

STRAIN OF DISPLACEMENT AND VOICE OF EXPATRIATION IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S THE NAMESAKE

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Abstract - In this paper, an attempt is made to examine the strain of displacement and voices of the expatriation in Jhumpa Lahiri's The Namesake. It is through experiences of dislocations, translocation, and re-locations that diasporic or migrant writers learn to live with multiple, often contradictory, notions of the self and community. It is an attempt to fill the gaps in the trajectory of these innumerable diaspora journeys, whereby the emphasis would be to read diaspora in the light of globalization, transnationalism and notions of hybridity, and arrive at a point where diaspora would become synonymous with a state of revival and replenishment abounding in newer possibilities of change and empowerment. In The Namesake, Lahiri reflects the second or third generation immigrant life in the light of two separate cultures and their failure to cope with the host land. In most of the stories, the cross-cultural tie exposes the conflict inherent to a hybrid identity resulted from the negotiation between different cultures.

Keywords: Culture, Expatriation, Diaspora, Displacement, Hybridity, Identity

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As ethnic Indian women writer of the Diaspora, Jhumpa Lahiri celebrates myriad issues in her narratives. She is concerned with human relationships, material and familial, and how the various stresses of the diaspora existence impact her. She uses fiction to weave narratives that are richly textured with the nuances of dichotomies created between tradition and modernism, or resistance and acceptance in a diaspora situation. Being Indian, woman, and American diaspora, certain areas of thought overlap, which become evident in Lahiri's literary oeuvre.

Lahiri's *The Namesake* is the story of an Indian immigrant couple Ashoke and Ashima that demonstrates how much of a struggle of immigration can be and the clash of Indian and American culture. The novel follows two storylines. The first is that after spending the first two decades in Calcutta, Ashima and her tough transition to life in America. Ashima has a rough time adapting to America's more relaxed society after living in India's strict traditions. The second storyline follows the birth and first thirty-three years in the life of Ashima's son Gogol who is the second-generation immigrant who has difficulty in finding his own identity in the two worlds in which he lives. Thus, these two storylines represent the clash of cultures. It is the namesake of the title which represents Gogol, Indian by parentage, American by birth and living, and Russian by the name of Russian author's name - Nikolai Gogol. All these conflicting cultures lead him to hate, frustration, distress and tension.

In 2000, the story that began in 1960 comes full circle. An entire lifetime of immigrant life in America raising a family, making friends, taking up a job comes to a close with the death of Ashoke, divorce of Gogol, upcoming marriage of Sonia, and Ashima's move back to India. Be it the first or the second generation. *The Namesake* is a faithful record of the struggle, memories, losses and gains of the diaspora and how they come to terms with the negotiation between the two homelands, India and America.

In *The Namesake*, Lahiri presents the dilemma of expatriate Indians who have to face identity crisis, feeling of alienation on an alien land, sense of rootlessness, and displacement. She brilliantly shows how Indian immigrants keep on struggling with the universal issue of identity. Gogol's discomfort with his name represents the bewildering world of American immigrants who are born in one country but spend their life either gracefully immersed or hopelessly drowning in the culture of other people.

Lahiri also presents before us "what is acquired and lost by immigrants and their children in pursuit of American Dream" (9). She depicts the crisis in relationship with special emphasis on conflict of children and parents, husband and wife due to immigration on the foreign land. *The Namesake* concerns itself with the exploration of various dimensions of the pull between cultures, and various stages of acculturation of the first and second generations of a diaspora family, The Gangulis. The story of *The Namesake* centres on a diasporic Bengali family - Ashoke Ganguli and Ashima Ganguli and their two children Gogol and Sonia. It was Ashoke's choice to come to America to pursue his studies on Ph.D. in fabric optics. Though Ashoke and Ashima immigrated to America with their own choice even then they always remain attached to their Bengal Cultural heritage.

Various immigrant writers have shown that women who cross the frontiers adapt more easily to the comparative freedom of the new environment, almost welcoming the lifting of taboos that govern the silent gender of the Indian population. But in this novel, *The Namesake*, Lahiri has shown Ashima such a character who though adapts the host country's culture for her husband and children's sake, but during the whole novel we see her as a character, who is struggling for her identity and also feels uncomfortable and alienated on this alien land. In spite of the finality of their dislocation, there is a perpetual turning of one's gaze towards the lost homeland. Thus, the notion of Asian American Culture based on putting down roots on American soil becomes deeply problematized. Through Ashima, narrow-thinking of Ashima's parents about foreign-land is also shown. As her parents instruct her, at her departure for foreign land, "not to eat beef or wear shirts or cut off her hair or forget the family the moment she landed in Boston" (37).

Major dilemmas of Ashima are due to her children. During her first pregnancy when Ashima was in hospital, she felt lonely and sad after thinking about her child, "It is strange that her child will be born in a place most people enter either to suffer or to die, so there is nothing to comfort her" (4). After the birth of her child she further express her suffering, "she is terrified to raise a child in a country where she is related to no one, where she knows so little, where life seems so tentative and spare" (6). Ashima further comments on the artificiality and immorality of America, "without a single grandparent or parent or uncle or aunt at her side, the baby's birth like everything in America, feels somehow haphazard, only half true" (25). Due to absence of any grandparent, she pities for her son, "She has never known of a person entering the world so alone, so deprived" (25). Ashima expresses her desire to return to India as, "I'm saying hurry up and finish your degree. I don't want to raise Gogol alone in this country. It's not right. I want to go back" (33).

Like immigrants of other communities Ashima and Ashoke, too, make their circle of Bengali friends or relatives. After Gogol's birth three Bengali friends come to greet them. These are - Maya and Dilip Nandi, a young married couple, Dr. Gupta mathematics Postdoctoral from Dehradun. These Bengal friends also play the role of substitutes for the relatives, who really ought to be surrounding to perform various ceremonies. Like during "Sonia and Gogol's annaprasan (rice ceremony) Dilip Nandi plays the part of Ashima's brother to hold the child and feed him/her rice" (38). These gatherings of Indians in the form of communities help up to a certain extent to solve their identity crisis and cultural conflicts because these gatherings always remind them of their customs, traditions, and culture of the homeland. In *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha shifts this conflict to a theoretical gain and transforms the diasporic scattering to a gathering, "Gathering of exiles and emigres and refugees, gathering on the edge of foreign cultures, gathering at the frontiers; gathering in the ghettos or cafes of city centres" (99).

In *The Namesake*, Ashoke and Ashima's respect for their tradition is also shown through their attachment to their Bengal relatives back home. A rare kind of affection is seen when they visit India. Main relationship we can see of Ashoke's with his grandfather and Ashima's with her grandmother. It was

Ashima's grandmother who was chosen to provide the name of the first child of the family. It was a misfortune that the letter in which the child's name was proposed lost in the way. So Ashoke and Ashima's on had to face identity crisis under Gogol's name throughout his life. First generation immigrations always want to attach their children to their homeland but since they have come on foreign land to provide better future to their children, they also want that their children should adopt better part of host culture. So, for making their children balanced combination of both the cultures Ashoke and Ashima celebrate Indian as well as Western festivals, for the sake of Gogol and Sonia, they have gone to the trouble of learning these western customs. They celebrate the birth of Christ, an event the children look forward to even more than the worship of Durga and Saraswati, with increasingly increasing fanfare. The view of balanced culture includes values of both past and present culture equally.

In *The Namesake*, Gogol too undergoes much identity crisis. His main crisis is due to his absurd and obscure name which is neither Bengali nor American, which aggravates his bewilderment and raises a question mark on his identity; his real self An ABCD (American Born Confused Desi) with a bicultural identity, Gogol is truly caught between two worlds. We can compare Gogol with Dimple in Tanuja Desai *Born Confused*, who is also labelled as ABCD due to her identity crisis. The dichotomy in the outlook of Americans and beliefs of his parents affect the balance and harmony of his life leading to endless self-questioning. Due to circumstances, his pet name becomes his good name, so he has to become victim of both cultures. The name Gogol honours the legendary Russian writer Nikolai Gogol, whose book almost saved Ashoke's life years ago in an unfortunate accident. When Gogol hears from his father about his accident, it is too late. He had already hated his name too much for it to be of any significance to him. He now has the additional burden of hating himself for hating his name.

In the dominant culture how Gogol feels alone, is shown after his marriage with Moushumi. Whenever he is with his wife in her western friends' company, he feels ignored by her and so feels strange and lonely on this foreign land, Lahiri remarks "Gogol has nothing to say to these people. Still Moushumi's devotion to these people puzzles him" (237). Lahiri further remarks: "He is particularly mute when he and Moushumi get together for dinners with groups of her French friends. From the beginning he feels useless as Moushumi makes all the decisions, does all the talking. For some reason, in Moushumi's company, he feels more apologetic than excited" (231). Once during his school trip to a graveyard, he becomes face to face with such truths that once again compel to treat himself other on this foreign land. During this trip the teacher asks all the students to rub grave stone surfaces to find names of those dead persons whose names are similar to their own names. In *The Namesake*, Lahiri remarks about Gogol, "Gogol is old enough to know that there is no Ganguli here. He is old enough to know that he himself will be burned, not buried, that his body will occupy no plot of earth, that no stone in this country will bear his name beyond life" (69).

Gogol is shown by Lahiri struggling between two cultures. He tries to resolve the contradiction of his life by rejecting the traditional Indian values and adopting the cultures of American society. His rejection of his parents' world, however, is anything but complete. This rupture is in fact a way of forgetting, repressing the past that is to say, repeating it and not surpassing it. His refusal to recognize his relations and continuity with the past and the gaps and fissures of his present condition make him a stranger to himself. Gogol's rejection of past is shown by Lahiri at various turns in the novel. As during his college life, he avoids to make friends from his Homeland. He has no ABCD friends at college. When Gogol was spending his vacations with Maxine and her family, he compared his vacations spent at Calcutta with his family, and treats vacations at Calcutta as overall boring, he feels no nostalgia for the vacations, he has spent with his family, and he realizes now that they were never really true vacations at all. Instead they were over-whelming, disorienting expeditions, either going to Calcutta or sightseeing in places they didn't belong to and intended never to see again. Gogol makes difference of his parents from Maxine's in various respects like foods, dresses, behaviour. At the same time, he also always treats his parent's inferior to the western people in all respects. Gogol himself likes only western music and western singers like John, Paul, George, and Ringo. So, he gives no value to a present of a cassette of classical Indian music by his father which is still sealed in its wrapper. He also has amorous relations with various American girls

and in Maxine's house he changed himself according to Maxine and her family. He learns to love the food she and her parents eat, he learns not to put wooden spoons in the dishwasher, and he learns to wake earlier than he is used to.

In *The Namesake*, Lahiri focuses on the ideas of isolation and nostalgia of first generation immigrants through the character of Ashima, while Gogol's experiences are based upon her own experiences. The disaster of Gogol's marriage proves this point amply, and it is seen that despite their best intentions, first generation parents are not always right in what they desire for their children. The first generation often fails to connect with the lifestyle the second generation must follow outside their homes, or with their need to conform to mainstream American culture. Gogol and Moushumi's marriage are one instance of children capitulating to parental pressures, but this reason is not enough to make the marriage sustain. Moushumi in any case relents to her parents out of her frustrations at a directionless life and is fully aware that her wedding is a sort of capitulation and defeat. The marriage of Gogol and Moushumi and its outcome maps out the rejection of Indian cultural moorings by the second-generation diaspora and its movement towards freedom of American culture, even though this transition is a hardly joyous or guilt free. *The Namesake* ends in the year 2000 with an account of Ashima's plans to move to India alone after Ashoke's death. Lahiri brings out the contrast between what Ashima felt and thought as a newly arrived immigrant and how she changed as she got used to the American way of life down the years.

Towards the end of the novel, *The Namesake*, we see a sea change in the novel. Identity crisis and cultural conflicts of various characters seem to dissolve. In the starting of the novel Gogol had rejected his past but towards the end of the novel he understands the value of past tradition in his and his parents' life. Now he feels guilty and regrets at his neglect of his cultural heritage in the past time. Identity is thus emphasized through the observance of certain traditions, which are central to the life and identity of Indian immigrants in western countries. These are frequently reinforced through the maintenance of contacts with the homeland. Gogol also realizes how painful it is for his parents to remain separate from their homelands. He wonders how his parents had done it, leaving their respective families behind, seeing them so seldom, dwelling unconnected, in a perpetual state of expectation, of logging. Gogol knows now that his parents had lived their lives in America in spite of what was missing, with a stamina he fears he does not possess himself. Gogol now realizes that in past his immersion in Maxine's family was a betrayal of his own. His refusal to recognize his relations and continuity with the past makes him a stranger to himself. It is only when he reclaims and owns his past against that his true self emerges and integrates him with society.

The Namesake is an important literary and socio-cultural document which dramatizes the problems of assimilation faced by well educated, middle class immigrants and their children. This novel brings into focus some of the basic cultural, ethical and ethnic issues involved with migration, social construction of identity, and adoption of mainstream American values and lifestyle. The novel deals with the implications of socio-cultural dislocation for two generations of an ethnic Bengali - Hindu family in America. It begins with the process of adaptation of Ashima and Ashoke Ganguly, the newly migrated, newlywed Bengali couple who struggle to retain their ethnic identity after moving to America in the sixties. All through their lives they deal with the feelings of nostalgia and loneliness and yet never regret their decision to live so far from home even though they cherish memories of their motherland. Rather they try to impart the value-system of the culture of the motherland to their children who are unwilling to live that life. The children Gogol and Sonia eagerly embrace America in totality be it the food, social life or culture.

The complex and often contradictory identities of the various characters in *The Namesake* and the problems created by their emotional or psychological crises are what the novel is all about. There is no ethnic, racial or religious conflict preoccupying the characters who instead are caught up in the contradictions arising from expectations of parents, and traditional role models set before them on one hand, and different value systems, opportunities and personal freedom made available to them on the other. The second generation no longer faces dilemmas of socio-economic struggle that beset first generation diaspora. Prosperity, education, career choices, and socio-cultural assimilation ensure that the second generation no longer feels the contrastive pulls of a still valued but slowly fading identity as

intensely as their parents. Thus, the struggle is a far more personal one of coming to terms with his past and making peace with it, thus paving the way for his future. This acceptance leads to the understanding of why his parents never really broke away from their homeland and an ultimate broadening of his cultural horizon to include his Indian heritage. Lahiri is better at portraying diaspora identities and human relationships; she acutely brings out the inequalities present in the society.

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