

Diasporic Consciousness in Jhumpa Lahiri's 'The Namesake'

Abstract

This paper sets out to look into the dilemma of name and sense of identity and belongingness of the characters as immigrants in the *Namesake*, the novel written by Jhumpa Lahiri. Jhumpa Lahiri is the child of Indian Immigrants and she migrates from England (where she was born) to America. In this way she is both a migrant and diaspora writer. She writes on the Indian diaspora and narrates stories that reveal the inconsistency of the concept of identity and cultural difference in the space of diaspora in her works. The *Namesake* discusses the term diaspora and its role in the present era, the major issues of cultural dislocation, multiculturalism, struggle for identity and belongingness. A diaspora is a large group of people with a similar heritage or homeland who have since moved out to places all over the world. Diaspora has its roots in the Greek word *Diaspeirein*— “to scatter about, disperse”. Diaspora is located between majority and minority nation and non-nation, citizen and foreigner, original and hybrid.

Keywords: Diasporic Consciousness, The Namesake, Higher Education.

Introduction

The Indian Diaspora is a general term to describe the people who migrated from India. Migration has taken place due to historical, political and economic reasons including higher education, better prospects and marriage. However, the migrated Indian community has showed greater sense of adjustment, adaptability, mobility and accessibility. During ancient times a large number of Indians migrated to other parts of Asia. During British period to spread Buddhism to trade a major lot of Indians migrated due to misery, deprivation and sorrow to the U.K. Africa and U.S.A. Migration was also in wave in the nineteenth century in order to flourish to the developed economies like the U.K., U.S.A., Australia etc. It was a major wave as it gave rise to immigration either to study or settle and it goes as till present date. The situation today is that the Indian Diasporas are a well known success stories in the U.K., U.S.A., and Australia. In *The Namesake*, Gogol's parents Ashoke and Ashima belong to this wave of immigration to the United States where as Gogol is a product of the contemporary success story of the Indian Diaspora in the United States coming across two cultures, the first impression for a migrant is that of homelessness. As the strong Indian root does not allow him to mix and acculturate at once. Therefore, the Diaspora Indian is like the banyan tree following the traditional Indian way of spreading strong roots of affection. He spreads out his root in several soils as that of the motherland the one where he migrates. He constantly tries to nourish from one when the rest dry up. Far from being homeless he has several homes, and that is the only way he has increasingly come to feel at home in other land. The sense of homelessness every immigrant suffers is genuine and intense; but in recent times it has been seen that this concept has been minimized and made less intense through their social networking. Earlier immigrants used to suffer intense homelessness due to lack of communication means. They had letters either to write or to receive to connect with family in homeland.

Diaspora Indians on foreign land expressed themselves best through creation of literature. Earlier it was possible only when a non-resident Indian came to the homeland and tells about his life and struggle for settlement. Writers of Indian Diaspora wrote on loss of identity, feeling of alienation, sense of adjustments, adaptability and mobility and let the world be acquainted with the position of migrants on the foreign land. Literature of the Indian Diaspora constitutes a major study of the literature and other cultural texts of Indian Diaspora. Diaspora literature helps in understanding various cultures, breaking the barriers between different countries, globalizing and spreading universal peace. Diaspora writing raises questions regarding the definitions of 'home' and 'nation'. Literature,

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as a product of culture thus becomes the source by which we would come to know about the global scenario and multiculturalism. This literature works as a channel to strengthen the bonds between Indian in relation with the other countries at large. The Diaspora features of homelessness, dislocation and alienation are well represented through the character of Ashima in the *Namesake*..... In the *Namesake* Ashima leaves her home country (India) for America after her marriage with Ashoke. After settling there, she feels lonely in the deserted area. It is a hired apartment where she begins her life. The life styles of the owners of the apartment is different from her Indian way of life. She passes the whole day alone in the apartment as Ashoke, her husband is busy with his studies. In India her life was filled with a number of relatives but in the U.S.A. she finds no one to communicate.

In an unknown city of Massachusetts, Ashima's pang for abandoning the home country is emphasized through imagining the picture of the family in Calcutta. And the feeling of nostalgia seems to mitigate the pang and anguish of Ashima. When she is about to give birth to a child, her Indian ethnicity reminds her of the conventional social code and customs of the Indian Bengali culture...." women go home to their parents to give birth, away from husbands and in-laws and household cares¹.... (P.4)¹. Again the solitary atmosphere in the hospital makes her recollect the particular moment of the domestic life of Calcutta. The reference of the 'fractures of memory' can be mentioned in this context. Ashima's anxiety over giving birth and rearing up the child in the alien land is revealed. it was happening so far from home, unmonitored and unobserved by those she loved, had made it more miraculous still."² (JL-6). Regarding the immigrants' situation abroad, scholars like Royaprol quotes Gupta and Ferguson as follows : ".....Remembered places have often served as symbolic anchors of community for dispersed people. This has long been true of immigrants, who use memory of place to construct imaginatively their new lived world."

Ashoke is psychologically prepared to acculturate himself with the mainstream Americanism. His unwillingness to come back to India becomes clear through his taking a job in an American university and buying a home there. But he can't forget his past life. It is an inevitable phenomenon for the immigrants. Victor J. Ramraj has rightly observed.

"Yet though diasporans may not want actually to return home, wherever the dispersal has left them, they retain a subconscious attachment to traditions, customs, values, religious and language of the ancestral home." (B.K 215).

For this he holds on to his Indian sect very consciously in his long thirty two years life in America. He is always interested in sending his son, Gogol, to learn Bengali language. For his respect for ancestral tradition he, very enthusiastically, visits Durga Puja and other religious ceremonies with his children. Even, he is habituated to taking Indian foods.

Ashoke's diasporic tension isn't explicit. Sometimes he feels an urge to go back to India when Ashima constantly pressurizes him to do so. But he can't promise to do it, as he always remembers

Ghosh, the train passenger, he met during his journey to his grandfather's home. In the context of coming back from London, Mr. Ghosh confessed to Ashoke, "it is my greatest regret coming back" merely hours before his death in the train accident. He is afraid of the social injustice in India. So, he takes his journey to America as his final movement which makes things easier for him in acculturating himself with American society with the anguish of a diasporan.

As for Ashima, Ashoke's wife's diasporic problems are concerned, she has a great pressure to cope with the American life. Her fascination about America disappears with the birth of her first child, Gogol. To her life in Cambridge during her pregnancy is not normal at all and all the worst thing to her is the motherhood in a foreign land and 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 to tentative and spare.' The sense of alienation is an ever formulating phenomenon for a diasporan. She suffers from it from the very beginning of her life in America and it, particularly, becomes apparent during her first child's birth, who is born:

Without a single grand parent or uncle or aunt at her side, the baby's birth, like most everything else in America, feels somehow haphazard, on half true. As she stokes, suckles and studies her son, she can't help but pity him. She has never known of a person entering the world so alone, so deprive.³ (JL25) Her transformation from Indian housewife to an American mother starts with the growing up of Gogol, her first child. She would be recognized as a wife, a mother, and above all, as an American. In order to achieve these identities, she has to go through great personal, psychological, and habitual changes. To bring changes is not always easy, they create tension. Ashima also embraces this during her long life in America.

Diaspora focusses on "recognizing the impossibility of recreating or returning to the past and futility of the excessive obsession with the origins." (Colonial 125) Ashima, in *The Namesake*, suffers severely for her inability to recreate India. So, she expresses her great reluctance about her life in America and forces Ashoke again and again to go back to India. She tells Ashoke after Gogol's birth, "I'm saying I don't want to raise Gogol alone in the country. It's not right. I want to go back."⁴ (JL-33). But, gradually, she realizes the reality about her life in America. This realization of impossibility of returning to India fills her with the tension of a diaspora. She discovers ambivalent thoughts in concerning her past and present life. So, she reshuffles herself in terms of her daily activities. She knows how to go the market alone for buying everything necessary and she "begins to pride herself on doing it alone."⁵ JL-34.

She maintains a routine for even days of the week for taking care of Gogol, cooking for them, taking Gogol out, or waiting for Ashoke at Harvard Yard with homemade samosas a fresh thermos of tea. She, inevitably, becomes busy with her usual American life. But the pangs of diaspora haunts her when she revisits her past which eventually creates a deep crisis in her.

Ashima as a diasporan can be characterized by her "continual movement between

home and abroad." The movement leads her to the creation and recreation of the past continuously. For this, shedumps the letter onto her bed and goes through them, devoting on entire day to her parent's words, allowing herself a good cry. She revisits, their affection and concern, conveyed weekly, faithfully, across continent all the bits of news that had nothing to do with her life in Cambridge but which had sustained her in those days nevertheless.⁶ JL160 She neither gives up her past life, nor embraces the present one. She hovers between these two words like the letter, sent by her grandmother with her son which was lost.

In spite of their undeniable attachment to their homeland, the diasporans feel a "yearning for a sense of belonging to the current place of abode." (BK216) that enhances their attachment to it. Moreover, Victor J. Ramraj while commenting on the themes of Pillai's story, brings the fact out.

The diasporic Indian community should be prepared to modify and adopt their traditions and customs according to modern western thoughts and practices. BK219

Both Ashoke and Ashima are not indifferent to Ramraj's observation. For this, both Ashoke and Ashima never interfere in Gogol's personal life including his subject choice for honours course, his relation with Ruthe and Maxine, his living together with Maxine at home and so on. They welcome the newness of their son's Americanized attitude, but it is an imposed welcome which doesn't stem from a clear permissible heart. This struggle between yes and no creates diasporic tension in them. It is more severe in Ashima. She is completely different from her husband and children. Lahiri, commenting on Ashima's inability to adopt herself with American life, says,

At forty-eight she has come to experience the solitude that her husband and son and daughter already know, and which they claim not to mind. "It's not such a big deal" to her children. "Everyone should live on their own at some point." But Ashima feels too old to learn such a skill.⁷ (JL-160).

Gogol's life starts with the problem of identity as far as naming is concerned. Naming, according to the Indian rituals, is done by the elders. Ashima's grandmother, the eldest in the family, is authorized to name the first son of Ashima, "mailed the letter herself, walking with her cane to the post office, her first trip out of the house in a decade".⁸ (JL25) But they have never received the letter. As a baby cannot be released from the hospital "without a birth certificate"⁹ (JL27). They after the tradition by naming their son with a "backup"¹⁰ (JL28) name, Ashoke takes help from the book that rescued him from the train accident, he had during his early life in India. At that time he was reading Nikolai Gogol's short story, "The Overcoat". The rescue team abandoned their hope to find any living man in Ashoke's compartment, and very dramatically, and very dramatically, Ashoke was discovered because of the movement of the pages of Gogol's book, this way Gogol's book becomes a symbolic savior for him that bound him for a lifelong gratitude towards the Russian writer. So he gets, "The perfect pet name".¹¹ (JL28) for his son and that is Gogol. Ashima also consents for the name being aware that, "the name stands not only for her

son's but her husband"¹² (JL-28). But they are not happy at all with the name and it becomes evident when Ashima soothes herself by telling, "it's only a pet name, not to be taken seriously, simply something to put on the certificate for now to release them from the hospital." In this way Gogol Ganguly is registered in the hospital's files¹³ (JL29).

For Gogol, hybridized name is always a matter of tension, a catalyst in discovering his own acculturated identity, in shuffling and reshuffling his views concerning his dual identities in America. He has resemblance with Edward Said (1935-2001), who, though an Arab, was named after the Prince of Wales. Edward said comments in his essay, "Between Worlds of Reflections on Exile".

Besides with an unexceptionally Arab family name like said connected to an improbably British first name (my mother very much admired the prince of Wales in 1935, the year of my birth). I was uncomfortably anomalous student all through my early years : A Palestinian going to School in Egypt, with an English name, an American passport and no certain identify at all.(557).

Gogol obviously doesn't have the intensity of Said's affliction concerning identity crisis in acculturating himself with the American Society, in befriending American girls, and in doing everyday activities, he is severely formented for his name.

Gogol always accepts American life better than the Indian one. His relationship with Ruth can be characterized as the outburst of his long cherished desire of making friendship with an American girl. He changes himself thoroughly to cope with Maxine's American life. Even, he tries to shake off his parents' ambiguous practices to make his relationship with maxine more authentic. Lahiri says,

He didnot want to attend his father's alma matter, and live in an apartment in central square as his parents once had and revisits the streets about which his parents speak notalgically. He did not want to go home on the weekends, to go with them to Pujas and Bengali parties, to remain unquestionably in their world.¹⁴ (JL126)

It is also that he has not got a smooth American at Rateliff's Housel with Maxine. He, being an Indian, (suffers from the sense of inferiority in Maxine's family which encourages him to be more Americanised. Then a tension is created that results from the co-existence of the ambivalent cultures in him, which he has got from his own family and American society. Sometimes this tension leads to re-discover himself. Gogol's relation with maxine beaks as a result of his realization that there is a gulf of difference between them which ensures the impossibility of their connection. His father's death enhances this realization. He is a changed man now because, "he knows now the guilt that his parents carried inside, at being able to do nothing when their parents had died in India"¹⁵ (JL 170). He is now repentant for his detachment to his parents' sentiments. His life gets a new direction with the death of his father, his (father's) cremation, the obituary in the newspaper, the calls from different states with the condoling messages, the mourning period and the feast on the breaking day of the mourning period. All these things have given a new

understanding about himself and a deep psychological attachment with his family. Now, his mode of expression regarding his newly realized attachment with his family is noticeable.

Even the decision for getting married with Maushomi Majoomdar, an Indian like him, is really the inevitable reshuffling of his thoughts practiced by him in his youth. Now, he tries to find out the similarities shared by both of them. Lahiri says, "in a way, he realizes, it's true they share the same colouring, the straight, thick eyebrows, the long, slender bodies, the high cheekbones and dark hair"¹⁶ (JL203). This realization of Gogol helps us in determining his changed mind.

At the end of the novel, both Ashima and Gogol, the two leading characters, are able to translate their scattered thoughts concerning their ultimate future course. Ashima divides "six months of her life in India, six months in the states"¹⁷ (JL275). This is which Lahiri justly says, "true to the meaning to her name, she will be without borders, without a home of her own, a resident everywhere and nowhere"¹⁸ (JL276). But this resolution, concerning her life, is not necessarily a final solution. She has more to bear. Ashima's diasporic tension of dual existence becomes evident as Lahiri notices :

For thirty-three years she missed her life in India Now she will miss her job at the library with who she has worked. She will miss throwing parties. She will miss living with her daughter, the surprising companionship they have formed, going into Cambridge together to see old movies..... she will miss the country in which she had grown to know and love her husband... It is here, in this house and in this

town, that he will continue to dwell in her mind.¹⁹ (JL279).

Lahiri's *The Namesake* is a masterpiece concerning Indian diaspora. Her Ashima doesn't suffer from severe diasporic tension. But Ashima and Gogol are prominent figures with diasporic dilemmas. This is an everlasting problem for the Indian immigrants and it is quite difficult for them to get rid of this. Lahiri has not tried to synthesize her characters. Ashima's final decision about her life is transitory. Her diasporic tension is clear. On other hand, Gogol's life is like that of millions of Indian immigrants who constantly suffer from the division of emotion, personality, religion, culture, language, and above all, relationship.

References

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19. Ibid, p. 279.