

THE IMPACT OF HYBRIDITY AND MIMICRY ON THE INDIAN IMMIGRANTS' IDENTITY: A POSTCOLONIAL ANALYSIS IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S *THE LOWLAND*

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Abstract

This research has two objectives: (1) to identify the forms of hybridity and mimicry done by Indian immigrant characters in the US, (2) to analyze how hybridity and mimicry affect their identity. Therefore, post-colonialism theory specifically on the discussion upon hybridity and mimicry is applied. This research falls into qualitative research. The data of this research are in the forms of words, sentences and paragraphs taken from Lahiri's *The Lowland* related to the form of hybridity and mimicry done by the characters and the effects on their identity. The content analysis technique is used to analyze the data by reading, understanding and interpreting the data. The results of this research are that the form of hybridity experienced by the characters is linguistic hybridity and the forms of mimicry done by the characters are mimicry of manner, value and lifestyle. The interpretation of the data shows that hybridity and mimicry lead the characters to have double consciousness.

Keywords: Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland*, post-colonialism, hybridity, mimicry, identity, double consciousness

INTRODUCTION

An individual's identity is shaped by the influence of culture and the society s/he lives in. When two or more cultures meet, they could blend, adapted or even forming a mixture. One might try to imitate other culture by suppressing his own or experience hybridity without losing his root. These phenomena can be seen for example in the colonial era and in the reality of immigrants' life.

One of the problems that arise from these phenomena is concerning the identity of the people who experience hybridity and

mimicry. Experiencing hybridization and imitation of culture stimulates the characters' identity to be always in development and negotiation. Cultural differences and personal reasons are strong impulse that drives the postcolonial individuals and immigrants to consider about who they are and what they are going to be.

The problems related to identity, hybridity and mimicry are often found as the main issues depicted in the postcolonial literature for example V.S. Naipaul's *The Mimic Men*, Sam Selvon's *The Lonely*

Londoners, and Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland*. First published in 2013, Jhumpa Lahiri's novel entitled *The Lowland* tells the life of the Indian immigrants in the United States. It portrays how Indian immigrants perceive the land they are now settled in with a complete different culture and the homeland they have left behind.

This research aims to (1) to identify the forms of hybridity and mimicry done by Indian immigrant characters in the US, (2) to analyze how hybridity and mimicry affect their identity. Therefore, post-colonialism theory specifically on the discussion upon hybridity, mimicry and identity is applied.

Both postcolonial theory and literature speak and analyze tricky post-colonial matters mostly concerning culture and identity. As suggested by Ashcroft, Griffiths. And Tiffin (1998: 186), postcolonialism concerns with the effects of colonization, "Post-colonialism (or often postcolonialism) deals with the effects of colonization on cultures and societies." Postcolonial individuals try to show their existence and express their criticism through literary works. According to Barry (2002: 127-8), postcolonial criticism has at least four characteristics: otherness, the portrayal or insertion of local language into literary

works written in English, double or hybrid identity and cross-cultural interaction.

Both in colonization and post-colonial era, people experience hybridity and do imitation or mimicry which later affect their cultural identity. Hybridity according to Homi Bhabha (1994: 112) is a productive cultural fusion formed by the cultural contact between the colonizer and the colonized. Some theorists and practitioners in postcolonial study such as Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin (1988:118), Tyson (2006: 422) and Greese (in Dizayi, 2015:1005) also share the similar idea that hybridity brings positive sense in postcolonialism and cultural mixture and can be altered into resistance of colonialism power. According to Singh (2009: par. 11), hybridity can be classified into five categories: racial, linguistics, literary, cultural and religious.

Mimicry according to Bhabha (in Bertens, 2001: 208) is done either voluntarily or by force. There are at least two motives of mimicry according to Tyson (2006: 421), the first is that the colonized individuals want to be accepted in the colonizer's society and the second is because colonizer's hegemony has successfully make the colonized see their own culture as inferior.

Double consciousness according to Tyson (2006: 421) is a way of an individual sees the world which is torn into two different cultures. For example a colonial individual compares his local culture and the one of the colonizer's. He further describes how double consciousness leads to an unstable sense of self. They face an unstable psychological state since they feel like belonging to none of the cultures. They are trapped in between the two cultures.

As one of the main issues in postcolonial literature and criticism, identity as suggested by Castle (2007: 313), is influenced by inner and outer factors. The shaping of one's cultural identity itself, according to Hall (1990:222-3) is a process that keeps going in a shared culture. Mercer (in Dizayi, 2015: 1000) states that identity emerges as an issue when it faces a crisis. After freed from colonialism, a nation is in search and construction of its identity; crisis can emerge in the process of reclaiming their identity.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research falls into qualitative research specifically with content analysis method. According to Julien (in Given, 2008: 120), content analysis is suitable in seeking the meaning of a text through both

the explicit and implicit messages. Thus, it is useful for the researcher who aims to understand characters' experiences and the phenomenon portrayed in the text. The method itself, as stated by Julien, involving deep close reading to reveal the hidden meaning in the text

“A qualitative approach to content analysis, however, is typically inductive, beginning with deep close reading of text and attempting to uncover the less obvious contextual or latent content therein.” Julien (in Given, 2008:121)

The primary source of the data of this research was obtained from a novel written by Jhumpa Lahiri in 2013 entitled *The Lowland*. The data taken from Lahiri's *The Lowland* are in the forms of words, sentences and paragraphs related to the forms of hybridity and mimicry done by the Indian immigrants in the US and how do hybridity and mimicry affect their identity.

In collecting the data of the research, two steps are employed by the researcher. The first step is reading and rereading the text thoroughly in order to get a deep understanding of the text and produce an in depth interpretation of the phenomenon under discussion. The second step is

recording and grouping the data taken from the text.

In analyzing the data, the researcher follows several steps: (1) Conducting a close reading over the text and redo it again, (2) Recording the data related to the forms of hybridity and mimicry done by the Indian immigrants in the US and the impact of hybridity and mimicry on their identity by marking the book with pen or colorful post-it and write the data in the notes, (3) sorting and grouping the relevant data based on the categories needed to answer the research questions, (4) analyzing and interpreting the data, (5) extracting the data in order to produce post-colonialism interpretation, and (6) conducting triangulation to measure the trustworthiness of the data. The triangulation itself is conducted by discussing the findings with a research partner who was using the similar theory and consulting to the 1st and 2nd advisors.

THE RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings and discussion are divided into two major parts. The first part is the form of hybridity and mimicry done by the characters while the second part is the impact of hybridity and mimicry on the Indian immigrants' identity.

The Forms of Hybridity and Mimicry in Lahiri's *The Lowland*

1. Linguistic Hybridity

The form of hybridity found in Lahiri's *The Lowland* is linguistic hybridity. Postcolonial writers use language as a way to present images of the indigenous or post-colonial society's socio-cultural aspect. For example, postcolonial writers apply some un-translated words from the postcolonial society's language in their works. This method is also used by Lahiri in her novel *The lowland*. She writes the novel in English and inserts some Bengali words both in the narration and in the dialogues of the characters.

In the novel, the first generation of Indian immigrant characters, Subhash and Gauri use Bengali instead of English in their written communication. Secrecy is the main reason of using Bengali language in composing their letters. The advantage of using mother tongue as a means of communication in a foreign land is that there is a very small chance of anyone else to decode the content of the conversation.

The letter had been composed in Bengali, so there was no danger of Bela deciphering its contents. He conveyed a version of what it said,

somehow managing to look into her confused face. (Lahiri, 2014: 257)

In the direct communication or dialogue between the characters, Lahiri inserts some words in Bengali. Through the local language of the characters' country, Lahiri introduces their local reality and cultural identity. The words 'ma' and 'baba' are used in place of 'mother' and 'father', "This isn't a game you're playing. What if the police come to the house? What if you get arrested? What would Ma and Baba think?" (Lahiri, 2014: 36).

Beside the dialogue between the characters, Lahiri also inserts some Bengali words in the narration part to further depict the socio-cultural aspect of the West Bengal society. One of the Bengali cultures mentioned in the novel is Durga Pujo, a Hindu festival "He thought of Durga Pujo coming again to Calcutta." (Lahiri, 2014: 99) "The days of Pujo arrived and began to pass: Shashthi, Saptami, Ashtami, Navami. Days of worship and celebration across the city." (Lahiri, 2014: 129).

2. Mimicry

The forms of mimicry found in Lahiri's *The Lowland* are mostly non-verbal mimicry. These non-verbal mimicry forms include mimicry of manner, value and lifestyle.

a. Mimicry of Manner

The example of mimicry of manner done by Indian immigrants in Lahiri's *The Lowland* is the dress and cultural behavior. Subhash learned that in the US they have different culture about marriage. Arranged marriage is a deeply rooted tradition in India. Meanwhile in the US, the responsibility to arrange a marriage is not in the hands of the parents but the individuals themselves. Concerning Bela's marriage, Subhash has to remain silent and follows the customs of the place they are living in where they have no culture of arranged marriage. Subhash lets Bela to set her own path instead of setting her up with someone of his choice like what most of the Asian Indian parents in the US would have done.

He had learned to set aside the responsibility he'd once believed would be his: to do his part to secure a daughter's future by yoking it to another person's. If he'd raised her in Calcutta it would have been reasonable for him to bring up the subject of her marriage. Here it was meddlesome, considered out-of-bounds. He had raised her in a place free from such stigmas. When he'd voiced his concerns one evening to Elise, she had advised him to say

nothing, reminding him that so many people these days waited until their thirties to marry, even their forties. (Lahiri, 2014: 319-20)

As for Gauri, most of the mimicry of manner done by her in the US is related to her physical appearance. As already widely known, sari is the Indian traditional clothing for women. By the time Gauri moved to Rhode Island, most of the Indian women she met in that place still wear sari every day. Gauri on the other hand, grows tired of it. She begins to yearn for having the appearance like other American women she meets in the campus.

The student seemed so at ease, wearing long silver earrings, a gauzy blouse, and a skirt that stopped at her knees. Her body was unencumbered by the yards of silk material that Gauri wrapped and pleated and tucked every morning into a petticoat. These were the saris she'd worn since she stopped wearing frocks, at fifteen. What she'd worn while married to Udayan, and what she continued to wear now.

I like your outfit, the girl said, getting up to go.

Thank you.

But watching the girl walk away, Gauri felt ungainly. She began to want to look like the other women she noticed on the campus, like a woman Udayan had never seen. (Lahiri, 2014: 161)

Bela is a second generation of Indian immigrants in America. In her case, compared to what girls would normally wear in India, she has a more Americanized way of dress since her parents did not introduce her to Indian culture especially Indian dress or fashion items when she was little.

She wore denim coveralls, heavy soiled boots, a cotton kerchief tied over her hair. She woke up at four in the morning. A man's undershirt with the sleeves pushed up to her shoulders, dark strips of leather knotted around her wrist in place of bangles. (Lahiri, 2014: 270)

b. Mimicry of Value

Living in the diaspora not only encourages the immigrants to mimic the manner of the host society but also their value. When they come back to their own country, these immigrant characters start having a different way of perceiving their local culture and surroundings.

Subhash leads Gauri to mimic the individualism value which stresses on the

need for independence. Under the circumstances that have made Gauri live in difficulty, Subhash encourages her to leave his parents' house. He shows her the chances for better living in the US with him, start a new life without anyone knowing her background and also pursue higher education and career, things which are impossible to achieve if she stays in her in-laws' house.

After she had absorbed this, he said the only things he could think of, the most obvious of facts: that in America no one knew about the movement, no one would bother her. She could go on with her studies. It would be an opportunity to begin again. (Lahiri, 2014: 143).

When Bela visits her parents' homeland, West Bengal, she receives a lot of attention from the neighbors because of her appearance, the language she speaks with and the fact that she lives abroad. In the US where most people are individualist and value privacy, she never gets such treatments from the people around her. In India however, she suddenly becomes a celebrity. The way people observing her makes her feel uncomfortable and she perceives it as the negative things from the Indians.

Do you understand what we're saying? Do you speak Bengali? A woman asked Bela. She peered at her. Her eyes were unkind, her stained teeth uneven.

A little.

Liking it here?

Bela had been eager to go out of the house that day, to accompany Deepa to the market, to explore the place she'd traveled so far to see. But now she wanted to return inside. Not liking, as they retraced their steps, the way some of the neighbors were pulling back their curtains to look at her. (Lahiri, 2014: 236).

c. Mimicry of Lifestyle

Living in Rhode Island, the characters also mimic the western lifestyle which is closely related to alcohol and sexual intercourse before marriage. Western lifestyle is closely related to club and alcohol. When Subhash comes back to his homeland, he possesses an option to mimic the same lifestyle; spending time in the club and drinking alcohol to forget his problems.

There were hotels he might have entered in this part of the city, to have a whiskey or a beer, to fall into a conversation with strangers. To forget the way his parents behaved,

to forget the things Gauri had said.
(Lahiri, 2014: 134).

After leaving Subhash and Bela to pursue her career, Gauri stays alone and keeping herself away from having a relationship with other men. However in the end, she embraces open relationship, getting chances of meeting new people in dinner invitation and conferences.

Sometimes she juggled lovers, and at other times, for extended period, there was no one. She'd grown fond of some of these men, remaining friendly with them. But she never allowed herself to reach the point where they might complicate her life.
(Lahiri, 2014: 287)

The Impact of Hybridity and Mimicry on the Indian Immigrants' Identity

As it creates a cultural synergy, hybridity is considered as having positive sense. It has a harmonizing effect; the state of equilibrium when different cultures meet. It serves as a space where people can be culturally hybrid without losing one's cultural root.

On the opposite, mimicry is commonly considered as having negative sense. However, according to Bhabha (in Singh, 2009: par.7), mimicry has two

possible ends. It can be subversive or empowering. Mimicry can be subversive when it is suppressing one's cultural identity, encouraging one to leave his origin culture. On the other hand, mimicry can be empowering for example when it comes to the copy of justice, freedom and rule of law.

Experiencing hybridity and mimicry both in their homeland and in foreign country gives certain impacts to the Indian immigrants. Subhash, Gauri and Bela experienced linguistic hybridity which gives them positive impact since it stimulates resistance. It provides them secrecy and gives them nostalgic feeling. As for mimicry, although it helps the characters in achieving their goals, it also gives them negative impact in the process since one must suppresses his or her cultural identity in the process of imitating other culture.

The conditions above lead the characters to have double consciousness where the world is broken into two. For a postcolonial individual for example, one part is of his origin culture while the other part is the colonizers'. This division of mind eventually affects the socio-cultural development of the individuals themselves. The postcolonial individual himself in the end, trapped in between these two cultures;

he feels that he does not belong to any of them.

1. Subhash

Subhash feel that India and the US are different from one another. He is aware of his position as an immigrant and that he does not completely belong to the place he lives in. However, he feels more comfortable living in the US than in his homeland.

He didn't belong, but perhaps it didn't matter. He wanted to tell her that he had been waiting all his life to find Rhode Island. That it was here, in this minute but majestic corner of the world, that he could breathe. (Lahiri, 2014: 79).

It does not mean that he entirely forgets about his homeland. He feels nostalgic every time the colors of autumn reminds him of the spices used by his mother and touched by the hospitality of the shopkeepers in his homeland.

2. Gauri

Gauri feels more comfortable living in the US than in her own homeland. However, some aspects such as her name, physical features, the Bengali language she uses to speak with Subhash and the way the American citizens see her keep remind her of her position and identity. Thus, she

chooses to stay in the US without changing her nationality.

Her appearance and accent caused people to continue to ask her where she came from, and some to form certain assumptions. Once, invited to give a talk in San Diego, she'd been picked up by a driver the university had sent, so that she would be spared the effort of driving herself. She had greeted him at the door when he rang the bell. But the driver had not realized, when she told him good morning, that she was his passenger. He had mistaken her for the person paid to open another person's door. Tell her, whenever she's ready, he'd said. (Lahiri, 2014: 286).

3. Bela

Bela grew up in America with a very little knowledge about Indian culture and the Bengali language. When she heard the conversation between the Bangladeshi workmen, she feels close and distant to the language at the same time. It reminds her to the language her parents used to talk with but she herself does not very fluent and even has forgotten about it. Her childhood memories about India seem to be erased from her mind. However, after hearing the Bangladeshi language, she can feel that it

stays in her, that her tiny bits of Indian identity is never left.

She can't understand what these men are saying. Just some words here and there. The accent is different. Still, she always slows down when she passes them. She's not nostalgic for her childhood, but this aspect of it, at once familiar and foreign, gives her pause. Part of her wonders whether the dormant comprehension in her brain will ever be jostled. If one day she might remember how to say something. (Lahiri, 2014: 311).

CONCLUSION

The form of hybridity experienced by Indian immigrant characters in Lahiri's *The Lowland* is linguistic hybridity. It can be seen in the insertion of un-translated words and expressions from Bengali language to English in which the novel is written as well as where the characters are described to be communicating with the Bengali language. Meanwhile, the forms of mimicry which are done by the characters fall into three categories. The first is mimicry of manner which is in the forms of dress and cultural behavior. Second is mimicry of individualism value which stresses on independency and privacy. Third is mimicry

of lifestyle in the form of alcohol consumption and sexual intercourse before marriage.

The harmonizing effect and the subversive effect of mimicry lead the characters to have double consciousness. The act of mimicking they done is suppressing their Indian cultural identity. However, the harmonizing effect of hybridity helps to form a resistance of it from being completely forgotten and erased. They feel comfortable living in the host country but also aware that they are not completely belong to that place. At the same time, they sometimes recall their homeland but do not feel attachment to it anymore.

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