

Negotiation in Diasporic Identity in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Third and Final Continent* and *This Blessed House*

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Abstract

Nowadays diaspora becomes crucial issue once people actively involve in global world. In diasporic world, people inevitably engage with their new environment, adjust with the new life and adapt to the unaccustomed-yet habits. However, on the same time they will look back at their old homeland which is sometimes totally different from their new world. In that situation people will face the struggling condition to keep going with two different worlds by some process of negotiating, transforming, or even contesting. This paper aims at discussing the negotiation process experienced by the Asian Indian characters during their lives in America in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Third and Final Continent* and *This Blessed House*. As one of the ethnic groups which has been scattering throughout global world, Asian Indian people endure the situation when they are in in-betweenness in their daily lives. The short stories, which are parts of Lahiri's short story collection, *Interpreter of Maladies*, concern mostly with the diasporic postcolonial topics. This paper draws the ideas of diaspora proposed by Steven Vertovec which mentions that diaspora can be as the type of consciousness, in which it is regarded as the dual or paradoxical nature. Through scrutinizing the wives and husbands characters in both short stories, the result shows that through some different ways, all the Asian Indian characters do both negotiation by adjusting to the new world--America, and old world--India. Both the Americaness and Indianess are reflected in their habits and apparatuses such as life styles, beliefs, foods, costumes, and others. The old world nostalgia, to which the characters feel deep meanings, have been created in some ways in their diasporic lives in the new world. Since the process of engaging two worlds is inherited through generations, the degree of in-betweenness is different among the characters. In *The Third and Final Continent*, since the characters can be categorized as the first generation of immigrant, their ties to the old world is bigger than those of the characters in *This Blessed House*. However, negotiation in diasporic life is a process, it may be different among persons, and it is fluid.

Keywords : negotiation, diaspora, identity, old world, new world.

A. Introduction

Diaspora today becomes a crucial issue in global world. Developing into a field of study, it is not merely confined into people's movement to the other countries. Cohen (2008) specifies the diaspora studies which has passed through four stages. First, the term was confined to the study of Jews' exile experience, which later, in 1960s and 1970s the term was extended by involving the experience of Africans, Armenians, and the Irish. Second, in 1980s and onwards, Safran (as qtd. in Cohen, 2008:1) described diaspora as different categories of people, such as expatriates, expellees, political refugees, alien residents, immigrants, and ethnic and racial minorities. In the third phase, in 1990s the concept of diaspora is more complex; it is delimitating, more over, identities are deterritorialized, constructed and deconstructed flexibly. The fourth stage is the phase of consolidation among ideologies which then reaffirm the diasporic idea. In this stage Brubaker (2005 in Cohen, 2008:12) mentions three core elements in diaspora, namely dispersion from the homeland, homeland orientation, and boundary maintenance.

As one of fields of study in postcolonial, diaspora emerges in wide array of other disciplines, including literature. Numerous works of literature are created mostly by writers who have self-experiences with diasporic life. Jhumpa Lahiri, one of Indian-American writers, created one of her masterpiece, *The Third and Final Continent* and *This Blessed House* as collection of her short story, *Interpreter of Maladies* which led her to receive 2000 Pulitzer Price for fiction. Born in London as daughter of Indian immigrant who later moved to the US when she was still three, Lahiri uses her personal experiences in most of her works. Her concern on Asian Indian diaspora in the US influences her alot in creating her works. The inspiration to write *The Third and Final Continent* is called coming from her father's occupation as librarian at one of universities in the US. Both *The Third and Final Continent* and *This Blessed House* tell about the diasporic life experienced by the characters: "I" and the wife, Mala; and newlywed couple Sanjeev and Twinkle. Both stories represent the first and second generation of immigrants, how they have to adjust to the American life, but on the other side they still maintain their identity as Asian Indian. It can be seen how the negotiation and adaptation, and collective identity are different.

B. Diaspora and Identity

Many scholars put some definitions of diaspora in some ways. Khachig Tololian (as quoted in Clifford, 1994: 303) writes that the term was articulated to the study of Jewish, Greek, and Armenian experience in which now share wider meaning as immigrant, expatriate, refugee, guest-worker, exile community, overseas community, and ethnic community. Safran as quoted by Clifford, (1994: 304) later defines main features of diaspora as the 'expatriate minorities community' that: 1) are dispersed; 2) maintain memory, vision, and myth about their original homeland; 3) cannot be fully accepted by the host land; 4) desire for eventual return; 5) committed to the homeland; 6) think that collective identity and solidarity are important. However, Safran's idea on diaspora invites criticism from many scholars such as Clifford (1994) and Cohen (1997) who suggest that the definition is too limited to accommodate today's migration. Cohen then proposes typologies of diaspora as victim, labor, trade, imperial, and cultural. Jews, African, and Armenian are examples of victim diaspora; Indian exemplifies labor diaspora; Chinese and Lebanese as trading diaspora; the British represents imperial diaspora, and Carribean exemplifies cultural diaspora. However, this boundaries are flexible and some ethnic group may be classified as two or more types of diaspora (Bhatia, 2007:78).

Steven Vertovec(1999) asserts three definitions of diaspora, namely: 1) diaspora as

social form; 2) diaspora as type of consciousness; and 3) diaspora as mode of cultural production. Diaspora as social forms is characterized by triadic relationship between globally dispersed but collectively self-identified ethnic group, the territorial states and contexts where the groups occupy, and homeland states and contexts whence they came (1999:5). Diaspora as type of consciousness is marked by dual or paradoxical nature experienced by the group in the host land. This may lead into 'here' and 'there', 'past' and 'present', and other forms of dualism (Gilroy qtd.in Vertovec 1999:8). While diaspora as mode of cultural production can be depicted as *involving production and reproduction of transnational social and cultural phenomena* (Appadurai qtd in Vertovec 1999:19).

This paper discusses the term diaspora as the type of consciousness experienced by the characters in Lahiri's stories. In this second type, diaspora reveals the term of 'new world' and 'old world'. Old world is usually identified with the homeland, 'the past', the place where people come from with the thick characteristics of their home culture. New world refers to the land where people now live, where they must survive and adjust to. It is identified with 'the present'. This situation leads into double-consciousness, a term firstly proposed by W.E.B. Du Bois. People will be in the condition of in-betweenness, between the 'old world' or 'new world'. Both new world and old world are indispensable. In the effort of survival in the host land, people will adapt to the life and rules of host land, but on the other side they will at times look back at their home land. As both are important, thus what they can do is doing negotiation between the two worlds, as Clifford says, "*diaspora cultures thus mediate, in a lived tension, the experiences of separation and entanglement, of living here and remembering/desiring another place*" (1994: 311). It is supported by Gilroy and Clifford that...."*The 'where you are at is a combination of roots and routes*"(Gilroy 1993 and Clifford 1994 in Kalra et.al 2005:29).

C. Indian Diaspora, Dual Identity, and Negotiation

Today approximately 1.7 million Indians live in the United States and based on 2000 US census, this ethnic group became of the fastest-growing immigrant communities (Bhatia, 2007: 14). In 1950s some Hindus and Moslem in India engaged in small business and East Coast. (Lee, 1998: 9). 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act basically changed the immigration pattern of Indian moving. That second wave immigration led the highly-skilled immigrants such as medical doctors, engineers, scientists, university professors, and doctoral and postdoctoral students come to the US (Bhatia, 2007: 14).

1. Negotiation in the Stories

In *The Third and Final Continent*, the character "I" is depicted as a professional immigrant who works in the library of Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). Coming to the US in 1969, America is not the first country he stepped on. After completing his degree in India, England is his first travel abroad for studying and working in library at the same time. America is mentioned as his last or his third continent after Asia (India) and Europe (England). Thus, the character has already made some negotiation for both old and new world before coming to the US.

Negotiation can be conducted through some ways, such as foods, costumes, traditions, and others. In foods, he starts his negotiation process with his new world by having American food such as cereals and milk, while reinventing his old world is executed by cooking egg curry and having Darjeeling tea. This process of negotiation emerges as the efforts to survive in the new land. Sanjeev, the character in *This Blessed House* also tries to make negotiation in foods by

having both foods from the two worlds. Serving both American and Indian food in his housewarming party is one of his forms of negotiation. '*...there would be a case of champagne, and samosas from an Indian restaurant in Hartford, a big tray of rice with chicken and almonds and orange peels...*' (Lahiri, 1999: 150).

Old world has significant meaning for diasporic people. As claimed by Safran in Cohen (2008:6) that the members of diasporic people "*... retain a collective memory, vision or myth about their original homeland including its location, history, and achievements*" (2008:6). Old world offers nostalgia and certain comfort that they may not find in new world. Since they cannot be uprooted from their ancestry, the ties to the homeland is important for them to balance with their new world

Clifford claims that diaspora consciousness can be constituted in negative or positive way. In positive way, it is through identification with historical cultural/political forces."*...it is also about feeling global* (Clifford, 1994:312). Diasporic people can produced positively when "*...it can offer a sense of attachment elsewhere, to a different temporality and vision, a discrepant modernity.*" (1994:314). In their daily interaction with people, both "I" and Sanjeev make intense interaction with American people. The work as librarian in MIT makes "I" inevitably meet a lot of people from various background. His first dealing with US citizen, a fussy alienated old woman, Mrs. Croft, who becomes his host, is one of his successful adaptation process. For Mrs. Croft, "I" become her only friend to whom she shares her feeling. The conducive social relation and environment make "I" feel to be accepted positively. It is shown by the end of story where it is told that "I" has been in the US for nearly thirty years. Being an American citizen and decides to grow old in the new land, "I" never leave his homeland. Mala and him still visit Calcutta every few years, bring back more drawstring pajamas and Darjeeling tea (Lahiri, 1999:197). This is in line with the idea of Bhattacharjee in Dasgupta (1998:954) who writes that however well adjusted to the American life, Asian Indian immigrants still insist on keeping their ties with their ancestry in many ways, one of them is through frequent visits to the homeland." *...psychological closeness is maintained by reinventing 'Indian culture' on foreign soil*" (1998:954).

As the same with "I", Sanjeev also makes very good relationship with American. His position as vice president in a firm near Hartford, who has a secretary of his own and a dozen people working under his command is a proof of positive diasporic consciousness. He can be well accepted, in addition, his acquaintances include not only Indian people living in the US but also the Americans. This type of successful diasporic model is usually called as model minority. People of minority resolve to perform the best to raise their living standard and career achievement based on the faith that meritocracy system is still open despite some discrimination for some minorities.

Sharda (1990) in Jain and Belsky mentions that many Indians in the US still observe traditional festivals and rituals, seek guidance from parents, including having arranged marriage. Though having been internationally interacting with global world, the old world is still given attention, including for Sanjeev, the second generation of Indian immigrants. Both characters subjugate to the Indian tradition by having arranged marriage to Indian women, things that can be called as looking back at the old world. The comfort in getting along with Indian tradition is a proof that diasporic people cannot be uprooted from their ancestry. Though some conflicts and awkwardness do not rarely occur during the marriages, both characters attempt to adapt to their own couples. "I" confesses that he needs time to get to know and intimate to his wife. *At night we kissed, shy at first but quickly bold, and discovered pleasure and solace in each other's*

arm (Lahiri, 1999: 197).

2. Diasporic Life for Women in the Stories

Clifford (1994:313) mentions that diasporic experiences are always gendered. "*Life for women in diasporic situation can be doubly painful—struggling with the material and spiritual insecurities of exile, with the demands of family and work, and with the claims of old and new patriarchies.*"(1994:314). Women's experience in diasporic life and adaptation process is different from men's. When men usually face the new world as a new challenge for them and as a means for better life, women may encounter it as the opposite. Compared with "I", Mala, the wife faces more obstruction in her adaptation process. As the 1969 first generation immigrant Indian woman who never travelled abroad, Mala is often found weeping at night remembering her parents, though it was still in India. The new world seems a questionable habitat which is far and to which she should rely her life on. Meanwhile, the old world, India, gives a big influence and comfort to her and thus it is too significant to leave. Hence, she keeps her identity as Indian woman by wearing sari and India accessories, rubbing coconut oil to her scalp at nights, cooking curry and oxtail soup, having Darjeeling tea, and bringing some pajamas." ... *a woman in sari, with a dot painted on her forehead and bracelets staked on her wrists*" (1999:195). Her ability to cook, knit, embroider, and sketch landscape is reason to put her as a typical of ideal Indian woman. Like in India tradition, men are considered superior and powerful; while women must subjugate and bow down to their fathers, husbands, and then to their son as well. Men are the breadwinners, while women are domesticated at home (Derne, 1995 et.al. in Jain and Belsky, 1997:875). In both India and America, Mala's position is restricted at home, handling domestic affairs, while her husband provides economic security. This working division reflects the divided gender roles in the diasporic life of Indian women.

On the other side, Twinkle, Sanjeev's wife in *This Blessed House* experiences different negotiation and adaptation process compared to Mala. As the second generation immigrant who is pursuing her master degree, Twinkle is described as a modern woman who more easily adapts to the new environment. In the matter of food and costumes, Twinkle has her own stream. When Mala is good at cooking and knitting, Twinkle chooses to order food or cook practical recipes. Her habit of smoking and consuming wine are examples of her adaptation to the new world. In this case, modernity plays roles in transferring values in adaptation process. For Twinkle, new world is not a questionable matter. New world is regarded as the place which offers hopes and chance to raise her standard of living, hence there is no worry for Twinkle to involve in American life, including plunging herself into the most principles thing in her life : admiring the Christ statue she found in her new house. Though a Hindu devotee, she is interested in the statue. The situation of being Hindu but interested in Christ statue is part of dual nature in diasporic life. "*No, we're not Christian. We're good little Hindus.*" *She planted a kiss on top of Christ's head, then placed the statue on top of the fireplace mantel...*"(Lahiri, 1999: 137).

However, Twinkle's negotiation process to the old world also run smoothly. As an educated Indian woman, Twinkle, also agrees to have arranged marriage. The couple went back to India for wedding. "*...At the urging of their matchmakers, they married in India, amid hundreds of well-wishers whom he barely remembered from his childhood, in incessant August rain, under a red and orange tent strung with Christmas tree lights on Mandeville Road*" (Lahiri, 1999: 143).

Her negotiation process with her own husband Sanjeev becomes parts of her diasporic life. Sanjeev, who holds Indian tradition more than Twinkle reluctant to put Christ statue inside

the room though Twinkle asks for. The religious belief difference is the cause of his reluctance though Twinkle convinces him that they are still Hindu devotees. The negotiation process between Sanjeev and Twinkle represents negotiation between old and new world. Eventually the negotiation can reach the agreement successfully when both sides can mediate, compromise each other and loose their rigid principles. Sanjeev is succeed in keeping his idealism to hide some statues, but on the other side he can compromise when Twinkle has willingness to display the statues in some certain rooms he determines.

“Now look. I will tolerate, for now, you little biblical menagerie in the living room. But I refuse to have this,” he said flicking at one of the painted peanut-tears,”displayed in our home.”.....

“I’d put it behind the door,” she offered. That way when they peek in, they won’t see. Happy?” (Lahiri, 1999: 139).

The situation is in line with Buriel in Jain and Belsky (1997) who writes that “...immigrants do not simply shed their old or native values for new ones, but rather select, shift, and modify to adapt to the new environment” (1997: 874). Sanjeev and Twinkle has executed the negotiation process smoothly.

D. Conclusion

Diasporic experience becomes part of Lahiri’s *The Third and Final Continent* and *This Blessed House* which urge the characters to mediate the in-betweenness of the new world and old world. Both worlds are important for the continuation of the characters’ lives since both are energy for them to survive : adapt to the new environment and keeping the old tradition from the homeland. The negotiation processes among the characters are running differently. It is based on their historical experience, belief, education, and to what extent modernity comes to them. Immigrants cannot simply drop their old values and take all of the new ones , but they rather select, shift, and modify (1997: 874) to adapt to the environment They will choose the values that they see it fit. Hence, negotiation in diasporic life is flexible and fluid.

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