



Colonial Consciousness in Jhumpa Lahiri's 'The Third and Final Continent'

Vijaylaxmi

Rohtak, Haryana, India

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Abstract— Colonialism has become a matter of past but its dominance is starkly evident in the lives of once colonized. The region and the people who were colonized; still carries the submissive notion like 'west better than east', 'high and low', 'superior and inferior'. On surface it seems that the phase of 'decolonization' has brought an end to colonialism. Indeed, it has provided a physical liberation but the psyche of the once colonized and their coming generations are still colonized.

Keywords— Colonialism, Post colonialism, Colonial Consciousness.

In the works of Jhumpa, there is a kind of shift or to be more precise, there is always a kind of drifting away from the homeland. Characters in the novels or short stories have always shown moving away psychologically as well as physically from the land of their origin. In order to seek better opportunities and a secure future, Jhumpa has repeatedly shown her characters moving toward west. Through this drift, the psychological landscape of the Indian immigrants becomes apparent. It speaks about the illusion within which Indians are trapped. And the illusion is that if east wants to prosper then it has to seek the mercy of the west. Throughout her novels and short stories, we do not find a single character holding a high position, hired for a reputed job or running a decent business within the boundaries of India rather we witness the characters possessing the same in America.

In the short story *The Third and Final Continent*, right in the beginning, the writer has shown a band of aspiring Indian Bengali bachelors struggling to educate themselves in London. She has clearly presented them as poor from India who cannot even afford a decent accommodation. The narrator of the story exactly stated the adverse living conditions and the dream of young Indians to realize and live their ambitions in the west. The narrator said,

I lived in north London, in Finsbury Park, in a house occupied entirely by penniless Bengali bachelors like myself, at least a dozen and sometimes more, all struggling to educate and establish ourselves abroad.

Lois Tyson in *Critical Theory Today* (2015) wrote,

Because their technology was more highly advanced, the colonizers believed that their whole culture was more highly advanced, and they ignored or swept aside the religions, customs, and codes of behavior of the peoples they subjugated...colonizers saw themselves at the centre of the world; the colonized at the margins. (419)

This story also shows that Indian psyche is filled with the notions like west is superior in all the aspects of human life. The instances of the west being authoritative and to some extent dominant could be traced in the character of American landlady. We can sense this right from the first conversation between the narrator and the landlady. She was direct and strictly authoritative in her selected few sentences while the narrator seemed to appear small, meek and docile. Humility and politeness was completely missed from the speech and tone of the lady. For example, she straight away asked, "Who is speaking?"

(176), "Harvard or Tech?" (177). On the contrary, the narrator used, "Yes, good afternoon, madame... I beg your pardon...Yes, madame." (177) Even on the first meeting between the two shows the commanding nature of the lady and the narrator as a submissive follower. The bossy lady showed no hesitation while ordering her guest to lock the main door and instructed him to do the same every time he enters the house. Another example: the lady was not contented to listen the narrator admitting the historical achievement attained by American astronauts as they became the first people from the entire human race who landed over moon. She insisted him to say splendid. "Say 'splendid'!...Say 'splendid'! the woman bellowed once again... Splendid, I murmured." (179, 180). This meeting and conversation between American landlady and the Indian narrator somehow opens a tiny passage to analyze the meeting from a master-slave point of view.

There is a wide difference in the cultural aspects of east and west. Life is more individualistic and practical in the west; where emotions have little or no room. Whereas in case of East, it's not only the sentiments for relatives or people with little acquaintance but the emotions can be felt even for the streets which are often crossed, the market place which is regularly visited, the neighbors with whom smiles and greetings are exchanged. People in the east have the tendency to establish a kind of a link or a connection with what so ever they come across. This 'connecting factor' of the east can probably be considered as the reason for their successful development and easy assimilation in the west.

The similar connection can be observed in the story. The narrator adopted the son like duties toward the landlady who was hundred years old. He felt happy to warm the soup for her in the evening; he was worried for her when she retired to her lonely room or when left alone in the house where nobody was there to attend upon her requirements. He was concerned and worried about the mishaps that the old lady could meet during his absence. Despite the fact that he was just a renter, he felt responsible for her well-being. Many a times, he also gets feared imagining receiving the blame for if the lady meets some unwanted accident. He made sure to check her before sinking into his bed. "At time I came downstairs before going to sleep, to make sure she was sitting upright on the bench, or was safe in her bedroom." (189)

The character of the landlady and her daughter, Helen, is in sheer contrast with that of the narrator. There was a complete absence of a real 'caring daughter' in Helen. She appeared more like a nurse who would visit on fixed days of the week to do the formal needful. It seems to be irresponsible on the part of Helen to leave her hundred years old mother all alone in the house. When the

mother shouted for Helen from downstairs, the narrator immediately felt to rush to her as fast as he could because he imagined her losing the balance and falling down on the floor waiting for an instant aid. But opposite to the narrator, Helen was perfectly relaxed and seemed to be in no rush. Examples for the care free attitude of Helen are shown through the repeated lines like,

"...Helen, who seemed to be in no hurry..." (185)

Unlike the narrator, Helen never feared for what could happen to her mother in the absence of an attendant. "Helen didn't seem worried." (188)

The nature of the landlady was also dry and it won't be imprecise to call her rude or devoid of feelings. The narrator was not her son but living in the same house, though as a boarder, he felt responsible for her. It was out of sympathy that he never minded to spend little time sitting by her side. The worries and concerns that should be present in Helen, they were visible in the narrator. In spite of all this, for the landlady, the narrator was nothing more than a boarder, a man who is to pay the rent on every Friday. The narrator felt little hurt on the landlady's total indifference during his de-boarding the house.

The last thing, she asked me to do was hand her the cane propped against the table, so that she could walk to the door and lock it behind me. "Good-bye, then," she said, and retreated back into the house. I did not expect any display of emotion, but I was disappointed all the same. I was only a boarder, a man who paid her a bit of money and passed in and out of her home for six weeks. (191)

Immigrants have not only proved themselves professionally but have left their good impression on the society in America. Culture plays a crucial role in the making of an individual's nature and personality. Indian culture is full of moral aspects like respect towards elder, dutifulness, humility and politeness. These factors form a very important part of Indians which they can never rid off, no matter where they migrate, no matter which culture they abide to; the shadow of their original culture follows them where ever they go and live. This is an ironical fact that in the stories; the characters try to escape from Indian identity for which they are appreciated and try to imitate the west probably because in their mindset they have fixed an ideal image of west which is superior and far higher than their very own.

In *The Third and Final Continent* we come across the instances which appreciate Indian virtues. Apart from the quality of being very humble and polite, the narrator was very punctual as well. He arrived to meet the landlady right on the time of appointment and therefore the lady

could not restrict herself from commenting, "You're punctual! the woman proclaimed." (178) The story also brings up the quality of high adaptability in Indian immigrants. From the description about the landlady; it appears that she was a difficult lady to live with. But the narrator did live with her as a boarder and also gained a little praise for himself. Helen said, "Some of the boys run screaming. But I think she likes you. You're the first boarder she's ever referred to as a gentleman." (185) The modesty in Indian women and the decency that is reflected through their nature also bagged the praise from the old lady. Here, narrator's wife can be contrasted with landlady's daughter. The landlady found it inappropriate of Helen to put knee length outfits. On the contrary she appreciated narrator's wife, Mala, after observing her for a couple of moments. The feeling of 'being less or secondary' is again apparent in the narrator as he was doubtful of the old lady's statement; he thought she'll disapprove of certain things in Mala.

I wondered if Mrs. Croft had seen a woman in a sari, with a dot painted on her forehead and bracelets stacked on her wrists. I wondered what she could object to. I wondered if she could see the red dye still vivid on Mala's feet, all but obscured by the bottom edge of her sari. At last Mrs. Croft declared, with the equal measures of disbelief and delight I knew well: She is a perfect lady! (195)

In the work of Jhumpa Lahiri, the presence of colonial consciousness is strongly visible. The master – slave connection in case of American landlady and the narrator, clearly manifests the high and low culture; where high culture represented the West and low culture indicates towards the East.

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