of the host at the hands of home cause conflicts of all kinds. Both Jhumpa Lahiri and Kiran Desai endeavour to reflect this in their works in an eminent style.

In *The Namesake*, everybody is just a little bit lost. Or a lot lost, frankly. Practically every character struggles with his or her identity, because practically every character feels the tug and pull of different cultures, different traditions, and different dreams, Gogol, in particular, is torn between two cultures – the Indian traditions of his parents and the mainstream American culture in which he grows up. His struggle is the same one that his sister Sonia goes through, and his wife Moushimi, too. It's also related to the struggle his parents undergo as immigrants. Characters wrestle with these questions through their relationships with their names, their relationships with their families, and their choices about the future. The question of identity and location finds a dominant presence throughout the novel *The Namesake*, based on broad metaphor of a name. In India, a name carries a cultural assertion, religious affiliation and strength.

In *The Inheritance of Loss*, Biju discovers that, in spite of the racial and religious differences that separate him from his fellow immigrants, they all share the experience of struggling with the effects of colonization and racialization in the USA. In this novel, we find that though poor, many characters are polished, forward-looking and of a modern mentality who think money matters more than anything else. Desai's characters in the novel suffer from identity crisis. Except Jemubhai, the retired judge, most of the characters are poor but they try hard to change their lives.

It is true that comparison of any kind involves contrast. The characters of these two writers face the effects of migration and lost identity. There is no denying that migration brings problems of all sorts. The identity crisis in Jhumpa Lahiri is largely of an elite class but in Kiran Desai, the identity lost people are shown as poor and less educated people. Both Jhumpa Lahiri and Kiran Desai inherit a multi-cultural home atmosphere and have been frequenting India, which provides them a profound knowledge of Indian culture. Cross cultural identities in *The Namesake* and *The Inheritance of Loss* have been an important issue today and these two writers are fit enough to analyze, deal with and provide a solution.

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