

Existentialism and Cultural Alienation in The Namesake

Amrit Mishra

PHD Research Scholar

Department of English Literature

English and Foreign Language University

Hyderabad

Abstract

My paper deals with the nature of existential anxiety that a diasporic individual faces. The Namesake by Jhumpa Lahiri renders itself perfectly to such a reading as there is a sense of estrangement throughout generations. Success in the novel appears to be a fleeting project at the level of both the individual and the family. The pressing sense of being an outsider slowly mixes with the characters being partly accepted only to become ABCD's (American Born Confused Desis) in the second generation. The in between nature of diasporic existence is clearly depicted in the novel. Identities are marred and suffused. There is a rigorous effort to mediate between the cultures through music, food and other choices. However, a cautious reading suggests that there is a tussle between modification of the Indian (in this case Bengali) way of life to fit to the American way with little success.

Keywords: existential anxiety, migration, individuality, culture, alienation

Existentialism is a set of philosophical outlooks developed in 20th century France. Though the philosophy has historical roots in the Danish theologian philosopher Kierkegaard, the thinking of Martin Heidegger and Jean Paul Sartre is what brought existentialist philosophy to a limelight. Authenticity, a yearning to realise one's true being, freedom of choice and an anxiety about a contingent future culminating in death are some of the key concerns that have been raised by most of the philosophers associated with this movement.

At the root of the word diaspora are two Greek words 'dia' which translates to across and 'speirein' which means to scatter. When we add people to this scheme of things, the very idea of diasporic migration takes an involuntary nature. The self is rarely the agency for an act like dispersion. At the very outset, it would be interesting to list out a few motivations that Indians have which makes them pursue a diasporic life. Better living conditions in the host country, smoother career growth and advancement, a sense of achievement in the very idea of being a non resident indian. At deeper subjective levels, however, this is not the way individual desires operate. The Namesake by Jhumpa Lahiri is a bold experiment to show a mixed picture of diaspora lives which ultimately brings out the alienated individuals in a foreign land who undergo an existential angst- a lingering sense of a loss of meaning and purpose in life.

We meet Ashima, the pregnant wife of Ashoke Ganguly, a doctoral candidate at MIT in the very first pages of the novel. The story of her arrival in the USA is an exemplar of unpremeditated migration to a foreign land. She puts all her faith in Ashoke, and in a state of semi-anxiety, lets herself be carried on a plane to a cold country. She possess minimal education, gives up her college education in India and takes up the role of a wife in a foreign land. She feels a terrible homesickness in the initial years of her stay and is in perpetual fear of giving birth to her first child in a foreign land- 'counting indian time on her fingers'. She longs for her people and the homely comforts. At a point she even feels that she would not be able to cope up with all of this together, would not be able to bring up a family in a foreign land. She protests, but mildly, like all other maneuverings of time- she struggles into the american way of life, a life where her favourite snack of puffed rice lacks mustard oil- even food is incomplete.

The sense of anxiety in a diasporic individual is a result of feeling out of place. The question of belongingness is always a question of a double identity. The persistent enquiries about their origins, about meanings of names in 'Indian' are some of the irritants a diasporic individual inevitably must grow with and through. It is also interesting to note that the nature of institutional paraphernalia changes in a foreign country. When we put these observations in perspective with respect to the text, some instances worth noticing are the naming of Ashima's newborn child. American law does not allow newborns to be checked out of hospitals unnamed. The message that Laheri is sending across to her readers is that, a marker of fate, a marker of identity is a state demand, a burden right after birth. The fussy and unplanned naming of the child is a reminder of a loss of control. It is curious to note that one of the core push factors behind Ashoke's leaving India, the train accident and the saviour page torn out of a Gogol book becomes the name of his new born child. The very nature of survival in a foreign land is instinctive. At one point the author very outspokenly shares one of the plights of diasporic existence comparing life in a foreign land to a continued pregnancy- an uncomfortable wait for the inevitable unknown. Migrant life in a relatively developed country is a double edged sword. While it allows Gogol freedom to keep his name even during his Kindergarten years and lets him change it to Nikhil upon his graduation- peer pressure in absence of a closer contact with his family keeps the real reason for his name at bay for long. Absolute freedom can also be counter productive. It can create alienation within the family itself- a distance breeding in the garb of individuality.

It is curious how religious and cultural identities get mixed in a foreign land. Gogol and Sonia wait for Christmas eagerly. There exposure to the beliefs and practices of their own religion is no more than a namesake ritual. The bengalis in the novel can't blow a conch. Judy and Allan who have Christian sounding names (or are taken within the overwhelming fold of the dominant religion) turn out to be Buddhists. Ashima who had got her idea of America from hollywood movies is taken by surprise when she is expected to make do with a small house in a suburb all by herself. The notion of space is of immense value to come to terms with the nature of migratory experience from India to the USA. Physical space is in abundance in a sparsely populated country like the USA. The result of the spatial freedom experienced soon turns itself

into alienation. A scene that strongly demonstrates this is the labour scene of Aseema during her first pregnancy. She is impressed by the hospital space and facilities but at the same time, she is conscious that she might be the only Indian in the hospital. This sense of a lack of belongingness prevents her from realising her free self and she feels limited to being a foreigner outside home and a wife and a mother at home-unable to be satisfied with her existence. Gogol and Sonya both born and brought up in USA feel alienated when they come to Calcutta. The perception they have of their own family relatives is that of an unbridgeable distance. On the other hand, the family members treat them as an object of queer attention and distanced glorification. There is a vast gap between the values people inculcate and enshrine in India and the USA. Therefore, prejudgements and subjective flawed views of the other are very possible on both sides. For the middle class Indians, it is awe inspiring to see carpeted bathrooms. While on the other hand, a migrant may have been forced to stay in a relatively less facilitated American suburb and in complete isolation even from their American counterparts. A similar scenario emerges when

Ashoke takes up a suburban job and the family buys second hand clothes from the yard sale. Whether this is the impact of cultural difference or a relative poverty in the USA is a question that is not clearly lighted up in the text. The fact however, which is quite clear is that of an unease in the lives that Ashoke Ganguly and his family live. There is a clear contradiction between the reality and the imagination in the life of a diasporic individual. The famous novelist Albert Camus describes the absurd emerging out of the gap between expectation and reality. Gogol who initially finds himself a part of the American society fails at understanding his American girlfriend who is not to be blamed for persuading Gogol to seek self satisfaction by choosing her over an attachment to his family. By American standards Gogol was old enough to fend and choose for himself. On the contrary, when Gogol chooses the values of his indian upbringing- his decision not to escape from the reality of the loss of his father drives Marine away. On the other hand his marriage to Maushmi who is otherwise a bengali and an indian ends up in an extramarital affair she indulges in with an old Russian boyfriend. Community identities don't seem to keep people intact in a foreign land. Perhaps, the author is suggesting that there is a need to reach out to deeper levels of humanity beyond labels of region and nationality.

The life that the immigrants live in the States is a persistent struggle to be accepted in the host country despite belonging in their private mental spaces to their homeland. The very idea of a home takes different shapes in the novel. Ashima is torn between her desire to return to India and to build a future for their children in the USA. Ashoke who had first seen the American dream in that fateful train runs away from India to leave that memory behind and to chase his success in the coveted job of a tenured professor in a foreign university. However, once all this is achieved, he does not seem to be at absolute piece with himself. He, like Ashima feels an emotional distance with his own son. Ultimately, before leaving for his self imposed exile, he confesses to his son, the real reason behind his name. The revelation regarding the train accident brings father and son close like never before- it is one of the glimpses of a meaning emerging out of a saga of distance and separation.

It is interesting to note the way death comes about in a place far away from one's homeland. The

suddenness of death is enhanced by the crushing distance between the departed and the migrant who loses them. Life in a foreign country comes at a cost that in itself can rip sensitive souls apart. This distance adds to the amount of shock that death brings with itself. A migrant generally bears the burden of having taken a self centered decision of leaving their homes and loved ones to seek a life of success and fulfillment abroad. The result that comes about is most times a sense of double estrangement- a failure to realise a stable self. Both Ashima and Ashoke lose their parents while away from their home. It is bitterly difficult to reconcile oneself with a loss which occurs in physical distance. The massive heart attack that Ashok himself undergoes leading to his death in a hospital in Cleveland away from his wife and family is a proof of the devastating distance that a life in a spread out individualistic lifestyle can create. Another message that the novel conveys is that life in an economically advanced country does not necessarily mean a fulfilled life. Larger challenges lie in coming to terms with the irreversible changes that migrant life creates in the individual. At the same time an upbringing shaped by Indian culture ingrains a contrary set of desires in the individual. For instance Gogol's desire for Maushumi to carry his name as a part of her identity is typical of Indian men. All his education and upbringing in a foreign country does not elevate him above such a desire. Ultimately, the bitter truth that one must realise is that life is a set of compromised choices and offers just an illusion of complete happiness. Perfect and lasting happiness is an ever moving project.

The life that Ashoke and Ashima try to settle into in the USA is a made up miniature bengal (by extension an India) of their own. America offers them a possibility of a simulated room full of Bengali culture but the bitter truth stays the same. All these immigrants have become stunted versions of their half formed Indian selves. The notion of a family in India is quite different from that in the USA. Immigrant families face conflicting ideas about children growing up from their home tradition and the impacting host culture. For instance it irks Ashima when Gogol refers to Ashok and herself as guys. It is an obvious point but still worth taking note of that diasporic experience is different from the experience of America born Indians for whom the primary contact culture is America. It is in their case that life gets even tougher because they have to make a double adjustment. Perhaps it is in this sense that veteran literary and cultural theorist Homi Bhabha talks of the notion of hybridity. They are exposed to Indian values in an American setting and at the same time they have to fit into an Indianness which is always an effort at self deception for them. It is between these torn identities that they must find a self. This fact is most apparent when Gogol- the same person gobbles 'American Omelets' on an airline-aware that he wont find such food for months. He has admiration for things Indian ; for instance, a single visit to the Taj Mahal inspires him to take up an architecture major. Yet he finds himself socially an outsider, unable to come to terms with the common Indian life. He spends most of his time packed up in the protection of his family home or posh hotels which scarcely have Indian guests- thus cut off from the real feel of India. American born Indian children like Gogol and Sonia have a tough time defining their concrete identity in terms of national and social belonging. Their sense of personal alienation often goes beyond legal identities like holding a passport. They are always expected to deliver to both sets of personal and cultural expectations coming from their parents and peers. This is precisely what has led to the creation of a psychological situation

among Indian Americans which prevents them from feeling at home in both cultures. This sense of dual cultural alienation among Indian migrants has made the critics refer to them as American Born Confused Desis’.

At the same time, the positive results of such cultural exposure are also worth considering seriously. Over the years, such migrants develop resilience to crises situations and evolve coping mechanisms which keeps them moving ahead in life. Nevertheless, identity crisis in a foreign land can lead to absolute estrangement, leading ultimately to an existential crisis at the core of the human personality.

The time in which the first generation Indian immigrants of the novel Ashoke and Ashima move to the USA is one of minimal telephonic and zero internet connectivity. This adds its own set of challenges for Ashok and Ashima and their parents who are rarely able to call or converse. While this problem has become extinct today, the technology which was developed for the welfare of the people has given rise to its own set of problems. Telephone and internet connectivity has made people drastically cut down upon personal meetings.

One of the drastic blows that an attempt at ultra modernity has given non western cultures is a pressing insistence on nuclear families. Raising up a nuclear family is considered a prudent choice. However, such modern day choices come at a cost. They erode the possibility of a cultural bridge between the elders and the younger generations of a culture. At the same time, it has made life for the elderly difficult. Loneliness at an advanced age in life can lead to situations as terrible as creating depression and suicidal tendencies in the elderly.

One of the characters that merits a cautious attention is the childhood self of Moushumi Chatterjee. She is a character who creates a shield around herself. Her shield is built of too many books, a nerdy appearance and a general negligence of people, occasionally spiced with pert remarks like “I hate American television.” Such suppressed characters let loose of themselves once they are in a nothing left to lose situation. This is quite evident when she mentions the several affairs she indulged in after an arranged marriage got foiled. A migration across cultures affects people positively in such cases. An Indian might be heard speaking Ashima’s much repeated sentence “Only in this country” with regard to the amount of freedom Moushumi exercise over her will and body. For a contrast we can refer to Ashima’s own situation in her parents home where she is treated as an object meant for giving away, capable of knitting and sewing and reduced to being a responsibility for her parents.

It is vital to note that the lives that migrants from bengal are living is one of an attempt to create an imaginary homeland in their host country but they find themselves discussing American politics- residing in a country where none of them has the right to vote. On the other hand they discuss the movies from bengal which they rarely get to see in their host country. Daily life in a foreign land is brutally distanced from that in the imagined homeland. The question which then comes to mind is whether the US truly provides the melting pot culture it projects?

One of the problems that has once again raised its ugly head in recent times is the issue of racism. At a point in the text the Ganguly family discovers their mailbox tampered with and

“GANGRENE” etched on it. Racial discrimination and intolerance are factors that are implicitly present in many host nations. The anxiety that erupts out of such a vital existential threat is psychologically debilitating. Many a times, both first generation migrants and America born Indians face discriminatory treatment at the hands of shopkeepers-that intended sneer, a rolled eye, all pointers enough to make the immigrant conscious of his outsider status. A rising jingoistic nationalism on both sides is one of the primary causes of such racial hatred ingrained in citizen’s minds. Politicians and civil society group on both sides should take proactive steps to ensure a dignified and even joyful life for immigrants. In a rapidly globalising world, xenophobia could act as a cataclysmic bomb and must be done away with.

America the land of self made men offers every individual complete choice. At the same time it won’t be erroneous to suggest that a life of plentiful choices has spoilt the american consciousness and destabilized their potential to stick to choices with conviction. Perfection is a fleeting mirage and being unsatiated the perennial state of life. The indians have always put a premium on a contented life- as the saying goes in India “Santosham Param Sukham” (Contentedness is peace). This is a lesson the Indian diaspora can keep at the back of their minds and spread to their American counterparts.

On the contrary we find immigrant Indian Americans (along with others) attempting to rush at the speed of time. Ashoke's life is marked by clocks even though he is an academician unlike the more physically demanding vocations like business management. What does this rage against time ultimately lead to? At this point one is reminded of a scene in Meera Nair’s film production of the novel where Ashoke and little Gogol reach the end of a shore on a beach holiday and Ashoke asks Gogol if he would remember this place, this time in his memory when he and his father came to a spot beyond which there was nowhere else to go. Perhaps Laheri is playing with a doubly loaded metaphor here. The dead end of flowing water could suggest the peak of human aspirations and desires beyond which all that stays is human contingency-an abyss. The american expedition that later became Ashoke and Aseema’s very life is symbolic of such an effort beyond the expectations of common men- a truly decisive move, an irreversible one at that. The other message that this imagery imparts is that of inevitable death which comes to all despite of their worldly sweating- an existential reality with its own shades in a foreign land.

Gogol’s decision to get his name changed is a significant part of the novel. It is emblematic of the impotence of the many apparently vital decisions one takes in life. At stake here is no less than a name an individual has grown with (and by his choice) until his graduation. He gets his official name changed to Nikhil in a desperate desire to rub out the humiliation and the insult the earlier name had caused him. Minutes after the name change, we find Nikhil (a new Gogol) struggling in the sun. The author suggests loud and clear that names are mere namesakes- destinies are premeditated in a culturally alienated individual’s doubly thrown condition. The first thrownness is clearly the burden of human freedom leading to all but anxiety. The cultural alienation in this case arising out of an odd russian name marred with a history of human miseries aggravates Gogol’s plight to such an extent that even after legally giving up the name, it takes him quite some time to publicly assume a newly gained identity- a self determined name. The very act of having one’s own name changed is an act of strong will as it calls for an inner

strength arising in Gogol's case out of sheer frustration and then a desperate resolve to undo the supposed wrong of his parents. It is only later that Gogol comes to cherish his old name Gogol, when he had already assumed another. This is a simple but telling example of how the events in life completely overpower any of our attempts to control them. Fate has its ultimate say in all final reconciliations. All action as clearly demonstrated in the novel is a 'being towards death'.

As the novel progresses towards its end we see Gogol's and Moushumi's relation coming to a painful end. This personal catastrophe is the most numbing of the novel in my opinion, simply because it evades belief in ideas about a possible love or even an actually arranged marriage. A common bengali identity fails to keep the couple together and Moushumi returns to her more real self in Paris with her more sustaining desire arising first out of a teenage lust. In a way human passions win devastatingly over man made institutions and expectations of marital fidelity. Moushumi's lifestyle and the choices that she makes are the most authentic and therefore allow her maximum existential freedom. Perhaps this is the reason Gogol finds himself slightly envying Moushumi for succeeding to become what he could not- a free American, a free individual.

Sonia's life with her newly wed fiance is the only one that appears relatively unblemished! She is yet to have the trials and tribulations of her adult life when the novel closes. As a child, she has also felt like Gogol- out of place in India, slightly accepted in the USA.

Ashima is perhaps the only character who realises her namesake in the novel. She has become completely independent, possesses an American passport, a social security card and yet she decides to make an authentic choice-to return back to India and to her desire to learn music. For Ashima America has been a mixed and tough experience, keeping her always on the edge, in the vitality of life. The state of being that Ashima enters towards the close of the novel is perhaps closest to the Indian notion of the state of abundance. This state does not arise out of material advancement but perhaps is rooted in the reconciliation of the self with the true meaning of life. Abundance is a state of mind where an individual accepts anonymity in a pursuit to do away with the various identities, the various selves that one acquires over a lifetime and to willfully move into a state of peace and bliss.

Gogol on the other hand reconciles himself to his name, the memories of his lost father and his anguished an unrealised life by reading his father's gift rejoicing in his handwriting-loving his name for the first time, closest to realising a meaning in a name he has been responding to.

Conclusion

The Namesake is a novel that is pleasing and disturbing at the same time. In a way, it also cuts across the illusions of a supposed success in a foreign land. It is vital for people today to understand that success is relative and contingent just like anything else in life. Material prosperity is just one side of a large act of life. Life in its limited essences (whatever is spared by existential surprises) is comprised of relations, people and authentic choices. There is rarely ever

a permanent solution to a problem, but their always is an emerging, a better one. Multicultural existence calls upon individuals to foster a culture of harmony and tolerance. A foray into the lives of the diaspora through this literary piece brings us in touch with core human values across boundaries and allows readers to introspect on the meaning and values of life.

Citations

Lahiri, Jhumpa, 2003, The Namesake, Boston New York, Mariner Books