



RESEARCH PAPER

Cultural syncretism in Jhumpa Lahiri's "only goodness"

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Abstract

Cultural syncretism is used as a major tool in analyzing the integrating process of multicultural identities within diasporic communities. Here, majority and minority groups have been dealt with at an equal level; however, in some domains, it is connected to colonialism as it involves mimicking western patterns and behavior, which helps assimilation into the foreign culture. This method of 'assimilation' is quite complex because it combines the influence of the dominant or majority group and the folks of other groups share sentiments, memory and the impression of alienation. The term assimilation is constantly used for immigrants from unique cultural identities and encourages the idea of a 'melting Pot'. This research paper seeks to identify the elements of cultural syncretism in Bengali diasporic communities in the story "only goodness" from the anthology of Jhumpa Lahiri entitled *Unaccustomed Earth*.

Keywords: Assimilation, Cultural syncretism, Diaspora, Jhumpa Lahiri, Melting pot.

Introduction

In the global era, human migration from one place to another, on both national and international levels, is ordinary. But the real challenges are stimulated when immigrants begin their life in an exotic land. Immigration to a foreign country is quite complex due to the hardships of assimilation into a foreign culture. Both first and second generations of diasporic communities suffered a lot in assimilating with foreign cultures. Diasporic communities are often characterized by 'cultural syncretism' as they are forced to adapt to a 'new' culture while also preserving their own cultural heritage. Generally, diasporic communities blend elements of their own culture with elements of the 'new' culture they are exposed to, creating a unique hybrid culture that reflects both their ancestral heritage and their new setting. In the process of mingling with foreigners, immigrants try to preserve their ethnicity and so they create a new syncretic identity in the form of a cultural mixture. All

popular concepts like 'Creolization', 'Mestizaje', 'Bricolage', etc. reflect the mixing of distinct cultures to create a new one. When all such related notions as 'Creolization', 'Mestizaje', 'Bricolage' and 'Hybridity' were examined then 'Syncretism' is the only notion identified that doesn't borrow its essence from biology (Liebmann, 2013). It does not apply to all kinds of assimilation as the idea of syncretism is cultural (Stewart, 1999). It is used as a major tool in analyzing the integrating process of multicultural identities. 'Syncretism' is the result of the process of hybridity, mixing and fusion. Syncretism has its roots in theology and religion. With time, it took a cultural shape. Plutarch initiated the use of syncretism to demonstrate the unity of the Cretans (Leopold, 2001). After that, in the 3rd century BCE Syncretism was used in the form of 'Manichaeism', a dualistic religion founded by Mani, an Iran prophet (BeDuhn, 2020).

In India, Syncretism was used to connect two major religions, Islam and Hinduism in the 15–16th century. Furthermore, German protestant theologian George Calixtus used it in post reformation Europe. The use of syncretism reached its peak in the 19th century in the context of Hellenistic religion. It was the time when scholarly disputes related to syncretism in religion were on fire, and it proceeded till the 19th century when syncretism is generally adopted as an interpretation of Christianity. In the contemporary era, syncretism is no longer criticized as before; presently, it is employed in the blending of unique cultures. Syncretism shattered the shackles of its religious walls and expanded in other disciplines i.e., linguistics, humanities, social sciences, cultural studies and literature. In syncretism, majority and minority groups have been dealt with equally; however, in some domains, it is connected to

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colonialism as it involves mimicking western patterns and behavior. Consequently, this 'Cultural Meet' tends toward the 'Cultural Imperialism' gap in the literary context. Some theorists criticized it as a 'new planetary ideology' or 'another kind of intellectual imperialism' for syncretism is often used to describe the large-scale imposition of one alien culture, religion, or body of practices over another that is present" (Unpacking the New, 2008, p. 11).

Diasporic communities are particularly inclined towards cultural syncretism because they are often in a situation of cultural exposure to a foreign land. Diasporic communities are marginalized or discriminated against in their host society, which direct them to either reject or embrace their homeland culture. The idea of homeland is described as 'desh' in diasporic imaginary and the Indian diaspora by Vijay Mishra as he asserts, "Idea of one's 'homeland' as very real spaces from which alone a certain level of redemption is possible. Homeland is the desh (in Hindi) against which all the other lands are foreign or Videsh" (2005). In some cases, diasporic communities create new cultural patterns to affirm their identity and resist assimilation into the dominant culture. In other cases, they obtain elements of the host culture to adapt to their new environment and locate a sense of belonging. Another interesting aspect of the relationship between diasporic communities and cultural syncretism is the potential for the innovation of new cultural forms and expressions. When different cultures come into contact and blend together, as 'Cultural Meet', they develop new cultural products which are unique and distinct from their sources as 'Cultural Amalgamation' (Crippen & Brew, 2013). It contributes to the richness and multiplicity of global culture by creating a 'new' hybrid space. This space is defined as a 'transnational space' by Michel Bruneau (2010, pp. 43-44).

Another factor that affects the relationship between diasporic communities and cultural syncretism is the extent of cultural retention in the form of "Cultural Memory" (Assmann, 2021, p. 25) within the community. Some diasporic communities are more successful in preserving their cultural traditions and resisting assimilation into the dominant culture, while others are more willing to adapt and blend with the host culture. In the context of the Indian diasporic community, cultural syncretism has been a significant process that has assisted in shaping the identity of people of Indian origin living outside of India. The Indian diaspora is spread across the globe, with significant communities in countries such as the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and Australia, among others. Various factors, including historical migration patterns, cultural exchange, and globalization, have shaped these communities. Consequently, the Indian diasporic community has developed a unique cultural identity that combines elements of Indian culture with the traditions and customs of their host countries.

In different multicultural identities, there is always a presence of compromise. According to Jerry Bentley, syncretism

cultivates "Cultural Compromise" (Mabra & Okonkwo, 2017). Cultural compromise is a mixing of traits of two or more cultures that reminds of assimilation. Periodically minority groups adapted the alien culture and assimilated with them but most often, they denied the total influence and reproduced their own culture of 'mixed new'. Mixing results in the growth of 'new', which has a connection with the elements of modernity and this procedure of choosing the best out of the 'mixed new' is called 'Eclecticism'. Subsequently, the problem of 'mixed new' (Unpacking the New, 2008, p. 18) emerged as it creates tension and the role of hegemony between distinct cultures.

This method of 'assimilation' is quite complex as it combines the influence of the dominant or majority group and the folks of other groups share sentiments, memory and the impression of 'alienation'. The term 'assimilation' is constantly used for immigrants. Immigrants from unique cultural identities encourage the idea of 'Melting Pot' (Bhattacharya & Groznik, 2008). Syncretism advocates the idea of a 'Melting Pot' which is opposed by the 'Salad Bowl' or 'Tossed Salad' (Munasinghe, 2001, p. 22), or 'Cultural Mosaic' (Chao & Moon, 2005), in which different cultural groups maintained their separate identities in the process of synchronization. 'Salad Bowl' (Bhattacharya & Groznik, 2008) theory supports the phenomenon of 'Glocalisation', a blend of global and local (Robertson, 1995, p. 28), while the 'Melting pot' theory puts more emphasis on oneness very similar to the notion of 'Globalisation'. American assimilation is affiliated with the idea of 'Melting Pot' as well as with the idea of 'Americanization' (Craig, Douglas, *et al.*, 2009). 'Americanization' reflects the cultural hybridity and diversity of immigrants from different nations yet their unity and oneness are expressed through their assimilation into American society. Similarly, in India, it is more like 'Chutnification', which is better explained by Salman Rushdie in most of his works. (Veettil, 2019). All cultures are assigned together to construct a new hybrid identity. In the Indian diasporic community, it has enabled the creation of a unique, hybrid culture that celebrates both Indian traditions and the multiplicity of their 'Host' nation. This process of blending cultures has helped to create a sense of belonging and identity for the Indian diasporic community while also enriching the cultural landscape of their embraced countries.

"Only Goodness" is a short story by Jhumpa Lahiri, which revolves around the experiences of an Indian American family. The story explores common themes among many diasporic communities, including the challenges of adjusting to a new country and culture, the tension between maintaining ties to one's homeland and assimilating into a new culture, and how cultural identity is passed down from one generation to the next. This story is about Sudha, her alcohol-addict brother, Rahul and her Bengali parents, immigrants in America. The process of immigration in the diasporic

community is fascinating yet challenging. It involves lots of tears of separation from the motherland and loved ones. It includes the dilemma of culture and identity. The process of amalgamation in foreign society is more complex for first-generation and second-generation immigrants. Similar to other works of Jhumpa Lahiri, in this short story too, the second generation is displayed in miserable conditions due to the mingling of native cultures of their own and of their parents. This state of perplexity, sometimes distant second generation from their parents, and this miscommunication drives them to be misled. The family faces this same situation in this story. Seemingly, Sudha and Rahul were much into western culture. Sometimes they didn't understand the logic behind the rules and regulations of their Bengali parents. They did not like the restrictions of their parents and this situation created a gap between these two generations. This gap became the reason behind Rahul's addiction to alcohol and ruined his entire life. Here, 'Cultural Syncretism' plays a sensitive role that can devastate everything when it goes wrong. The concept of syncretism in any culture demands sacrifice. And in America, a melting pot nation, a place of immigrants, where different diasporic communities and cultures exist, syncretism becomes more challenging, especially for the second generation, what to believe and what to not. The second generation found themselves in between the two worlds, and so, they created their other world, a place in-between. 'Cultural Syncretism' helps the first and especially second generation to attain the state of 'Biculturalism' where they accept both the cultures of the host land and homeland. In the book, *The Psychology of Culture Shock*, biculturalism has been connected with "a range of social and psychological advantages as has integration, when compared with assimilation, separation and marginalization" (Ward, Colleen, *et al.*, 2001). The first generation was much involved in cultural syncretism as they were in the process of assimilating their native culture with foreign culture. And this whole situation of mixing sometimes creates tension. In this story, Sudha's parents felt alienated in a foreign land, and the separation from India was the traumatic event of their life. Further, the second generation observed both cultural aspects and then selected the best for themselves using the process of eclecticism. 'Eclecticism' in the context of culture, is a process of selecting cultural elements from two or more cultures among different communities. According to Richard Peterson, the popular culture concept is based on the notion of 'Eclecticism' (1977). Sudha also created a place where they mixed both cultures by the process of eclecticism. "Sudha preferred the homes of her American friends, crammed and piled with things, toothpaste caking their sinks, their soft beds unmade" (Lahiri, 2010, p. 134). Here, Sudha prefers Americans over Indians. Moreover, she chose her mother's Bengali lullaby to soothe herself at night. In this story, Sudha finds herself uncomfortable in American society for she considers London

her home as her born and brought up there. Her parents used to live there first. However, assimilation into British society is the toughest process for them as most Britishers denied browns in their house for rental: "Her parents told her that half the rentals in London in the 60s said WHITES ONLY..." (2010, p. 135). The community of the host land are not that welcoming to foreigners in their country. They want to retain their cultural beauty as it is. They don't prefer cultural change or not want to handle the situation of melting-pot in their country. British people have a superiority complex and they are unwilling to ruin it with the immigrants.

First-generation and second-generation immigration has different definitions. Here, for the second generation, the idea of immigration is adventurous; on the contrary, for the mature generation, this thought is painful and not less than punishment. But when Sudha's parents left London then only Sudha could understand the sufferings of being immigrants. Sudha couldn't mingle with American society. The sense of belonging to the motherland is superior, so she returns to London for further studies. Further, this story shows the first generation as dependent on the second generation. In the process of syncing with different cultures, the first generation is often assisted by their children. In some cases, it is noticed that the first generation has less respect and acceptance towards alien cultures. The story also touches on the experience of being a woman in a diasporic community. Especially for Indian mothers, the culture of the host land is degraded because it provides much freedom to children at schools and universities. In this story, Sudha's mother felt the same. Further, the story focuses on a Bengali diasporic community and their children. It offers a portrayal of the complex experiences of immigrants and their descendants as they navigate the challenges of cultural identity and belonging in a new country. Not only the first generation suffered in the process of syncretism but the second generation also felt the pain of being bullied in school due to their color and their parents Indian culture. These bullies left a strong impression on their minds and this childhood trauma became the reason behind their annoying nature for their parents culture. In this story, Sudha and Rahul suffered from this trauma: being teased at school for the color of their skin or for the funny things their mother occasionally put into their lunch boxes, potato curry sandwiches that tinted wonderbread green (2010, p. 143). Cultural syncretism brings a gap between first generation immigrants and their children. For, the second generation is unable to locate their parents' pain and suffering due to separation from their homeland. While on the other hand, the first generation cannot understand the trauma of their children hanging between two cultures. In this story, Sudha's parents couldn't feel the trauma and problems their children faced by being immigrants' children: Depression was a foreign word to them, an American thing. In their opinion, their children were immune from the hardships and

injustices they had left behind in India (2010, p. 144). This gap between the two generations increased Sudha's parents' homesickness. Despite all the efforts, they find themselves unable to sync in a foreign community and after her father's retirement, they returned to Calcutta.

Conclusion

The synchronization process in any diasporic community encompasses exploration, adventure, enthusiasm, discomfort, suffering of separation, trauma and dilemma. Immigration has several meanings for the first and second generations. For the first generation, it combined with an identity crisis and feeling of loss of home nation. In such a situation, they maintain their 'Ethnocultural Identity' (Yamada, Marsella & *et al.*, 1998). Locating themselves in a new country and culture creates a situation of alienation. In such circumstances, 'Cultural Syncretism' or sync in another culture is the only solution left. This process of syncretism in an alien culture is complicated and leaves the impression of gloominess as an impact of trauma. This depression not only felt by the first generation but second generation also endured a lot in synthesizing themselves among foreign youths. Sometimes, they became the 'ABCD', 'American born confused desi' (The Namesake, 2003, p. 118). This process of mixing is confusing yet essential to survive in foreign land. Cultural syncretism is also significant in promoting 'Globalisation' by mixing different cultural traits altogether. It stimulates local culture into global culture. Hence, the process of culture syncretism is essential and transnational in nature and an assisting tool to manage in an exotic land. Indian diasporic community with the notion of 'Cultural Syncretism' emphasizes the complex and dynamic experiences of communities that have been displaced from their places of origin. Moreover, they create unique cultural, social, and political identities in their new locations. As the world becomes increasingly 'Global', the study of diasporic communities is more important than ever, as it sheds light on how global processes are shaping the lives of individuals and communities worldwide. "Only Goodness" offers an empathetic portrayal of the experiences of the Indian diasporic community and their descendants. As a consequence, it highlights the challenges of maintaining cultural identity while assimilating into a new culture and the tension that arises within the families of Bengali diasporic communities.

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