



Cultural Identity of the First-Generation Immigrants in Tan's *The Bonesetter's Daughter* and Lahiri's *The Namesake*

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Abstract

*This article examines the problematic cultural identity of the first-generation immigrants in Amy Tan's *The Bonesetter's Daughter* (2001) and Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* (2003). The immigrant characters problematize their cultural identity by oscillating in the cultural spaces of their home country and the host country. They tend to adopt new cultural identity of their host country while sustaining the old one of their home country. As a result, they negotiate their cultural identity in the shared cultural space which Homi K Bhabha terms as the third space. While analyzing the third space of cultural encounter, I refer to homeland culture as the first and the host land culture as the second cultural space of immigrants. Negotiating in the third space of the diaspora, the immigrants embody fluid and dynamic cultural identities that go beyond the binary of the host and home country. The process of the cultural negotiation of the immigrants is analyzed in the critical frame of Stuart Hall's cultural identity and Homi Bhabha's third space in this article.*

Keywords: *Immigrant, cultural identity, being, becoming, third space*

Introduction

Diaspora narratives explore the cultural identity of immigrants who simultaneously vacillate between their home and host cultural spaces rendering confusion and dilemma in their sense of belonging. Immigrants often remain somewhere between desires to belong to the host country and an urge to maintain the cultural identity of the home country. In a sense, they simultaneously follow the cultural practices of their home and host country at once. Analyzing such cultural interactions, Homi Bhabha postulates third space of cultural encounter. About Bhabha's third space, I refer to homeland culture as first and host land culture as second cultural space of immigrants. In such process of cultural interaction, immigrants involve in the dynamic interaction of their historical and cultural genealogies; 'being' in Stuart Hall's conceptualization and new cultural milieu of the diaspora; 'becoming' in Hall's term. Vacillating between the first and second cultural spaces, the first-generation immigrants problematize their cultural identity in the third space of the diaspora. Conspicuously, Amy Tan's *The*

Bonesetter's daughter, and Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* explore problematic cultural identity of the first-generation Asian immigrants in diaspora.

Chinese American writer Tan critically examines the experiences of the first and second-generation immigrants in her narratives. Her *The Bonesetter's Daughter* explores a problematic cultural identity of Chinese-American Mother LuLing and her daughter Ruth. Tan investigates mother-daughter relation in the backdrop of Chinese Americans' experiences both in the private and public spheres. LuLing, as a first-generation Chinese immigrant in the US, constantly negotiates her upbringing of the first cultural space with cultural practices of the second cultural space. Similarly, Lahiri's *The Namesake* recounts a story of a Ganguli family, comprised of parents immigrated to the United States from Calcutta and of their children raised in the second space. The first-generation immigrants Ashima and Ashoke attempt to perpetuate the cultural practices of the first space while adopting the lifestyle and cultural practices of the second space at the same time. The first-generation immigrants in Lahiri's *The Namesake* and Tan's *The Bonesetter's Daughter* undergo a constant process of cultural negotiation vacillating between cultural practices of the first and the second cultural spaces heterogeneously in the diaspora. The diaspora scholarships explore immigrants' cultural identity in diaspora narratives in various ways.

Review of Literature

The immigrant writers often receive the experience of the people of their own community potential areas of exploration. These diaspora writers expose the identity crisis, cultural displacement, problems of acculturations and intergeneration disputes in their writings. Moreover, the presentation of the culture and history of native country in diaspora narrative draws critical debate. The following section presents a brief survey of critical responses to selected diasporic narratives, namely Tan's *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, and Lahiri's *The Namesake*.

Critics have analyzed issues of presenting native cultural practices and cultural conflicts between American born daughters and their Chinese born mothers in Tan's *The Bonesetter's Daughter*. Frank Chin, Wenying Xu and Lisa Lowe debate around whether Tan reinforces orientalist views on China or not in her narratives. Unlike Xu and Lowe, Chin accuses Tan of borrowing an orientalist approach to present China. Contrarily, Li Zeng subscribes the conviction that exploitation of Chinese culture and heritage enables Tan to create counterculture in the American literary tradition. Moreover, Iuliana Vizan underscores an issue of the female's revolt in Tan's narratives. Naeimeh Tabatabaei Lotfi analyzes memory, its interaction with history in shaping past and personal identity. Likewise, different dimensions of the relationship of the Chinese born mother and the American born daughter draw critical appraisal of the diaspora critics. Chen Xiaomei asserts that the exploration of mother's past is simultaneously an act of self-reinvention to daughter. Similarly, Lisa Dunick, Yuan Yuan and Catherine Romagnolo analyze the relevant of the discursive practices of the Chinese talk-story tradition. Thus, the cultural identity of the first and second-generation immigrants is less explored area in the novel's critical appraisal.

Similarly, Lahiri's *The Namesake* gets lots of critical responses, readership and popularity. Most of the diaspora critics analyze the cultural dilemma and quest of identity of the second-generation immigrant Gogol. For Karunes, the plight of Gogol

reminds the situation of Lahiri as a second generation immigrant. Gogol's condition is further examined as repercussion of his unique name and in relation with Russian writer's "Overcoat" by Ruediger Heinze, Judith Caesar and Sally Dalton Brown. Unlike them, Tuire Valkeakari explores the trauma of train crash and its post traumatic effect in the life of Ashoke. Moreover, Min Hyoung Song, Natalie Friedman and Francoise Kral analyze the novel in connection with the development of information technology and global economy. Besides, Lavina Dhingra and Floyd Cheug find the novel dealing with universal dimension of human experience. And Anjali Tripathy explores the flexible and liberal Indian masculinity in diaspora. Thus, critics have not given ample attention in analyzing the process of cultural negotiation of the first-generation immigrants in diaspora, analyzing cultural negotiation, Hall conceptualizes the cultural dualism of immigrants in his postulation of 'being' and 'becoming'.

Cultural Identity Formation

Hall postulates cultural identity in his notion of being and becoming. Being encompasses the historical and cultural experiences that provide a reference to define the subjectivity of an individual. It emphasizes the similarities, the oneness and the underlying essence among a group of people. There is an authentic cultural identity, a true self, which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common. Hall explains that "our cultural identities reflect the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes which provide us, as 'one people', with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning, beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of our actual history" (223). The oneness is understood as fixed reference and meaning which reflects the general shared cultural codes and common historical experiences. In this sense, the first-generation immigrants' attachment with their first cultural space: cultural origin is their being. However, his concept of becoming stresses on the similarities and the differences among an imagined cultural group.

Hall's second definition of cultural identity emphasizes the similarities and the differences amongst an imagined cultural group. Cultural identity encompasses both common historical experience and cultural practices, and the ongoing process of interaction within a given time and place. Hall explicates:

Cultural identity, in this second sense, is a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being'. It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. (225)

Hall explains that cultural identity is contingent and not ahistorical or immutable. It is an ongoing process of 'becoming' as well as of 'being'. Depending on the pre-given and pre-determined aspects, it undergoes a constant process of negotiation resulting in inconsistencies and multiplicities. In case of immigrants, the adoption of cultural practices of their host land is becoming process. Both, their being and becoming involve in negotiation in order to form their cultural identity.

In the same way, Bhabha coins the interactive and hybrid cultural space as third space of enunciation. He argues that culture does not exist in isolation. It interacts and negotiates with other cultures. Such a process of amalgamation renders cultural

transformation that shapes an individual's identity. An intrinsic course in the lives of immigrants, cultural transformation operates in blending the cultural practices of the first and second spaces. The engagement in a transcultural conversation between the first and second cultural space slowly opens up avenues for transformation. Cultural transformation characterizes the in-between as a third element, and a fusion of two cultural entities that create a third identity after the original two have been altered. In this context, the cultural transformation which is related to Bhabha's notion of third space intrinsically involves in the formation of subjectivities of an immigrant. The following section examines cultural negotiation of the first-generation immigrants in Tan's *The Bonesetter's Daughter* and Lahiri's *The Namesake*. Hall's notion of being and becoming, and Bhabha's conceptualization of the third space substantiate the immigrants attachment with their first cultural space, their adoption of the cultural practices of the second space, and the cultural interaction in the diaspora.

Cultural Negotiation of the First-Generation Immigrants

The first-generation immigrants straddle between the first and second cultural spaces partially following the cultural practices and lifestyles of the both while negotiating their cultural identities in diaspora. In this process, they perennially manifest their preoccupation with their first space. Evidently, they follow cultural practices and rituals of the first space and ask their children to follow the same. In this process, they show their attachment with the semiotics of cultural identity like the dress, food, and customs of the first space occasionally. More importantly, they turn to the first space while facing a crisis in the diaspora. However, they also harbour a positive image and partially adopt lifestyle and cultural practices of the second space without forsaking the cultural practices of the first space. In addition, they adopt cultural practices of the second space for the sake of their children. Moreover, they reduce their contact with fellow immigrants and shifts to White suburb with their financial success. Briefly, first-generation immigrants like Ashima and her husband Ashoke, in Lahiri's *The Namesake* and LuLing in Tan's *The Bonesetter's daughter*, follow different cultural practices and lifestyles of the second space in a heterogeneous manner without forsaking their practices of the first space

LuLing manifests her constant preoccupation with the first cultural space which shapes her subjectivity and personal relationship. For her; "history was... a reservoir which she could draw from and share. It didn't matter that she blurred some of the finer points. The past, even revised, was meaningful" (Tan 192). Her vivid and nostalgic description of Chinese geographical landscape in her memoir reflects her deep and emotional affiliation with her first space. Moreover, her experience in the first cultural space shapes her manner and attitude. Her experiences in the Japanese invasion of China makes sceptical with strangers and more protective to her young daughter in the diaspora. Similarly, she internalizes the unconquerable nature of her mother Precious Auntie which enables her to face hardship in her life. Moreover, the influence of Precious Auntie intermingles with Chinese superstitious beliefs in ghosts and curses. The concept of ghost and its curse deeply ingrains in LuLing's physic. In the second space, her introvert nature and self-exclusion tendency result from the belief that the ghost of Precious Auntie hovers around her. The experience in the first cultural space shapes LuLing's manner in the diaspora.

With her deep attachment, LuLing harbours a fear of losing connection with the first cultural space. She writes her memoir in order to record and channelize her past to future generation when she realizes some problem in her memory power. Besides, she enacts as a transmitter of the first space to her American born daughter Ruth. While imposing cultural practices of the first space, she attempts to keep her daughter Ruth away from the Western manner and food habits of the second space. Such attempts sometimes render conflict in the mother-daughter relationship. In the same way, her attachment with her first space reflects in her emotional attachment with Chinese calligraphy which she wants to teach to her young daughter. In fact, LuLing, a descendent from ink maker family, uses writing to “forge a powerful link between the past and the present” (Dunick 14). With such attachment with the first cultural space, the first generation immigrants also suffer nostalgia and homesickness.

In the initial years, some of the first-generation immigrants suffer the homesickness in the second cultural space. For instances, Ashima feels spatially and emotionally dislocated in the diaspora in *The Namesake*. She often feels upset and homesick and sulks alone in their three-room apartment. She “faces an emotional uprootedness which in turn creates a deep sense of alienation forcing her to experience loneliness” (Nair 40). Consequently, she remains lost in the memories of her ‘home’ of the first cultural space most of the time. She spends her time reading and rereading stories, poems and articles from the Bengali magazines which she has brought with her from the first cultural space. Similarly, she “keeps her ears trained, between the hours of twelve and two, for the sound of the postman’s footsteps on the porch, followed by the soft click of the mail slot in the door” (Lahiri 36) expecting her parent’s letters. She is emotionally and psychologically transported to the first cultural space while reading these letters and magazines. Moreover, the first-generation immigrants also consume ethnic food for their physical and emotional nourishment and connection with the first cultural space.

Food enacts as cultural semiotics of perpetuating ethnic cultural identity for the first-generation immigrants in the diaspora. More than fulfilling physical hunger, they associate food with their cultural identity. For instances, Ashima prefers preparing Indian food and serves to her family. She cooks Indian foods “combining Rice Crispies and Planters peanuts and chopped red onion in a bowl; she adds salt, lemon juice, thin slices of green chili pepper, wishing there were mustard oil to pour into the mix” (Lahiri 6). Preparing cuisine of the first space, she feels an emotional and psychological connection with her cultural root. Such a connection helps her overcome the sense of alienation and nostalgia of living far away from her first cultural space. In fact, food enacts as a cultural signifier to bridge the gap of immigrants with the first cultural space. Besides, food, the first-generation immigrants also observe rituals of the first cultural space among fellow ethnic immigrants.

The first-generation immigrants also seek to promote relationships with immigrants of their first cultural space in their quest of maintaining a link with their root. Ashima and Ashoke socialize with other Bengali expatriates and organize gatherings of Bengalis at their home to celebrate various Bengali traditions. They know Maya and Dilip Nandi, Mitras, Banerjees and the young Bengali in the market who return from Calcutta with a wife. The formation of such a diasporic community “is demonstrated by an acceptance of an inescapable link with their past migration history” (Patil 150).

Besides, Ashima tries to observe Indian rituals like naming ceremonies of children, marriages, death rituals and Bengali festivals like *navratras* and *pujas*. They generally wear their traditional attires in such functions in order to “preserve their native culture in a new land” (150). They perpetuate cultural practices of the first space by observing rituals, social gathering and forming a close connection with people of the same origin. Shaped by cultural values and practices of the first space, they also impose the same to their children which sometimes renders conflict in their relationships.

The conflict in the parents-children relationship in immigrants’ family is the result of “cultural differences between parents’ home-country values, norms, and behavioral patterns and the mainstream... culture” (Foner and Dreby 547). Conditioned by the cultural practices of the first space, the first-generation immigrants want to impose the same to their children which differ from the mainstream cultural practices of the diaspora. For instances, as a typical Chinese mother, LuLing is strict, strong, and authoritative in *The Bonesetter’s Daughter*. In a traditional Chinese mother-daughter relationship,” the mother has the total control of her daughter, and a good daughter is supposed to be unconditionally obedient to the will of her mother” (Pu 12). As a result, LuLing wants a submissive daughter with total loyalty. In addition, she expects her daughter to internalize their past and make a strong connection with the first cultural space. Conversely, Ruth is grown up embracing the Western cultural practices of the second space which emphasizes individuality and freedom. So, she rebels against her mother’s authoritative behaviour. These differing cultural values worsen the parents-children relation in the immigrant family. However, the first-generation of immigrants also shows a positive attitude and adopts certain practices of the second cultural space.

Some of the first-generation immigrants develop their fascination with the second cultural space before their immigration. LuLing builds a positive image of culture, religion and people of second cultural space the US before immigration. Her fascination with the second cultural space is partly caused by the benevolent works of two American missionaries Miss Ruth Grutoff and Miss Towler who run an orphanage in an old monastery near LuLing village. She is looked after by these missionaries in the orphanage after the death of her mother. In her stay in the orphanage, the Christian missionaries celebrate female selfhood while imparting Christianity. LuLing, who is brought up in patriarchal Chinese customs, finds such a celebration of female’s talent and worth quite impressive. Consequently, she begins to trust herself and experience a transition during her stay in the orphanage. On the whole, with such a positive attitude about people and culture of the second space, she cultivates an idealized image of the second cultural space in her pre-immigration days.

Her incessant fascination leads LuLing to cultivate a fantasized image about place and culture of the second cultural space in her pre-immigration days. She envisions America as a place free from ghost, cruises, hardship and suffering. She reveals that “in my heart, America was the Christian heaven... but there was a hope that I could find happiness that had stayed hidden from me. I could leave the old curse, my bad background” (Tan 279). For her, visiting the second cultural space America liberates her from a miserable life full of destitution. So, the chance of accompanying Miss Grutoff to America for her treatment promises the golden opportunity for her. Moreover, she becomes quite excited while visiting the US and attempt to get assimilated into the second cultural space by marrying an American. In fact, she “tries to have a healthy

relationship with her neighbors and her daughter” (Vizan 218). Moreover, she starts investing in American share market and begins to trust her Westernized daughter Ruth. Briefly, cultivating positive image about the host country, the first-generation immigrants gradually attempts to get into the second cultural space by trusting its system and people.

In her becoming process, Ashima gradually transforms herself after her growing interaction with dominant White people. She develops her sense of independence when she begins a part-time job at a local library. This job allows her to have good interaction with the second cultural space outside of her home. She begins her friendship with her American colleagues. Occasionally, she invites these friends for lunch at her house, and they go shopping to outlet stores in Maine. Gradually, she begins to lead an independent life. She begins to pay the bills, buy tickets, drive a car, and interacts with American. She even manages her life in the absence of her husband who has gone to Ohio on a scholarship for nine months. Such activities reflect her growing sense of independence that emerges out of her interaction with the second cultural space. Moreover, the first-generation immigrants show their flexibility to the practices of the second cultural space to foster a good relationship with their children.

The first generation immigrants flexibly adopt certain practices of the second cultural space to harmonize their relationship with their children. For instance, Ashima flexibly begins to celebrate American festivals like Christmas and Thanksgiving for the sake of her children. In such occasion, she also prepares the Western dishes like turkey, sandwiches with bologna or roast beef for her children in order to please them. Gogol recognizes in the end “that his parents had gone to the trouble of learning these customs. It was for their sake that it had come to all this” (Lahiri 286). The choices of cultural practices and dishes remain critical in parents-children relation of the immigrant family. In this sense, the first generation immigrants’ flexibility to the practices of the second cultural space aims to harmonize their relation with their Westernized children.

Precisely, the first-generation of immigrants constantly vacillates between the first and the second cultural space. The cultural practices of the first space constantly influence their behaviour and subjectivity. Moreover, they perennially attach with cultural semiotics like rituals, customs, food and dress up of the first cultural space and impose the same to their children. On the whole, they constantly manifest their attachment with the first cultural space while negotiating their cultural identity. However, they also develop a positive image and gradually adopt practices of the second space. With their increased interaction, they adopt food, dress, lifestyle and rituals of the second space. In the same way, they also adopt certain practices of the second space for the sake of their children. In this process, they partially follow both without leaving any rendering dilemma and confusion in their cultural identity. Similarly, the second generation immigrants straddle between the first and second cultural space while negotiating their cultural identity.

Conclusion

In Tan’s *The Bonesetter’s Daughter* and Lahiri’s *The Namesake*, the first-generation immigrants constantly negotiate their cultural identity straddling between the first and second cultural spaces. The first-generation immigrants persistently struggle to settle in the second space while conserving the cultural practices of the first space.

Despite difficulties, the first-generation immigrants in the second space rigorously intend to perpetuate cultural practices of the first space deeply rooted in their subconscious. However, they manifest different degrees of flexibility and adaptability to the Western cultural practices of the second space. Living in such bicultural spaces, they involve in conflict and confluence in the matter of their preferred lifestyle with their children. They, without totally forsaking one culture while following the other, tend to live with the shared cultural space, partly the first and partly the second. Consequently, they vacillate between the first and second cultural space.

The immigrants oscillate between the first and second cultural space because they are not totally free from their shared and common ancestry: 'being' in Hall's conceptualization. At the same time, they are negotiating with their present and reforming themselves, which Hall terms 'becoming'. Both the 'being' and 'becoming' conjointly recreate an immigrant's personal identity in the diaspora. In such a process of negotiation, the varying preferences of lifestyle and cultural practices of the first and second-generation immigrants render conflict in intergenerational relations. However, their relation undergoes in a dynamic process of transformation by flexibly adopting and reappropriating cultural practices of different cultural spaces which renders harmony in the immigrant family. Moreover, their cultural interactions produce ambivalence in them, simultaneously attracted and distracted both to their first and second cultural space. Such interactions lead immigrants in the third space; doubling and assembling space of being and becoming in at least two places at once. In this space, they constantly involve in negotiation and transformation in a gradual process of identity formation, which inherently remains fluid and ever-changing.

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