

DIASPORIC DIMENSION AND IDENTITY ISSUES IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S *THE NAMESAKE*

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Diaspora which underpins self-awareness, self-identification, self-knowledge and self-definition is a voyage in an attempt to transpire fulfillment of one's own potential, gaining capacity or introspection. It reinforces the ability to recognize oneself as an individual, separate from the environment and other individuals, understanding of oneself or one's own motives or character and definition of one's individuality and role in life. As rightly observed by Okwui Enwezor: "The formation of a Diaspora could be articulated as the quintessential journey into becoming; a process marked by incessant regroupings, recreations, and reiteration. Together these stressed actions strive to open up new spaces of discursive and performative postcolonial consciousness."

Diaspora Literature incorporates an idea of a homeland, a place from where the displacement occurs- losing their attachment to their ancestral homeland and also an account of unpleasant journeys undertaken owing to economic obligation. It also embodies and explores the concepts such as nostalgia, memory and even lamentation of losing one's native language, homeland and friends and so on. The optimal part of Diasporic writing is the creativity and originality, making the readers form a mental image of 'a believable world'. The writers of the Indian Diaspora, through their marked style and literary potentiality have significantly enriched the English literature. They have been making an attempt to take up radically the aspect of re-creating India through, the complexities of another civilization, cultural adjustment and nostalgia. They plunge profoundly and thoughtfully into the realm of imaginations and originality- the plethora of reminiscence to illustrate something fairly different and distinct from the other novelists. However, they certainly do not 'feel right' in their host country and this is often regrettably apparent through intolerance or prejudice. Nevertheless, the Diaspora identity, even though conceived negatively by many, is actually viewed as a position of potency and might. The migrants are in a position to appreciate and see life not the same as the others do; and this offers them an appreciable competence to gain an accurate and deep understanding of someone or something as they are able to integrate aspects of both their home culture and their host culture in their living, which allows them to use and develop their Diaspora identity.

The Diaspora writing represents the understanding of experiencing an 'out of the common' practice of living, and the cultural adjustment and attunement is no more than a means of solving a problem or dealing with a difficult situation. Immigrants are entailed to adopt and accept the mores and language of the host land as a necessary or inevitable part. But this causes a cultural shock and Multicultural Confusion and the loss or failure of the immigrant's centers on the emotional fore. While holding their indispensable oddity and peculiarity within, the migrant

entangled between two or more independent cultures, lives on a borderland. As they cannot remove all traces of their identities totally, they can neither put out of mind the culture they have grown up in, nor can they altogether take in and understand fully the culture they have embraced. They quest for the roots in an unfamiliar and unknown land for continued survival, for the significance and belonging in their diasporic predicament with the blend of Indian roots.

The Namesake by Jhumpa Lahiri can largely be observed as a Diasporic piece of work with contributing sub- themes of immigrant experience, the clash of cultures, the disagreement of assimilation, and, most poignantly, the tangled ties between generations that open whole worlds of emotion. These themes in the novel are elaborated, through the main characters in her story and all her characters are often caught in a cross-cultural tension, excited about their new home but grieving the loss of their country of origin. The importance of names and identity is brought up all through the story, endowing the descriptions of anguish, unhappiness, love and delight, which are all part of Diaspora novel and also, to a larger extent, of every human's identity. This formation is vital for the novel involving struggle in the family, along with the circle of life and one's identity. The tribulations and successes of the Gangulis as they adjust to life in America are precisely typified. A reader of this novel experiences access to inestimably compassionate world seeing that it has a broad eloquence and empathy to everyone who is an immigrant. To relate Lahiri's own remarks in an interview with *Houghton Mifflin Company* she says that the novel is emphatically about those "who are culturally displaced or those who grow up in two worlds simultaneously". Speaking on the predicament of immigrants Jhumpa Lahiri says: "I think that for immigrants, the challenges of exile, the loneliness, the constant sense of alienation, the knowledge of and longing for a lost world, are more explicit and distressing than for their children". Jhumpa Lahiri's works competently underline the appalling predicament and alienated feelings that a migrant experiences in a new land and her characters symbolize an inner conflict of insecurity and dilemma that makes an immigrant all together lonely and inaccessible even while living in a hugely populated area where they find it complex to conform to the standards of a new nation. However, Lahiri also makes an effort to examine the fact that one's cultural roots may possibly restrain, subsequent to their continued existence in a non-native country, and this is something that every immigrant ought to face to stay adaptable and optimistic. Literally and metaphorically, India keeps cropping up as a backdrop in Lahiri's novels for the fact that the largest part of her characters has Indian background.

Jhumpa Lahiri as a writer of Indian Diaspora envisions the cultural traumas in her characters with a socio-ethical perspective of 'adoptive citizens'. Like her, her characters are inheres of Bengali lineage who are unable to consign to oblivion their cultural past as they ascertain an affectional and emotional confinement with their root. *The Namesake* has conspicuous autobiographical aspects, and Lahiri's parents are observably identifiable. She observes: "A lot of my personality was informed by feeling very different in the world I grew up in feeling that I didn't fully belong, that my parents didn't belong. I feel that I inherited a sense of that loss my parents suffered in moving to the United States, because it was so palpable while I was growing up". This disorientation finds its dominant presence in *The Namesake* and it is so much autobiographical for a writer like Jhumpa Lahiri who is caught between two cultures- Indian heritage and American Dream. In Lahiri's own words"

The Namesake is, essentially, a story about life in the United States, so the American setting was always a given. The terrain is very much the terrain

of my own life - New England and New York, with Calcutta always hovering in the background. Now that the writing is done I've realized that America is a real presence in the book; the characters must struggle and come to terms with what it means to live here, to be brought up here, to belong and not belong here.... the problem for the children of immigrants - those with strong ties to their country of origin - is that they feel neither one thing nor the other. This has been my experience, in any case. For example, I never know how to answer the question "Where are you from?" If I say I'm from Rhode Island, people are seldom satisfied. They want to know more, based on things such as my name, my appearance, etc. Alternatively, if I say I'm from India, a place where I was not born and have never lived, this is also inaccurate. It bothers me less now. But it bothered me growing up, the feeling that there was no single place to which I fully belonged.

Ashima, the heart of *The Namesake* whose life revolves around her husband and children is an accurate envoy of the greater part of women expatriates who are reluctant to transform or become accustomed to the ethnicity of the host country. Diasporic trauma increases in Ashima as she experiences a longing, loss and a cultural and emotional vacuity in her attempt to put down roots and adjust to the new life which is one of the fundamentals of Diasporic identity, undeniably. The process of adapting or becoming used to this new situation is difficult with her first pregnancy owing to the lack of family closeness. This dilemma produces intense emotions as she is terrified and saddened with the thought of raising her baby all on her own in that foreign country:

For being a foreigner, Ashima is beginning to realize, is a sort of lifelong pregnancy – a perpetual wait, a constant burden, a continuous feeling out of sorts. It is an ongoing responsibility, a parenthesis in what had once been ordinary life, only to discover that that previous life has vanished, replaced by something more complicated and demanding.(49-50)

Ashima's diasporic life as she moves from India to the United States is in fact worth mentioning to be examined intensely. However as the novel progresses and after constant struggle to keep a sense of balance between her roots while trying to keep pace with the American way of life, Ashima is all set and prepared to appreciate that not only India but the United States is also her home which has served a means to accomplish the purpose of her life and establish her own identity. It is the place where she has started to build her life as a wife for her husband, a mother for her children as well as a friend for everyone whose ethnicities and cultures are different. We see Ashima regularly making judgment amid her American Indian and life. Ashoke and Ashima, who walk down the aisle, arrive at Cambridge during August 1968 where Ashoke was a doctoral contender in Electrical Engineering at MIT. For Ashoke this flight is liberation whereas Ashima considers it as an exile away from family that leads to emotional isolation from her ancestral domicile. As the novel opens, we see an upset, nostalgic, spatially and emotionally alienated Ashima Ganguly in her attempt to recreate the taste of her favorite Indian snack, in so doing making an effort to redo her past. Her reminiscence of the past which consists a mind's eye of her family and people in Calcutta intensifies Ashima's sense of solitariness in the USA. The personal space of Ashima in *The Namesake* signifies the emotional

state and stance of the first generation Diasporic women from the South Asian countries. The new experience of moving to a new country was an emotional roller coaster for Ashima and thus all through her initial stay, she finds herself lonely and stranded in need of support as she notices everything is different, from the language, the social standard or pattern, the physical surroundings and the food. However by degrees she begins to achieve the desired fit to the American culture. The attachment and concern for her family fills her personal space and she seems not to have any self-governing or independent wish and she thinks only for the welfare of her family by providing everything that the family needed. She faces inner conflict typical to many Diasporic lives as the ideals in one culture are not connected to another culture. Assimilating into both cultures or finding a balance due to the influence of both of their cultures makes Ashima difficult to understand and accept the concept of American way of living.

Ashoke and Ashima welcome their bundle of joy into this world. The grandmother of Ashima is allowed to name their child, but the grandmother had a heart stroke- the news that couple is unaware of. Ashima and Ashoke, naively, wait for three days in the hospital for the letter from India which would inform them of the name for their baby. The Bengali culture allows having two names for a child. Bhaalo naam (good name or formal name) and daak naam (pet name or nick name). A Bengali child is not instantly bestowed with Bhaalo naam during his birth. The seek-out for a Bhaalo naam is a formal and ceremonial process which is premeditated upon by all elder folks in a family. Having spent three days in the hospital, in Cambridge, Massachusetts, they were forced to break with Bengali convention and give their son an official name on the birth certificate. Ashoke comes to a decision to name him Gogol, following the Russian novelist Nikolai Vasilievich Gogol, who apparently saved Ashoke's life when he was injured in a train crash in India, back in 1961. Thus Gogol's baptizing is a combination of bureaucratic obligation and a disconcerting occurrence related to his grandmother's heart- attack. All through his living, Gogol, the story's main protagonist deeply experiences the uniqueness of his name. When Gogol starts nursery school, he is told by his family that he is to be called Nikhil (a good name) by teachers and the other children at school. Hence he is Nikhil to everyone he comes across in adult life but Gogol to his family. Gogol, who rebuffs his proper name, wishes to be called 'Gogol' by his family and society. This disarranging and chaotic trauma goes on in the life of Gogol and at the same time he realizes the cultural disparity between India and America. A sense of aloofness from his Indian roots is felt by Gogol in his youth. He doesn't think of India as home and does not intermingle in the company of other Indian American students. For Gogol, his name is out of the ordinary since it is Russian but not American nor Bengali. Unable to understand the saga behind his strange name, Gogol feels like an 'outsider', intensifying obscurity in the identity crisis. Thus the name imbues the young American Ganguli with thoughts of dissent and discomfiture. This sort of malady is afflicted upon all the central characters of Lahiri that leaves them unfilled and secluded within. Lahiri sums up this weirdness and peculiarity of Gogol pretty well. "Not only does Gogol Ganguli have a pet name turned good name, but a last name turned first name. And so it occurs to him 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". (78). However, at a larger level, this situation always subsists in the lives of the second generation immigrants, as they feel culturally displaced and dislocated for simultaneously living in two ethnicities. As Gogol progresses in age and attains enough maturity to communicate or be involved directly with his parents, the theme and premise of the relationship

shared between parents and children becomes sufficiently important to be worthy of attention in the novel. Gogol seems to be like having or showing a tendency to be quickly irritated or provoked with his parents and they, in a like manner, feel incapable to identify with their American children. After the death of his father Gogol is aware of the futility and emptiness his parents had felt when their parents had passed away in Calcutta. By this time, Gogol begins to show gentleness, kindness, and affection towards his father. Gogol's sympathetic awareness of the distressing or disturbing experiences that his parents had to face is illustrated further by the actuality that he accepts that his parents withstood such hardships with "a stamina he fears he does not possess himself". Thus towards the ending of the novel he achieves acceptance or acknowledgment with his roots and learns to treasure his name:

Without people in the world to call him Gogol,
no matter how long he himself lives,
Gogol Ganguli will, once and for all, vanish
from the lips of loved ones, and so, cease
to exist. Yet the thought of this eventual
demise provides no sense of victory, no solace.
It provides no solace at all. (289)

Gogol understands through his experience on how his culture and American cultures were on the outs with each other and he lives the remaining part of his life recognizing that he ought to hold in high esteem his heritage and the place of his origin furthermore integrate them into a united whole in his way of living. Gogol never identified who he was because of his name, however towards the ending of the novel he eventually becomes fully aware and understands clearly that imbalance or lack of harmony in culture are not the causes for emotional pain in people or make them feel unrelated; they are what transform humans making them adaptable to function well in a new country, and Gogol, begins to accept others regardless of their differences. The experiences seem to make Gogol become wide awake and at this point he starts to appreciate and understand his own manner, as he starts reading the book that his father gave him, and learning more about his namesake.

The state of being in a place or situation that is separate from others, a typical Diasporic feature is readily noticed during the entire course of the novel. All through her effortful pregnancy, Ashima was filled with apprehension about raising a child not including her family ties in "a country where she is related to no one, where she knows so little, where life seems so tentative and spare." Ashima's struggle to attain mental and behavioral sense of balance between her own needs and the demands of her surroundings in an alien land is an encountering experience of every immigrant, for the universal concern of identity. Ashima's alienation in the suburbs measures up 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 as well goes through alienation, particularly when he understands 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 study of intergenerational conflicts is fundamental to Jhumpa Lahiri's description of Diaspora as her characters who belong to the first and the second generation immigrants in *The Namesake* experience the complexities because one generation sees things differently from the others. The anguish of the Indian young adult Gogol born in the US facing the problem of the

generation gap weaves the story of the novel, *The Namesake*. The clash between parents and children over cultural values is a recurrent concern in the Ganguli family. Their mental framework differs from each other and as a consequence, both the parties are not able to live in tranquility and harmony with each other thus unable to respect the likes and outlook of each other due to the different attitudes adopted by two generations. The first generation immigrants cleave to their customary cultural values and feel threatened by the change that immigration presents whereas their children endorse the governing Western standards and want to define their independence early in life and this leads to a conflict and disagreement. These differences and detachment between generations bring about miscommunication and family discord causing odd terms with each other. It is indeed challenging to find the perfect balance between cultures. Lahiri's novel fully features this 'cross condition' of the second generation Indians. Gogol's settled way of thinking or feeling towards his parent's ethnicity and that of his American school friends and teachers give us an idea that he is a kind of cultural fusion- Indo-American remaining on the edge uncertainly between speaking Bengali at home and English at school, eating American food like hamburgers at school and Indian food at home. The eventual outcome is that there is a want for cultural conciliation or transformation attributable to the roles played by them between the adopted culture and the culture of the motherland. The first immigrants impart the cultural a set of principles or procedures of their native countries to their US-born children. And the second generations transmute the American cultural patterns to their parents.

Some of the factors that infuse emotional strain between the younger generation and their immigrant parents are parental norms, behavioral forms and mainstream American background. This is the general condition of all the Diasporic community. In general the parents expect their children to maintain their established standard of living but the children are more inclined to adhere to the new culture and lifestyle. Demographically, both the parties grew up in hugely different worlds and this very different frame of the young and the old is the root of tension from which communication problems and misunderstandings emerge. The second generation immigrants of Ganguly family who want to unfurl their wings and become individuals in their own right do not want to be mirror image of their parents. They spend much of their lives making an effort to fit in with their in American peers without actually trying to retain comfort and acquaintance with the heritage of their homeland. On the other side, for Ashima and Ashoke who represent the first generation of Ganguly family, Indian heritage was always an element of their life at the same time they have embraced western traditions. Amissing to merge their ethnic ambiance with American culture, the two generations face Diasporic crisis of twofold identity. While the parents hanker to nurture Gogol and his sister by way of Bengali culture and values, the indifference of Gogol and Sonia towards Indian culture untangle them from their lineage and family as much possible. From the standpoint of the first-generation of Ganguli family, it was challenging to try to fit into a culture that appreciated independence when they have lived half of their lives in a culture that valued interdependence. It is often intricate immigrating to a new country and equally challenging to raise the children in a world where modernity and tradition, Indian culture and American culture exchange blows. Indian immigrant parents are typically very protective, nurturing and caring. This sort of cultural disparities mount to the sense of isolation. However beauty lies in fitting into the western culture while still maintaining and upholding our comfort, connection and acquaintance with our heritage. Victor J. Ramraj, in his essay, "Diasporas and Multiculturalism" has rightly observed:

Yet though diasporans may not want actually to return home, wherever the dispersal has left them, they retain a conscious or subconscious attachment to traditions, customs, values, religions, and languages of the ancestral home. (BK 215)

Food practices maintain a mutual sense of Diasporic cultural identity seeing that the immigrants carry nutritional regime and eating habits of their home country to the host country. Every dish has implication as a means to re-unite with culture, tradition and values of native soil. Food adds force to the identity of Ashima and Ashoke and makes them feel comfy as it brings them closer to her family and home in India. The opening scene of *The Namesake* in which Ashima attempts to recreate a snack that is popular in India, because she is longing for the years she left in the rear provide the readers a vivid observation of the event and episodes relating to reminiscence and nostalgia which is central to Diasporic identifications:

"On a sticky August evening two weeks before her due date, Ashima Ganguli stands in the kitchen...combining Rice Krispies and Planters peanuts and chopped red onion in a bowl. She adds salt, lemon juice, thin slices of green chili pepper, wishing there was some mustard oil to pour into the mix... a humble approximation of the snack sold for pennies on Calcutta sidewalks...in India" (1).

The adherence to the culture in an alien land by the Diasporic group of Ganguli family is in plain sight by their inclination and fondness for the Indian Bengali food which is observable in the lunches and the dinners, in addition to observance of Bengali rituals which reflect one's ethnic uniqueness. The first generation Bengali immigrants in America, binds with the ethnic culinary items like rice, dal and lamb curry with potatoes which make the characters that they are. In other words, observe food practices of their 'root' and complying with their Bengali culture is an important way that Bengali culture is conserved in the Ganguli home. More to the point, it echoes the undying ties with their homeland together with sustenance and preservice of Indian tradition in America which meant a lot to them. However, as we see Ashima and Ashoke are ardent for Bengali food but their children, appallingly, are still around for American cuisine like Shake' n Bake chicken or Hamburger Helper. This imprecision between parents and children, husbands and wives, is a recurring area under discussion in Lahiri's stories. They face different problems as the meaning of the culture differs for both the generation- the first being directly related to his/her homeland and second generation forming an image of culture based on the information transmitted by the first generation" (Agarwal, *Generational Differences in Diasporic Writings* 29). The parenting and nourishment of the youthful children, time and again, plays an essential role in the entire family's experience of migration. Among the Diaspora population of the first generation, it can be awfully challenging as they live through physical and emotional crisis in the process of coming to terms with their children. This loss is attributable to

sense of grief that results from on or after being disconnected from family, associates, acquaintances, culture and identity within a familiar community.

The Namesake a remarkable piece of literature by Jhumpa Lahiri is an account of remorse- an intense psychosomatic dilemma. The tug between the two worlds the Indian world and the American one is well studied in this novel and this discovery is rooted on her individual experiences growing up in America as the child of Indian immigrants. As a typical Diaspora writer, Lahiri seems to understand the realization of immigrants and have delineated them in a 'true to life' manner. In present milieu of a globalization a cultural multitude is a prime requisite for all, failing which may pilot to cultural quandary. Jhumpa Lahiri's sense of exile as presented through the characters in her novel is a broad-spectrum of the Indian Diasporic community who leave their home culture to settle in a new and untried cultural and social environment. Cultural adjustment or acclimatization, on the other hand, is also an idiosyncratic feature of Diaspora literature which is very challenging. It involves the process of realization; an individual has to learn and experience a new mixed bag of cultural patterns and behaviors to live at ease in a place that is new and unfamiliar to them. The life of the second generation of Ganguli family personified by Ashima and Ashoke offers an untainted Diasporic attribute which states that culture shock is a customary part of adjusting to a new culture and virtually every person who lives overseas experiences this. All that is important for a person is to develop a support system and hook up with others that may help him achieve the ability to function in the new culture.

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