

IDENTITY CRISIS IN MANJU KAPUR'S 'THE IMMIGRANT' AND JHUMPA LAHIRI'S 'THE NAMESAKE'

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Abstract: Since the dawn of human civilization, the urge and the longing of human beings for 'Identity' is unique. The efforts made by each person lead to the goal of 'Identity.' Without identity, a human being is nothing. In order to ascertain one's own identity here on the earth, human beings prefer different mediums such as name, house, fame, property, popularity, etc. Of all these elements, 'Name' and 'House' have an effective part to instill the sense of identity among people. Jhumpa Lahiri has said, "The question of identity is always a difficult one, but especially for those who are culturally displaced, as immigrants are who grow up in two worlds simultaneously." Lahiri, not only speaks of her elements of Identity Crisis faced by the people who migrate from the native land to other country, but also of all people in general. The paper here discusses how the novelist brings out the life of a married woman, with her husband alone to talk with, all alone in an alien land where Indian Culture and Individualism has often remained alien ideas. Manju Kapur's "The Immigrant" is a story of two immigrants, Nina and Ananda. The immigrant souls are always found to be divided. Manju Kapur chose Canada as the background for her novel, The Immigrant and discusses the Indian diaspora in Canada.

Keywords: Identity crisis, Longing for independence, Quest for identity, Social Content.

INTRODUCTION

The psychological term 'Identity Crisis' is defined as 'a period of uncertainty and confusion in which a person's sense of identity becomes insecure, typically due to a change in their expected aims or role in society. Ericson, a German born psychologist and psychoanalyst known for his theory on 'psychological development of human beings,' coined the term. Identity develops through experiences of the crisis and contradictions which every individual had to overcome, in order to rise to the next development phase.

The question of identity has remained a source of conflicts and has led to wars in history. The search for and discovery of identity has been a recurrent journey throughout humanity's history, defined and explored in literary works. Jhumpa Lahiri, the Pulitzer prize winner for her debut short story collection 'Interpreter of Maladies' in 2000, in her novel 'The Namesake' illustrates this humanity's pursuit of self. The novel explores the dilemma of name and immigrant's sense of identity and belongingness through the characters- Ashima, Gogol, Ashok and Sonia. Another novel 'the immigrant' written by Manju Kapur brings up the elements of identity crisis in the context of migration. This novels mentions all the troubles and traumas faced by immigrants abroad.

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Identity Crisis in ‘the immigrant’ by Manju Kapur

‘The Immigrant’ is the story of Delhi-based Nina Batra, a 30-year-old unmarried lecturer in English at Miranda House, Delhi University. The death of her diplomat father has left Nina and her mother struggling to make ends meet in strained circumstances in a small flat. The novel begins on her thirtieth birthday with a grim realization of her diminishing prospects of marriage. But, a visit to an astrologer sets her life on a different path through an arranged introduction with an NRI dentist, who arrives from Halifax, Canada to meet her. Ananda, the prospective bridegroom, left New Delhi a few years back after his parents were killed in an accident.

Ananda brings to his marriage a kind of loneliness centred on his sense of sexual inadequacy. Suffering from premature ejaculation he has failed to have relations with Western women earlier. After an initial inertia, he secretly visits a therapist later and almost cures himself. He becomes the insensitive, straying husband, and takes on a young, white mistress. Nina is left alone to brood over her pitiable state. But, in a few days, she too joins a library science course and has an extramarital affair.

The couple seeks neither to understand nor love each other. Nina finds she is not only ill prepared for the cultural gulf she encounters, but also the wide open distances in her barren relationship. Nina suffers a two-fold alienation. In a foreign land with no one to talk to but the husband, she feels rootless. This displacement is not merely a change of address but is also socio-cultural. Immigration results in the physical as well as imaginative border crossing. In addition to this is the oppression that a woman suffers from in a male-dominated society. The cultural dislocation, alienation and loss of identity related to diaspora thus open up multiple perspectives for writers who wish to portray these experiences in their writings. The immigrants or the expatriates, in most cases, are citizens of two countries. So they somehow shift their focus between their social and cultural identities which are in a way unstable and fluid. Despite living in a foreign land for a considerable amount of time, their identities are connected directly or indirectly with their old homelands.

The novel explores the issues of alienation and the quest for identity. It discusses common themes of alienation, dislocation of Indian culture, diaspora and quest for identity. It reflects the loneliness and the search of self being focused on the world at large.

The beginning of the novel poses the identity issues of the immigrants by the narrator such as, ‘Should the immigrant attempt to integrate and be more like the people in his or her adopted country or keep at preserving his/her cultures and traditions in a threat of the surroundings that smothers it?’ It is related to the questions of the alienated immigrants and their quest for the identity.

Ananda and Nina little by little switch from the strict vegetarianism of their upbringing to an omnivorous diet, and Nina finds herself doing the same with

clothing, feeling unable to wear her saris and ultimately graduating from salwar kameez to Western dress. Nina finally gives way to the picture Ananda presented to her of her life abroad. A gradual crisis of identity started between the couple. Arguments, blame, guilt, indifference and ultimately infidelity all ensue to create a much different atmosphere within their marriage than that of the beginning.

Although the novel is divided into two parts, Nina's life thematically divides the story. The first half where she holds on to her Indian identity, values and customs; and the second half where Nina returns to school for postgraduate studies at the local University and in doing so, after much finding of 'feet' gradually finds her own independence and identity in Canada (Kapur 2008: 121). The communication between Ananda and Nina portrays a kind of the search for self when Nina firms her feet to be independent and before having a child, she wishes to settle herself and says, 'I miss home. I miss a job. I miss doing things. I feel like a shadow. What am I but your wife?' (Kapur 2008:237)

Ananda and Nina are in the quest of the harmonious coexistence in the married life but bound together by their overlapping loneliness. Nina finds herself alienated when her husband is out at work she sleeps, reads or shops for sugar-rich junk food. Kapur writes that 'In marriage, the power of shopping together cannot be underestimated.' Christopher Lasch points that 'identity refers both to persons and to things. 'Both have lost their solidity in modern society, their definiteness and continuity.' (Lasch 1979: 32)

With respect to women's identities, Clifford makes an important point on how the process of self respect influences the role of women. He discusses how women, while still attached to a "home" culture often find themselves caught between "patriarchies, ambiguous pasts, and futures" and how communities can be a site of support for women, but also of oppression (Clifford 1994: 314).

Indians are known to value their morals and ethics but their attitude changes when they are in foreign land. Nina is alienated and dislocated from the Indian culture and finds puzzled in the quest for identity as Kapur writes; 'At present all she is, is a wife, and a wife is alone for many hours'. 'There will come a day when even books are powerless to distract. When the house and its convenience can no longer completely charm and compensate.' 'Then she realises she is an immigrant for life.' (Kapur 2008:122)

Nina finds no way to free from the alienation and in the context; she says that 'certain Indians become immigrants slowly. They are not among those who have fled persecution, destitution, famine, slavery and death threats, nor among those for whom the doors of their country slam shut the minute they leave its borders.' (Kapur 2008:120)

The Indian immigrants come across with the identity problems and alienation by different languages, customs, cultures, traditions, values and attitudes. The

amalgam of East and West values make the people alienated when they suffer from the inner conflicts like Ananda and Nina. The clash between Indian culture and Western influence results in the psychological dilemma for the people. As a result, the acute psychological study of the quest for identity and alienation becomes significant in the context of the issues of the immigrants.

Though the novel takes up the seventies as its background, the feelings of isolation and dislocation that Manju Kapur portrays would surely strike a chord with the present-day Indian immigrants trying to adjust to life in the West on the one hand and life of the West on the other hand.

The couple plays out a simultaneous existence in two cultures and face varied problems at different stages on the road to their assimilation of a new culture. They suffer different kinds of losses – of identities, familial love, economic security, social status and feel insecure about the preservation of their own religion. Nina's initial failure to strike a balance between her American and Indian identity brings in an identity crisis in her life. This results in cultural isolation that leads to personal isolation as well.

Ananda had to face the awful loneliness of a recent immigrant when he arrived in Halifax for the first time. In his uncle's home he missed the intimacies of Indian life, the communal meals, rich spices and vegetarian diet he was used to. But soon his feeling of rejection faded away and he assimilated the western culture. Though he becomes a reputed dentist and tries hard to establish the fact that he is more a Canadian than an Indian by nature, his sense of alienation remains. He becomes Andy and starts taking non-vegetarian meal fairly soon after moving to Canada. But for Nina, it is harder to adapt. She believes that using the word Andy in her home is to carry alienation into the bedroom. Kapur explores the special challenges that the young immigrant wives face in their life. They are already so pressured in professional and reproductive terms, and life to them becomes an even more impossible balancing act inside a foreign culture. The immigrant who comes as a wife has a more difficult time. If work exists for her, it is in the future, and after much finding of feet. As the novelist avers:

Nina has no idea why this is happening to her. She has a valid visa... She is decent, respectable, god fearing and worthy... She feels edgy; she is alone with a woman who makes no eye contact, for whom she is less than human... Though she was addressed as ma'am no respect is conveyed. Nina has been used to respect. It came with her class, her education, her accent, and her cloths. (107-08)

Pushed into the burden of staying at home jobless and being denied a life outside of marriage, she has to console herself that planning the weekly menu together secures the future in a way in which sex never can. As she changes from sari to jeans and takes her first morsel of meal which she so hated, the readers realize how

depressing it can be to dress every day entirely differently from how one is used to dress, to live on food the thought of which has always been nauseating.

One weekend Ananda is delighted when she accepts both fish and beef in her diet. While he is happy that life will be much easier now, Nina lets out the hidden truth - her taking of fish and beef was the result of fragmentation and distress, not a desire for convenience. Nina's own slow process of assimilation results in changing from an easily recognizable Indian woman in an oversized overcoat to a student of library science at the local college.

The idyllic future - mother, daughter and grandchild united at last in a Canadian home - that Nina had dreamt of, shatters when her mother dies alone in her apartment. She realizes that there is no going back for an immigrant, but at least she can establish an identity of her own apart from being Ananda's wife: "I feel like a shadow. What am I but your wife?" (237). She faces the problems of her marital life boldly, defies the role that tradition has scripted for her, and qualifies as a librarian. When she boards a Greyhound bus bound for another new start, the readers feel that she has found her own identity Anchors. "You had to be your own anchor." (328).

Through the ages, Indian woman's history of suffering and rebellion against patriarchal dominance remains almost the same. There are old models and newer ones but the paramount question of adjustment or rebellion in search of identity still remains. Male domination which leads to woman's subjugation, discrimination, exploitation and oppression presents sexism in its worst form.

Socio-political problems of contemporary life portrayed in terms of individual's quest for identity and freedom along with a sensitive handling of issues like gender, sexuality and diaspora make '**the immigrant**' a novel with a difference.

Identity Crisis in Jhumpa Lahiri's 'The Namesake'

Jhumpa Lahiri: Lahiri, an Indian American author, was born in London on July 11, 1969. She is the daughter of Indian immigrants from the state of West Bengal. Her family moved to the United States when she was two. The present novel 'The Namesake' definitely has some autobiographical elements. Lahiri expresses all her feelings of 'identity crisis,' 'trauma' and 'longing for the homeland' through Gogol, the central character of the novel. The novel is a representation of immigrants' lives who feel displaced and homesick, floating in an anonymous land, far away from home. The vital question for them is that of identity and their ongoing quest for it.

Elements of Identity Crisis

The novel narrates the assimilation of an Indian Bengali family from Calcutta, the Gangulis, into American culture, the cultural dilemmas experienced by them, and their American born children in different ways; the special, cultural and emotional dislocations suffered by them in their efforts to settle 'home' in the new land.

The identities of diaspora individuals and communities can neither be placed only in relation to some homeland to which they all long to return nor to that country alone where they settle down in. The main characters of this novel face the crisis of hybrid or dual identity, which makes their existence all the more difficult.

The novel talks about the journey of an Indian woman Ashima, the central character of the narrative, who moves from India to America after her marriage and in the process, suffers a lot by missing her country every now and then. She belongs to a traditional Hindu Brahmin family which lives in Calcutta. In fact, the novel opens with the agony of Ashima, in her advanced stage of pregnancy, feeling miserable to be away from the family members.

...But nothing feels normal to Ashima. For the past eighteen months, ever since she has arrived in Cambridge, nothing has left normal at all. It's not so much the pain, which she knows, somehow, she will survive. It's the consequence: Motherhood in a foreign land...It was happening so far from home, unmonitored and unobserved by those she loved.

The question of identity is a very difficult one. Ashima Ganguly was born and bred in India and had been to America after her marriage. She feels that living in a foreign land is like a lifelong pregnancy. She tries to settle in and adjust herself to her surroundings, but she feels strange and lost in this country and spends hours remembering her parents and family, and reading the same five Bengali novels time and again. While waiting for the child to be born, she relives the past until the point of her departure for Boston.

Lahiri says, 'The names we have, there is so much about them: who are we and they are the one world that exists that represents us. And yet we don't choose them. These are from our parents.' Lahiri expresses this aspect through 'Gogol' who has two names one for family and the other for others. In fact, Gogol spends much of his time in his teenage thinking of his name. He wants to escape from being called 'Gogol.' This is another aspect of identity crisis. Gogol thinks that his identity lies with the name he likes much. As a child he did not oppose anybody calling him 'Gogol,' but quite contrastingly, in his teenage, he did not like anybody calling him with the same name 'Gogol' as he wanted to be called 'Nikhil.'

The incident at kindergarten school brings to our notice how Gogol wanted to be called by other people in his childhood. Through Gogol, Lahiri presents identity crisis which she herself has faced acutely. She contradicts the idiom "What's in a name?" Rather she is obsessed with 'it's everything that matters in a name.' The problem of Gogol's name symbolizes the problem of his identity.

Gogol looks down at his sneakers. The way the principal pronounces his new name is different from the way his parents say it, the second part of it longer, sounding like "heel."

“No, no, it’s not a middle name” Ashoke says. He is beginning to lose patience. “He has no middle name. No nickname. The boy’s good name, his school name, is Nikhil.”

Mrs. Lapidus asks, “Are you happy to be entering elementary school, Gogol?” “My parents want me to have another name in school.” “And what about you, Gogol? Do you want to be called by another name?” He nods. “Yes.” “Then it’s settled.”

Gogol’s conversation with his suitemates, Brandon and Jonathan, both of whom had been notified by mail, reveals us another aspect of the identity that is tied to the name ‘Nikhil’.

“Is Gogol your first name or your last?” Brandon wants to know. Normally that question agitates him. But today he has a new answer. “Actually, that’s my middle name,” Gogol says by way of explanation, sitting with them in the common room to their suite. “Nikhil is my first name. It got left out for some reason.”

Eventually, Gogol refers back to his name to find his identity, a name he shirked since adolescence because of its hated oddity. Because of the peculiar link between his name and his father’s salvation, he discovers a sense of identity in his namesake, and a connection to his father, his father’s past, and indirectly, his own past, through the survival of his father. This correlation is an embodiment of Ashoke’s immigration and acculturation to America, because when Gogol asks his father, “Do I remind you of that night?” Ashok answers, “Not at all,” his father says eventually, one hand going to his ribs, a habitual gesture that has baffled Gogol until now. “You remind me of everything that followed,” says Ashoke.

Of the eight main identity crises- five in the childhood and youth ages, and three in the adulthood, the two aspects namely ‘identity-role of confusion’ and ‘identity-isolation’ are much evident in the novel. In connection with Gogol and Sonia we have many incidents with regard to the aspect of Ericson ‘identity-role of confusion.’ Ashima is an apt character for the second aspect of Ericson ‘identity-isolation.’ Ashima’s longing for her family, native place and native country supplement this aspect. Sonia, Gogol’s sister, completely assimilates into American culture with ease, while Ashima’s forbearance against the same culture is meticulously sustained until the end of the novel.

The quest for identity as an incessantly altering world is a daunting task for the immigrant. Lahiri has explored in several ways the difficulty of reconciling cross-cultural rituals around death, dying and love. She has tried to answer all these questions in Indians at heart, having familial ties, bonds that last long than all the physical relations they build around themselves.

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