

THE DIASPORA PSYCHE IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S "THE NAMESAKE"

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Abstract

The aim of the paper is to bring forth the way; in which Jhumpa Lahiri, a Pulitzer Prize winner novelist, explores the dilemma of name and immigrant's sense of identity and belongingness in the novel "The Namesake". The paper discusses the term 'Diaspora', and their role in the present day world, the major issues of multiculturalism, struggle for name, identity and belongingness suffered by the characters in the novel. The paper reflects the story of two generations of an Indian family and their struggle to acculturate themselves in the west, as depicted in "The Namesake". The paper throws light on the feeling of cultural displacement, which involves loss of language, family ties, and support system. Lahiri stresses culture and its importance in an Immigrant's experience with a humanist outlook. The loss of roots, language and social norms are the three most important parts of the definition of what it is to be human being.

Keywords: Diasporic writing, Indian Poetics, Immigrants, Indian Diaspora, Marginalized, Multiculturalism, Cultural dislocation, Hybridity, Identity Crisis, Belongingness.

The term *Diaspora Literature* has become one of the most discussed issues of the post colonial period. Diaspora, originally a Greek word, is used to mean "a scattering or sowing of seeds". In general the term Diaspora refers to dispersion of any community or individual from their homeland to a new place and ensuing developments there in their cultures. In fact, the Indian Diaspora is estimated to be the second largest in the world and has a diversified Global Presence. Writers of the Indian Diaspora have been at the centre stage in the last decade chiefly because of the theoretical formulation being generated by their works. Their language and cultures are transformed when they come in contact with the others. These writers are often pre-occupied with the elements of nostalgia as they seek to locate themselves in new cultures. They write in relation to the culture of their homeland and at the same time adopt and negotiate with the culture of the host land. However, looking at the diasporic literature in a broader perspective

it is seen that such literature helps in understanding various cultures, breaking the barriers between different countries, globalizing the global and even spreading universal peace.

Interestingly, the terms ‘diaspora’, ‘exile’ alienation’, ‘expatriation’, are synonymous and possess an ambiguous status of being both a refugee and an ambassador. The two roles being different, the diasporic writers attempt at doing justice to both. As a refugee, he seeks security and protection and as an ambassador projects his own culture and helps enhance its comprehensibility.

The chief characteristic features of the diasporic writings are the quest for identity, uprooting and re-rooting, insider and outsider syndrome, nostalgia, nagging sense of guilt etc. The diasporic writers turn to their homeland for various reasons. For e.g. Naipaul who is in a perpetual quest for his roots turns to India for the same. Rushdie visits India to mythologize its history. Mistry visits and re-visits India for a kind of re-vitalization and to re-energize his aching soul. Bharati Mukherjee’s childhood memories harkens her time and again. In a way they remain somewhere still attached to their roots, but due to one or the other reasons they have to leave their homeland and face different kinds of experiences.

The diasporic writings, also known as the ‘theory of migrancy’, help generate aesthetic evaluation, negotiate with cultural constructs and aid the emergence of a new hybridity. Diaspora literature mirrors a double vision, at once of “yearning back” and “looking forward”. The peculiarities that we find in NRIs have been successfully narrated by Diaspora writers. The children of the immigrants are called *ABCD*; “American Born Confused Desi”. This “in-between-ness” leaves them with uncertainty about their role in the society; neither American nor Indian. Their identity is lost as they are treated as Indian in the foreign land and as foreigner in their mother land.

This dilemma of the immigrants has been very realistically reflected in the novels of Jhumpa Lahiri. She largely writes about the human conditions of Indian diaspora in the US. Her focus is the 'mindscape of characters' and 'human predicament' in its wider perspective. Lahiri delves deep to explain the labyrinths of her characters, to explore, psychologically the intricacies and complexities of human relationships particularly of a class of characters who live in the west but with parents born and raised in India. What are they? -Indians or Americans. They are apparently a close knit ethnic group, still far from being assimilated into the general current of life around them. Yet they were as far from the Indian current. Like the mythological king Trishanku, they stood suspended between two worlds, unable to enter either and making a haven of their own. This paper is a modest attempt to analyse the identity crisis, faced by the immigrants as portrayed in Lahiri’s novel, “The Namesake”.

“The Namesake” revolves around the lives of the Gangulis. The novel is the story of two generations of an Indian family and their struggle to acculturate themselves in the west. In the autobiographical novel, *The Namesake*, Lahiri tells the story of Gogol Ganguli, the American-born son of Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli, who arrive in Massachusetts from Calcutta in the late 1960s. The novel opens with Ashima who is about to deliver her first child, two months before her due date. Ashoke and Ashima are forced to name their child because the letter from Ashima’s grandmother, containing the name for the child, never reaches them and they learn that in America, a baby cannot be released from the hospital without a birth certificate and a birth certificate needs a name. The naming of the child revolves around Ashoka’s past emotional memories. Ashoke almost lost his life in a train derailment. Only the book he was clutching -A Collection of Nikolai Gogol's Short Stories revealed him to rescuers and had saved his life out of the train accident. With this story in mind, Ashoke names his son Gogol, but the child is never

comfortable with his name. He is always reluctant to tell his name to anybody and also unable to find any reason why his parents gave him this unusual name. Contrary to popular idiom "What's in a name?" Gogol is obsessed with "It's everything that matters in a name". His hatred for his name is explained thus: "For by now, he's come to hate questions pertaining to his name, hates having constantly to explain". Ashoke and Ashima are forced to name their child as the name, supposed to be given by Ashima's grand-mother never reaches and they learn that in America, a baby cannot be released from the hospital without a birth certificate and a birth certificate needs a name.

The significance of name becomes a major theme of the novel. The novel is an interesting and intriguing meditation on the extent to which our names shape our identity. Father had named his son Gogol in honor of the Russian Writer but the eighteen years old Gogol wants to change his name to Nikhil. When he makes this announcement there is an unusual silence at the dinner table. At last Ashoke says, "In America anything is possible. Do as you wish." (Namesake, 100). Gogol, as if reinvents himself and frees himself from his parent's constraints.

Yet in spite of becoming a part of the mainstream of American lifestyle, the name *Gogol* still haunts him. Gogol seems to have an invisible hold on Nikhil, his new name. Though her sister, Sonia is already very much Americanized. But *The Namesake* is still more than a book about a name. It is a story of assimilation and generational gap too. Unlike Ashoke and Ashima, Gogol and Sonia try to break free from the past of their parents. The offsprings turn away from the inherited customs and cultural values imposed upon them by their parents and enjoy accepting their American heritage at any cost. They prefer "love marriages" to "arranged marriage" and relish American and continental food more than the 'syrupy Bengali dishes'. Enjoying the celebration of the Christmas and Thanks giving more than their Bengali festivals, both the children rebel and try desperately to assimilate with their American peers. Lahiri pictures the sordid spectacle of racism, prejudice and marginalization by the unwelcoming society and Gogol is a victim of it. Gogol struggles to transform himself by escaping from the traditions of the community of Indian immigrants to which his family belongs. He is an ABCD - an American Born Confused Desi. Lahiri depicts that the ABCD's are unable to answer the question: "Where are you from?" The novel probes into the inner psyche of characters and brings out stirring and teasing sense of identity by clash of cultures. In the flat world, multiculturalism results in "the Melting Pot" and "Salad Bowl". The novel overflows with the subdued grace and dignity of a family forced to make peace with their loyalties to India and America.

Ashoke and Ashima soon realize that they cannot force their children to follow their way of living and they gradually learn the new culture' life style in order to keep pace with their own children. As Lahiri writes in the novel: "And yet it was for him {Gogol}, for Sonia, that his parents had gone to the trouble of learning these customs" (Namesake, 286). Ashima now invites her children's American peers on feast and finds it "less stressful" to feed forty Bengali guests "than the task of feeding a handful of American children" (Namesake, 72). In due course of time we notice a remarkable transformation in Ashima who was a young, scared, jobless and dependent woman at the beginning and a strong, self-reliant, employed Ashima at the end of the novel. Later in the novel, Gogol could not assimilate himself with the American culture. He loves Ruth, a white American, his college friend, but their friendship retained for a short period. His next love is Maxine who is of white American ethnicity. Their friendship breaks because of Gogol's struggle regarding emotional complications of his father's death. After this, his mother tells Gogol to have friendship with Moushumi, daughter of their friend, due to their shared culture and background. But their marriage breaks as Moushumi loves Dimitri, a German man. Gogol is

schizophrenic as he is split/torn between two nations, India/ America, between two names, Indian/Russian, between two value systems, traditions/conventions. Genetically he is tied up to his traditions and has unique self; racially he is alien, and a second class citizen in America. He feels that his wife has a better status. His complexes get reflected through Moushmi, who feels dissatisfied having married him.

To conclude, Jhumpa Lahiri, in her novel 'The Namesake', has presented relationships with various degrees of acculturation of second generation of the Indian immigrants. Being an Indian by ancestry, British by birth and American by immigration, Lahiri is much interested in the large section of new generation of Indian Americans, their cultural traditions, value system and relationships, their feelings for name and spacelessness. The issue of identity crisis is another remarkable theme in Lahiri's narrative. Lahiri finds her identity through her protagonist Gogol who looks back choose the best of both cultures; of their homeland and of their host country. She provides an authentic picture of diasporic culture by shedding lights on the lives of characters- Ashoke, Ashima and their son Gogol; their longings for their origins and customs, traditions and views. The novel is a fine discussion on "names, relations, families, inheritance and cultural assimilation. The novel exposes the eternal quest for identity submerged under black waters of uprootedness and from this black water a new culture reveals the possibility of blending of two cultures through introspection and self analysis.

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