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ETHNIC COSMOPOLITANISM IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S "NOBODY'S BUSINESS"

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Abstract

Indian diaspora is much about global influence among Indian immigrants, yet in contemporary period it is changing its focus from global to glocal. This glocal environment eventually promotes the 'Ethnicity' of immigrant community. This ethnicity is the idea behind the birth of the phenomenon of 'Ethnic Cosmopolitanism'. It is the outcome of modern and postmodern 'Cosmopolitanism'. 'Ethnic Cosmopolitanism' is the amalgamation and acceptance of multiple ethnicities in the global urban settings. The concept of the 'Ethnic Cosmopolitanism' has become interestingly significant in today's globalised world as it represents mixture and blending of different cultures. The study of 'Ethnic Cosmopolitanism' focuses on the 'Glocalisation' and power of ethnicity on a global platform. This research paper examines the identify the elements of 'Ethnic Cosmopolitanism' in the short story, "Nobody's Business" published in Jhumpa Lahiri's anthology, *Unaccustomed Earth*.

Keywords: Diaspora, Global, Cosmopolitanism, Glocalisation, Ethnicity.

The term "Cosmopolites" or "kosmopolites" is derived from the Greek word 'kosmos' which signifies to the "citizen of world". It has been first coined by a Greek philosopher, Diogenes the Cynic in response to a question about where he came from. The concept of 'Cosmopolitanism' has evolved over time, leading to peculiarities between ancient, modern, and postmodern Cosmopolitanism. Ancient Cosmopolitanism is based on cynic philosophy. It suggests, entire human beings belong to a single community which is constructed on a shared economic, social and political structure. It highlights moral responsibilities that encompass beyond one's instant community or 'polis' and further developed by Stoic philosophers. The Stoics anticipated that

human beings' first adherence should be to the universal reason and the mutual welfare of humanity instead of local communities. Costas Douzinas confirms, "According to the original Cynic philosophy, nature and cosmos, with their principles of dignity and equality deduced by reason or given by God, are tools of resistance against the injustices of the city" (159).

The term 'Ethnic Cosmopolite' refers to an individual who accepts various cultures of 'others' by maintaining his/her strong cultural identity. An 'Ethnic Cosmopolitan' respects the diversity of the global world and accepts all the different ways of life. Richard Werbner describes 'Ethnic

cosmopolitanism' as, "the realisation of which creates pressures for a shift in the postcolonial state from being assimilationist, backed by the One-Nation Consensus, to being pluralist" (751). An 'Ethnic Cosmopolite' sees cultural differences as a source of richness and depth. In addition to accepting other cultures, 'Ethnic Cosmopolites' are usually portrayed by an intense sense of identity and dignity in their own cultural origin. They skilfully balance their own cultural habits with an appreciation for the traditions and practices of different cultures. Though, this cultural borrowing is also associated with the cultural ignorance and suppression of whites in Indian context. Sheldon Pollock articulates: "Any claim to indigenosity thus becomes simply evidence of historical ignorance of the source – or the suppression of the source – from which the indigenous has been borrowed" (20). 'Ethnic cosmopolitanism' brings many advantages by leading to tremendous innovation and creativity, as disclosure to distinct cultures can encourage unique approaches and ideas. Pollock further declares: "I would actually prefer to use terms of Indian cultures (Kannada, for example or Telugu) that make far fewer assumptions – terms, for example, that refer simply to cultural practices of the great "Way" and those of "Place" (*marga* and *deshi*, respectively)" (21).

"Nobody's Business" is taken from the story collection of Jhumpa Lahiri entitled, *Unaccustomed Earth*. "Nobody Business" is about the story of Sangeeta (Sang), Farouk and Paul. In this story, Sang represents a young beautiful Bengali Woman who shares a house in Boston with Paul and Heather. While Sang is involved in a serious relationship with an Egyptian man, Farouk, the narrator of the story, Paul harbours feelings for Sang during that period of time. Eventually, Sang and Farouk's passionate love story turns into the betrayal of Farouk which is resulted into the Paul's constant involvement in the life of Sang. This story highlights the difference between moral responsibility and personal space for those they care about.

In "Nobody's Business", Sang (Bengali), Farouk (Egyptian) and Paul (American) belong to diverse ethnic backgrounds and their interactions paint a vivid picture of 'Ethnic Cosmopolitanism'.

Their communications, relationships and challenges to synchronise with each other represent the realities of living in a multicultural world. Even the nickname of Sangeeta, 'Sang' describes its universality as it suits to India, America as well as Japan: "...what sort of name Sang was, half expecting a Japanese woman. It wasn't until she wrote out a check for her security deposit at the end of her visit that he saw that her official name was Sangeeta Biswas" (*Unaccustomed Earth* 177). The relationship between Sang and Farouk portrays the changing aspects of love and betrayal in a global setting. Sang's response to Farouk's betrayal is shaped by her cultural and cosmopolitan context. The global setting of this story straddling between Boston, London, Egypt and Michigan incline towards the cosmopolitan vibe as it highlights the interconnectedness of today's world. In cosmopolitan milieus, relationships often violate the traditional boundaries. Sang and Farouk's long-distance relationship and Paul's hidden affections for Sang, and even Paul's brief interaction with Deirdre, all showcase the complexity and fluidity of relationships in a global society. Even, Farouk's infidelity is discovered due the connectivity facilities in the cosmopolitan world.

In this story, the personality of Sang represents a subtle illustration of 'Ethnic Cosmopolitanism' as she is an attractive and modern Bengali woman in America. The Indo-Western elements of her lifestyle attracts Paul and other men of foreign society. Her ethnic practices like eating rice, practicing 'Bharat-Natyam' dance represents her as a suitable example of 'Ethnic Cosmopolitanism'. Similarly, the Indian miniatures in Sang's room depict the 'ethnic' and 'glocal' element: "The green walls were bare but for two framed Indian miniatures of palace scenes, men smocking hookahs and reclining on cushions, bare-bellied women dancing in a ring. There was none of the disarray he for some reason pictured every time he walked by her room" (*Unaccustomed Earth* 192). Sang, being an educated Bengali woman, symbolises a contemporary diasporic South Asian identity. This identity attracts the western world, not just for its modernity but for the hint of 'exotic'. Paul's feelings might be genuine for her but there is certainly a

hidden magnetism of the 'other' which intensified by the 'exotic' element.

"Nobody's Business" is a descriptive mosaic of multicultural interactions. Lahiri uses interpersonal relationships as a lens to explore broader themes of attraction and ethics in a globalised world. Through the entangled lives of her characters, she subtly examines the challenges and exoticness of a cosmopolitan existence. The process of synchronisation in any diasporic community encompasses exploration, adventure, enthusiasm as well as discomfort, suffering of separation, trauma and dilemma. Immigration has several meanings for the first and second generations. For the first generation it combined with identity crisis and feeling of loss of home nation. In such a situation, they maintain their 'Ethnocultural Identity' (Yamada et al. 36).

When people locate themselves in a new country and culture, it creates a situation of alienation. In such circumstances, 'Ethnic Cosmopolitanism' is the only solution left. This process of syncretism in an alien culture is complicated and leaves the impression of gloominess and trauma. This depression is not only felt by the first generation but second generation also endured a lot in synthesising themselves among foreign youths. Sometimes, they become the "ABCD", "American born confused Desi" (*The Namesake* 118). This process of mixing is confusing yet essential to survive in foreign land. 'Ethnic Cosmopolitanism' is also significant to promote 'Globalisation' by mixing different cultural traits altogether. These theories stimulate local culture into global culture. Overall, "Nobody's Business" offer an empathetic portrayal of the experiences of the Indian diasporic community and their descendants. Hence, it highlights the challenges of maintaining cultural identity while assimilating into a new culture and the tension that can arise within families of Bengali diasporic communities.

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