



CULTURAL DISPLACEMENT AND IDENTITY CRISIS IN JHUMPHA LAHIRI'S *THE NAMESAKE*

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ABSTRACT

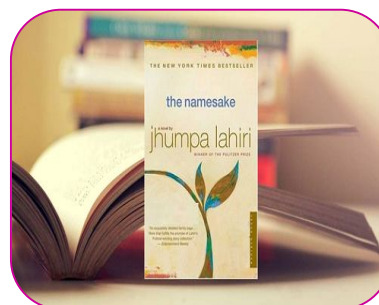
Diaspora Theory with its various features has influenced the literature of every nation. This literature is widely known as Expatriate or Diasporic Literature. It would be proper to examine features and aspects of such literature in which Indian Writing in English has not only contributed greatly, but also received international recognition and admiration in the past few years. Diasporic Literature is an umbrella term that includes all those literary works written by the authors outside their native country. But these works are associated with native culture and background. In this context, all those writers who write outside their country can be called diaspora writers. But they remained related to their homeland through their works. Diasporic literature has its roots in the sense of loss and alienation, which emerged as a result of migration and expatriation. Generally, diasporic literature deals with alienation, displacement, existential rootlessness, nostalgia, quest of identity. It also addresses issues related to amalgamation or disintegration of cultures. It reflects the immigrant experience that comes out of the immigrant settlement. The immigrants, whatever their reason for migration be, financial, social, political, no matter whether they migrated for trade and commerce, as religious preachers, as laborers, convicts, soldiers, as expatriates or refugees, exiles, or as guest workers in search of better life and opportunities have shared some common things as well as differences which are based on their conditions of migration and period of stay in the adopted land. Mostly the migrants suffer from the pain of being far off from their homes, the memories of their motherland, the anguish of leaving behind everything familiar agonizes the minds of migrants. William Safran has observed that; "they continue to relate personally or vicariously, to the homeland in a way or another, and their ethnic-communal consciousness and solidarity are importantly defined by the existence of such a relationship."

KEY WORDS: Identity Crisis in Jhumpha, *Diaspora Theory*.

INTRODUCTION

The diasporic Indians too, do not break their relationship with the ancestral land. There is a search for continuity and 'ancestral impulse', an effort to look for their roots. Settlement in alien land makes them experience dislocation. Dislocation can be considered as a break with the old identity. They experience the sense of loneliness in an alien land feel as they face non-acceptance by the host society and also experience ethnic discrimination. The immigrants attempt to assimilate, adapt and amalgamate with the society of their host country. Their attempts of adaptation and adjustment are not without their concern to maintain their original culture and identity. The marginal groups try to guard themselves against the dominant host group. The most important means used for insulation is the continuation of the cultural practices and social traditions.

As they are torn between the two places and two cultures and often languages; the Expatriate writer navigates a new literary space.



The diasporic literature arises under these circumstances. The broken psyche of the immigrants sheds off its psychosis into writing. Therefore, the migrant writer feels a forceful need to write and with their multicultural ethos and a profound understanding of socio-cultural and economic realities around them, they have been successful in transforming their experiences into writings. Another important reason for writing by the creative talent in the diasporic community is to make their existence recognized. The very act of creation is a purposeful

The expatriate literature also deals mostly with the inner conflict in the context of cultural displacement. The immigrants away from the families fluctuate between crisis and reconstruction. They are thrice alienated from the native land they left behind, from their new host country and their children. The longing to regain lost home often culminates in the creation of a different version of home. As Salman Rushdie observes; Nostalgia, loss, betrayal and duty are the foundations of new homes as diasporic protagonists adjust to new countries. In adjusting to new countries, issues of acculturation and assimilation become the central point as these immigrants negotiate the unbalance of their hyphenated identities.

Nilanjana Sudeshna "Jhumpa" Lahiri born on July 11, 1967 is an American author. Lahiri has been selected as the winner of the 29th PEN/Malamud Award for Excellence in the Short story. Lahiri's debut short story collection *Interpreter of Maladies* 1999 won the 2000 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, and her first novel, *The Namesake* 2003, was adapted into the popular film of the same name. She was born Nilanjana Sudeshna but goes by her nickname Jhumpa.

Lahiri was born in London, the daughter of Bengali Indian emigrants from the state of West Bengal. Her family moved to the United States when she was two; Lahiri considers herself an American, stating, "I wasn't born here, but I might as well have been." Lahiri grew up in Kingston, Rhode Island, where her father Amar Lahiri works as a librarian at the University of Rhode Island.

In 2003, Lahiri published *The Namesake*, her first novel. The story spans over 30 years in the life of the Ganguli family. The Calcutta-born parents immigrated as young adults to the United States, where their children, Gogol and Sonia, grow up experiencing the constant generational and cultural gap with their parents. A film adaptation of *The Namesake* was released in March 2007, directed by Mira Nair and starring Kal Penn as Gogol and Bollywood stars Tabu and Irrfan Khan as his parents. Lahiri herself made a cameo as "Aunt Jhumpa."

Lahiri's writing is characterized by her "plain" language and her characters, often Indian immigrants to America who must navigate between the cultural values of their homeland and their adopted home. Lahiri's fiction is autobiographical and frequently draws upon her own experiences as well as those of her parents, friends, acquaintances, and others in the Bengali communities with which she is familiar. Lahiri examines her characters' struggles, anxieties, and biases to chronicle the nuances and details of immigrant psychology and behaviour.

Jhumpa Lahiri's novel *The Namesake* deftly demonstrates how the familiar struggles between new and old, assimilation and cultural preservation, striving toward the future and longing for the past, play out in one particular set of foreign-born parents and their American-born children. In the novel's opening pages, Ashima Ganguli, who left India to join her husband Ashoke in America, is about to deliver their first child, a son. Following Bengali custom, the child is to have two names a pet name, for use only by family and close friends, and a "good" name, to be used everywhere else. Almost by mistake, the boy comes to be known as Gogol, named for his father's favorite Russian author. In a harrowing flashback, the reason for Ashoke's attachment to the Russian writer is revealed.

Gogol's father embraces their new life, while his mother longs for her homeland. As Gogol enters school, they attempt to convert his unusual name to a more typical one, but the boy stolidly rejects the transition, refusing to become, as he thinks of it, "someone he doesn't know." Soon he regrets his choice, as the name he's held onto seems increasingly out of place.

The novel's finely wrought descriptions of Bengali food, language, family customs, and Hindu rituals draw us deep inside the culture that Gogol's parents treasure while highlighting his alienation from it. Gogol finishes school, becomes an architect, falls in love more than once, and eventually marries, without ever fully

embracing his heritage. His decades-long unease with his name is a perfect distillation of the multiple dislocations cultural, historic, and familial experienced by first-generation Americans. At the novel's climax, when loss compounds loss and Gogol's family structure is forever changed, he begins to understand, at least in part, his parents' longing for the past, and the sacrifices they made to help him be what he is truly American. The themes of the relationship between parents and children become prominent in the novel along with the themes of name and identity, language barrier, alienation, Nostalgia.

The theme of alienation, of being a stranger in a foreign land, is prominent throughout the novel. Throughout her pregnancy, which was difficult, Ashima was afraid about raising a child in "a country where she is related to no one, where she knows so little, where life seems so tentative and spare." Her son, Gogol, will feel at home in the United States in a way that she never does. When Gogol is born, Ashima mourns the fact that her close family does not surround him. It means that his birth, "like most everything else in America, feels somehow haphazard, only half true." When she arrives home from the hospital, Ashima says to Ashoke in a moment of angst, "I don't want to raise Gogol alone in this country. It's not right. I want to go back."

Ashima feels alienated in the suburbs; this alienation of being a foreigner is compared to "a sort of lifelong pregnancy," because it is "a perpetual wait, a constant burden, a continuous feeling out of sorts... something that elicits the same curiosity from strangers, the same combination of pity and respect." Gogol also feels alienated, especially when he realizes that "no one he knows in the world, in Russia or India or America or anywhere, shares his name. Not even the source of his namesake."

The theme of alienation appears in Moushumi's life, as she describes to Gogol how she rejected all the Indian suitors with whom her parents tried to match her up. She tells him, "She was convinced in her bones that there would be no one at all. Sometimes she wondered if it was her horror of being married to someone she didn't love that had caused her, subconsciously, to shut herself off." She went to Paris so she could reinvent herself without the confusion of where she fit in.

Gogol feels alienated sometimes in his marriage to Moushumi. When he finds remnants of her life with Graham around the apartment they now share together, he wonders if "he represents some sort of capitulation or defeat." When they go to Paris together, he wishes it were her first time there, too, so he didn't feel so out of place while she feels so obviously comfortable.

Ashima feels alienated and alone after showering before the party. She "feels lonely suddenly, horribly, permanently alone, and briefly, turned away from the mirror, she sobs for her husband." She feels "both impatience and indifference for all the days she still must live." She does not feel motivated to be in Calcutta with the family she left over thirty years before, nor does she feel excited about being in the United States with her children and potential grandchildren. She just feels exhausted and overwhelmed without her husband.

The tension between the way things are in the United States and the way things are in India is apparent in the character of Mrs. Jones, the elderly secretary whom Ashoke shares with the other members of his department at the university. She lives alone and sees her children and grandchildren rarely; this is "a life that Ashoke's mother would find humiliating." As the Ganguli children grow up as Americans, their parents give in to certain American traditions. For his fourteenth birthday, Gogol has two celebrations: one that is typically American and one that is Bengali.

The theme of the United States versus India is apparent during the wedding between Moushumi and Gogol. Their parents plan the entire thing, inviting people neither of them has met and engaging in rituals neither of them understands. They don't have the type of intimate, personal wedding their American friends would have planned.

The difference between Bengali and American approaches to marriage is clear in Ashima's evaluation of Gogol's divorce from Moushumi. She thinks, "Fortunately they have not considered it their duty to stay married, as the Bengalis of Ashoke and Ashima's generation do." In her view, the pressure to settle for less than "their ideal of happiness" has given way to "American common sense." Surprisingly, Ashima is pleased with this outcome, as opposed to an unhappy but dutiful marriage for her son.

As the novel progresses, the characters begin to feel more and more nostalgic about earlier times in their lives. Gogol feels nostalgic when his mother and Sonia come to the train station to see him off. He remembers that the whole family would see him off every time he returned to Yale as a college student; "his father would always stand on the platform until the train was out of sight."

Gogol begins to feel more and more nostalgic as his marriage with Moushumi progresses. In Paris, he wishes he could stay in bed with Moushumi for hours, the way they used to, rather than having to sightsee by himself while she prepares for her presentation. During the dinner party at the home of Astrid and Donald, Gogol becomes nostalgic for when he and Moushumi were first dating, and they spent an entire afternoon designing their ideal house.

In an interview to Mira Nair, Lahiri Jump Lahiri expressed the existing problem of cultural diversity in the foreign land: "I wanted to please my parents and meet their expectations. I also wanted to meet the expectations for my American peers, and the expectations I put on myself to fit into American society. It's a classic case of divided identity." Ashoke and Ashima's constant struggle to keep Bengali culture alive in their lives in the foreign land gets reflected in their decision to send Gogol for Bengali language and culture classes at the home of one their Bengali friends. But the children take this as burden: "The children in the class study without interest, wishing they could be at ballet or softball practice instead." The attitude of the first and second generations to the cultural heritage left behind in the home country and the adopted country is in sharp contrast. The first generation makes leaves no stone unturned to maintain the culture left behind. Ashoke and Ashima find a temporary relief in foreign atmosphere in the celebration of Gogol's Anna Prashan. The presence of bengali members, their dress, their manner of speaking, performance of ritual testify to their sense of belonging to their own culture. On the other hand, the absence of the family members makes them nostalgic. The importance the immigrants attach to the Bengali rituals reveals their inner feeling of remaining away for home. But the second generation Gogol-Sonia's apathetic attitude to accept the Bengali customs and rituals seems to evade his Indian identity. Their hyphenated position, Indian–American, creates identity crisis in them. Their apparent attachment to the American customs makes them indifference to the Indian one. Gogol and Sonia fail to attach due importance to and obey the rules and regulations of the Indian religious ceremony after their father's death: "it was a Bengali son's duty to shave his head in the wake of a parents' death." The cultural displacement damages the sacred bond of marriage in the lives of Indian immigrants. The marital conflict comes to the fore because "in India a strict set of guidelines dictates how husbands and wives act both publicly and privately, in America, such guidelines are not as clear-cut and often, are thrown out guidelines together". The first generation and the second-generation immigrants are at loggerheads over marriage. To the first generation immigrants like Ashoke and Ashima, marriage is a sacred thing and it instills in their mind that it is their duty to remain as couple till their last breath on the earth. But the second generation immigrants like Gogol and Moushumi, fail to remain loyal to this parental tradition. After leading a happy life for a year and a few months, Moushumi doesn't want to continue her married life with him. She now wants to be a life partner of Dimitri, with whom she had had a relationship even before she married Gogol. She applies for a divorce and flies back to New York. The second generation immigrants' attitude towards marriage and married life undergo a drastic change under the influence of the Western culture.

In the post colonial discourse the question of identity always gets emphasis. This identity crisis arises chiefly from the feeling of culturally displaced. The problem faced by Gogol for his name which is neither American nor Indian, but Russian, symbolizes the problem of identity crisis. The baby Gogol is named after a Russian writer, whose book Ashoke attaches much importance considering the role played in saving his life in a fatal train accident when he was on the way to Ranchi. But, unaware of the mystery remained behind his naming,

The Namesake portrays both the immigrant experience in America, and the complexity of family loyalties that underlies all human experience. Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli, after an arranged marriage in India, emigrate to America where Ashoke achieves his dream of an engineering degree and a tenured

position in a New England college. Their son Gogol, named for the Russian writer, rejects both his unique name and his Bengali heritage.

In a scene central to the novel's theme, Ashoke gives his son a volume of Nikolai Gogol's short stories for his fourteenth birthday, hoping to explain the book's significance in his own life. Gogol, a thoroughly Americanized teenager, is indifferent, preoccupied with his favorite Beatles recording. Such quietly revealing moments give the narrative its emotional power. The loneliness of lives lived in exile is most poignantly revealed in the late night family telephone calls from India, always an announcement of illness or death.

Gogol earns his degree in architecture, but happiness in love eludes him. An intense love affair with Maxine draws him into a wealthy American family, revealing the extreme contrasts between American and Indian family values. Gogol's marriage to Moushumi, who shares his Indian heritage, ends in divorce.

Jhumpa Lahiri's conclusion achieves a fine balance. Ashima, now a widow, sells the family home and will divide her time between America and Calcutta. Gogol, at thirty-two, discovers in his father's gift of Gogol's short stories a temporary reconciliation with his name and the heritage he has rejected.

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