

ISSN: 2395-4132

THE EXPRESSION

An International Multi-Disciplinary e-Journal

Bi-Monthly Referred & Indexed Open Access e-Journal



Vol. 1 Issue 3 June 2015

Editor-in-Chief: Bijender Singh

Email: editor@expressionjournal.com
www.expressionjournal.com

The Expression: An International Multi-Disciplinary e-Journal

www.expressionjournal.com ISSN: 2395-4132



BINARISM IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S *THE NAMESAKE*

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Abstract

This paper aims to bring to the fore the concept of binarisms in the novel *The Namesake* by Jhumpa Lahiri wherein she has presented the lives of the immigrants as to how they cope up with the new things that comes up their way. How one's life is torn apart into two different ways. The concepts can move parallel to each other, create a new identity, thereby able to help them survive in the worst of the conditions. In contemporary post structuralism and feminist theories, the use of binaries have been prominently used whereby male is portrayed to be dominant over the female, white over the black, birth over the death, west over the east and so on. She has tried to delve deep into the psyche of the characters individually as well as culturally. In common parlance, binary logic defines the development of the western thought to perceive the world in terms of binary oppositions that helps to establish the relationship of dominance of one concept over the other.

Key-Words

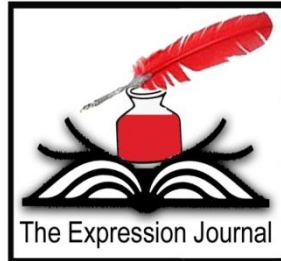
Binary, Opposition, Orient, Occident, Nostalgia, Dominant.

Vol.1. Issue 3 (June 2015)

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The periphery of the self and the other divides the personality of the woman in two halves whereby she is bound to portray herself as the one that is not self-convicted and portrayed as the other and on the other side, her true self, her true identity is subdued to the core. Her counterpart the powerful and the woman herself as the powerless. According to Chinua Achebe, "The universal myth... denigrates the post-colonial text on the basis that 'European' equals 'universal' there was immense awareness of (and resentment towards) the divide between the colonizer and the colonized, the center and the periphery, the self and the Other." (Ibid). As a fact of interest, the rise of post colonialism and the post modernism coincided altogether. Simon During has highlighted how both the concept run parallel to each other. Both these concepts helps in promoting the decentering of the discourse and the culture by emphasizing the need to move away from the centralization of the European thought and universality that it imposes on the world. They used similar tools in the "deconstructing of the master course" whereby we can find the parallelism in the culture and thought. By defying the master course that is there in the society present as binary concepts viz., male/female, colonial/colony, postmodernism/post colonialism, myth/reality, and culture/thought, Orientalism/Occidentalism. In the words of Simon During, "The concept of Post modernity has been pointed out in terms which more or less intentionally wipe out in the possibility of post-colonial identity." Within the civil society one can easily see the operation of the culture, where the influence of the institutions, ideas, and of all the other persons, works not by way of domination but by consent as referred to by Antonio Gramsci. In Orientalism, Said argued that Orientalism was a "Western style for dominating, restructuring and having authority over the Orient" (3). In any society apart from the totalitarian form of government one can easily see the

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predomination of the culture over others just as one can find certain ideas of an individual to be more influential than others. Gramsci has identified this cultural leadership a concept quite indispensable for the thorough understanding of any cultural life in the western areas. According to Edward Said:

It is hegemony or rather the result of cultural hegemony at work that gives Orientalism the durability and the strength that I have been speaking about as far. Orientalism is never far from what Denys Hay has called the idea of Europe, a collective notion of identifying “us” Europeans as against all “those” non-Europeans, and indeed it can be argued that the most major component in the European culture is precisely what made that cultural hegemonic both in and outside Europe: the idea of European identity as a superior one in comparison with all the non-European peoples. (Orientalism, 22)

Saadia Toor in her article “Indo-chic: The Cultural Politics of Consumption in PostLiberalization India” published in 2000, discusses the phenomenon of New Orientalism in the Indian context:

If Orientalism past was a manifestation of the ‘Occidents’ will to power over the ‘Orient’, New Orientalism rehearses the same relationship but with a crucial difference; today the production-circulation- consumption circuit in the case of these cultural commodities originates and culminates in India. There is however, a crucial period of mediation by the West where the commodities are circulated and then sanctioned by cultural critics as authentically ‘Indo-chic’. The diaspora features prominently in this process, the critics validating this authenticity are usually intellectuals of Indian origin. (9)

The concept of Orientalism and Occidentalism are too vast and influence each other but can never be brought together as one and it’s just like the zenith and horizon that seem to meet as a mirage far away but when perceived from closer it’s just a deception and the very identity of these two can better be analyzed from the following lines of Rudyard Kipling that identifies the relation between the poles apart:

OH, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet,
Till Earth and Sky stand presently at God’s great Judgment Seat;
But there is neither East nor West, Border, nor Breed, nor Birth,
When two strong men stand face to face, tho’ they come from the ends of the earth! (Kipling, 1-4)

In her work Jhumpa Lahiri, through her characters has projected the binarisms in terms of geography, relations, cultural, ethnic, habits etc. In the novel *The Lowland* and *The Namesake*

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psychologically (nostalgia) and geographically goes through the binarisms. She presents India and Rhode Island or the United States, between which the lives of the characters especially the first immigrants are divided. Ashima and Ashok on one side and Gauri on the other are nostalgic not only in terms of places i.e., their native land and the one they have shifted to. It is at their own will that they made this geographical shift but still it is the mindset that still makes them live in their own land despite their migrations. It is in one way or the other the divulgence between their past and present that they try to cope with. The nostalgia seems to be inflicted with only the first generation immigrants but when it comes to their children they are brought up into hardly feel the same as their parents. They feel oneness in the foreign culture and wish to identify themselves as the one. The children are in binary relation to their parents in terms of nature and they adapt their cultural manifestations but only to a certain limit. In the novel *The Namesake* Gogol and Sonali, show a sign of indifference when they are told that they are going to visit India. The first immigrants have somewhat adapted into their new life but the children hardly even try to imbibe that quality in themselves. On the other hand in the novel *The Lowland*, Bela is totally indifferent to her mother and hardly wish to visit India and Gauri is connected to her past and that is what makes her long for India though she is shown psychologically present in India and it is because of this that she is hardly able to do justice with her present life and tries to make escape with the situation and every moment doing this she is going far away from her family. "Most people trusted in the future, assuming that their preferred version of it would unfold, blindly planning for it, envisioning things that weren't the case. This was the working of the will. This was what gave the world purpose and direction. Not what was there but what was not" (*The Lowland*, 151). Gauri embraces isolation. "Isolation offered its own form of companionship; the reliable silence of her rooms, the steadfast tranquility of the evenings. The promise that she would find things where she put them, that there would be no interruption, no surprise. It greeted her at the end of each day and lay still with her at night." (*The Lowland*, 237). According to the Indian tradition, a woman is not supposed to call her husband by name which is quite the contrary that is found in the westernized culture. While aping the west the influence can be seen quite aptly in the upcoming generations but Lahiri has somehow managed to preserve the Indianness in her work:

When she calls out to Ashoke, she doesn't say his name. Ashima never thinks of her husband's name when she thinks of her husband, even though she knows perfectly well what it is. She has adopted his surname but refuses, for propriety's sake to utter his first. It's not the type of thing Bengali wives do. Like a kiss or a caress in a Hindi movie, a husband's name is something intimate and therefore unspoken, cleverly patched over. And so, instead of saying Ashoke's name she utters the interrogative that has come to replace it, which translates roughly as "Are you listening to me?" (*The Namesake*, 2)

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The three magical words of love confessions in a couple is quite a normal thing in the other cultures but when it comes to India, it takes years after marriage to say those words and Lahiri has shown the binary oppositions by way of thoughts of Ashima, “ And then a man’s voice: I love you, sweetheart.” Words Ashima has neither heard nor expects to hear from her own husband; this is not how they are. . . She wishes the curtains were open, so that she could talk to the American women.” (The Namesake, 3) No doubt, pregnancy and delivering the baby is a universal phenomena but it is the attitude that differentiates the two cultures from each other. No matter how broadminded these people are, but they respect their privacy and hardly let anyone peek within, “perhaps one of them have given birth before, can tell her what to expect. But she has gathered that Americans, in spite of their public declarations of affection, in spite of their miniskirts and bikinis, in spite of their hand-holding on the street and lying on the top of each other on the Cambridge Common, prefer their privacy.” (The Namesake, 3) It is probably the culture, the thought and the attitude that creates a parallel between the two concepts or for that matter say countries. We may say that a person can be named similar to his great grandparents, if we were in the west but if it were to be taken into consideration whence in India, it might sound weird and not acceptable. This difference distinguishes the two nations from each other. “You can always name him after yourself, or one of your ancestors,” Mr Wilcox suggests, admitting that he is actually Howard Wilcox III. “It’s a fine tradition. The king of England and France did it,” he adds. But this isn’t possible, Ashima and Ashoke think to themselves. This tradition doesn’t exist for Bengalis, naming a son after father or grandfather, a daughter after mother or grandmother. This sign of respect in America and Europe, this symbol of heritage and lineage, would be ridiculed in India. Within Bengali families, individual names are sacred, inviolable. They are not meant to be inherited or shared.” (Lahiri, 28). No matter the two concepts be it any are opposite to each other but the fact remains that they are complimentary to each other and what marks an identification to one is because of the existence of another. Might be they walk in a parallel way but the truth cannot be denied that they does exist, whether they meet or not on any particular moment. “Thanks, Baba,” Gogol says, eager to return to his lyrics. Lately he’s been lazy, addressing his parents in English though they continue to return to his lyrics. Lately he’s been lazy, addressing his parents in English though they continue to speak to him in Bengali. Occasionally he wanders through the house with his running sneakers on. At dinner he sometimes uses a fork.” (Lahiri, 75). On their Indian trip, they encounter a various obstacles as they were not accustomed to Indian places and they keep a western outlook towards the places they visit. “They are accustomed, after all these months, to being just the four of them. For a few days, in Agra, which is as foreign to Ashima and Ashoke as it is Gogol and Sonia, they are tourists staying at a hotel with a swimming pool, sipping bottled water, eating in restaurants with forks and spoons, paying by credit card. Ashima and Ashoke spoke in broken Hindi, and when young boys approach to sell postcards or marble trinkets Gogol and Sonia are forced to say, “English, please.”” (Lahiri 85) Though Indian

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by origin, they are subjected to being English because of the influence of the Occident. They might tend to ape the foreign culture but somewhere or the other they are treated as Indian are thereby the subject of the Orient. If West is the "Self", East is the "Other". On their return to America they are back to routine and their eight months trip is just a chapter of the past and it is linked only till them, "Once again they are free to quarrel, to tease each other, to shout and holler and say shut up. They take hot showers, speak to each other in English, ride their bicycles around the neighborhood. They call up their American friends, who are happy enough to see them but ask them nothing about where they've been. And so the eight months are put behind them, quickly shed, quickly forgotten, like clothes worn for a special occasion, or for a season that has passed, suddenly cumbersome, irrelevant to their lives." (Lahiri, 88)

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