

Overarching Presence of Past in the Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*

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Abstract

This paper aims to discuss the question of displacement in the life of Indian Migrant protagonist Ashoke, who successfully leads his life in the American suburbs. Jhumpa Lahiri has examined the personal narratives of her national and International exposures which has brilliantly brought into the literary front. She has exposed many biracial and bi-national identities in her works. The essay, then goes on to describe that Indian writing is in some sense also a part of exile literature. Displacement, whether forced or self imposed is in many ways a calamity. Yet, a peculiar but a potent point to note is that writers in their displaced existence generally tend to excel in their work, as if the changed atmosphere acts as a stimulant for them. The word exile has negative connotations, but we got to know about the self exile of the character in this novel.

Further, this paper elaborates the psychological conditions of Ashoke, who faces the repulsion from his living conditions in his own native place. He willingly chooses to migrate himself to U.S. to get rid of his fears. The flow of thoughts overpowers him on all the important events of his life and becomes like an emotional outburst of his personal feelings. Therefore the intersection between the concepts of homeland and hostland creates the ties among the human emotions and their practical life. The Question of survival always remains with him.

Key Words: Migration, Displacement, Space, Homeland, In-betweenness, Isolation

The Namesake is mainly a story of Ashoke, who is having all the desirable qualities for a migrant, such as he appreciates reading foreign literature since childhood and imagines to be at the place of their characters. In addition to all this sense of alienation occurred to him even when he is among his own people, as once he met with an unforgettable train accident in which he was almost dying but luckily saved. As a result of this life changing incident, he became an introvert character. In addition to all this sense of alienation occurred to him even when he is among his own people. To maintain his internal noise he starts remaining quiet, even with his own family members. It was not easy for him to forget the train accident, he faced at a very young age. Lack of protection overpowers his mind in this way, he felt exhausted by remembering his past again and again.

"He was raised without running water, nearly killed at twenty two. Again he tastes the dust on his tongue two. Again he tastes the dust on his tongue, sees the twisted train, the gaint over turned iron wheels. None of this was supposed to happen. But no, he had

survived it. He was born twice in India, and third time in America. Three lives by thirty."
 (Lahiri 21)

Since childhood Ashoke is sketched as a scholarly and very sincere character who always obeys his grandfather, who is the professor of English literature at the College, by following his teachings he develops very good hobby of collecting literary books and reading them. At such an early age he was inspired by the English and Russian author's, which is not a very usual thing of the other kids of his age. He was highly influenced by the Nikolai Gogol that he not only once read his books, but he just keeps reading them again and again and always keeps with him as a precious thing. "As a teenager he had gone through all of Dickens. He read newer authors as well, Graham Greene and Somerset Maugham, all purchased from his favorite stall on College Street with Pujo money." (Lahiri 12)

He had six siblings in the family they all use to enjoy by playing games but on the other hand Ashoke started obeying his grandfather his passion increased towards collecting and reading books. Further, he continues it by reading all the Russian authors at least twice. It was his grandfather's inspiration behind all this which turns into his valuable habit and also made him a scholar. Ashoke is not a timid character, but is the reserved one in the family. "Each day at tea time, as his brothers and sisters played Kabaddi and cricket outside, Ashoke would go to his grandfather's room, and for an hour his grandfather would read surprise on the bed, his ankles crossed and the book propped open on his chest, Ashoke curled at his side." (Lahiri 12)

This novel constantly focuses on the contrasting experiences of Ashoke, who is inclined towards western culture. In this way he receives both cultures parallel and also convince readers to understand both the cultures. This clearly distinguished from the early phase of diaspora, where it was observed with a greater sense of isolation, contrastingly protagonist willingly removes his own culture from his daily routine, so when grows up he doesn't have too much memory with Indianness in it.

Coincidentally, step by step he encounters with the western culture which creates its own space automatically. One day when he was travelling by a train, on the way he met a guy Mr. Ghosh, who resides in England but came to India to see his family. When he found Ashoke reading English literature, on this Mr. Ghosh suggests him to travel western countries to increase your knowledge by living the first hand experience of their culture. "You are still young. Free," Do yourself a favor. Before it's too late, without thinking too much about it first, pack a pillow and a blanket and see as much of the world as you can. You will not regret it. One day it will be too late" (Lahiri 16)

This is clearly distinguished from the early phase of Indian diaspora that there is a greater sense of isolation and removal of one's own culture, just because the protagonist wants to escape from his fearful memories. Mr. Ghosh who inspires Ashoke to visit western country. He says, "The sparkling empty streets, the polished black cars, the rows of gleaming white houses, he said, were like a dream. Trains departed and arrived according to schedule, Ghosh said no one spat on the sidewalks. It was in British Hospital that his son had been born" (Lahiri 20) Being a diasporic writer, Lahiri has tried to give a new dimension to the migrant character where they found the Space for the self growth, which successfully takes them to the highest level but somewhere it has been observed that it is the psychological level of individual which gives them

chance to remain strong in the adverse situation and resolve their mental conflicts in a challenging new culture.

Ashoke remains practical in his life as he got the guidelines from his grandfather about the value of books and who also suggested him that books will never let him down, so he follows him and remain very straight forward in life. In a very strange manner this author Nikolai Gogol becomes his important part of life, latter when he has to name his child he found no better option than this author's name. Out of emotional touch with this book he gave the name Gogol to his son. Though he has to face a lot of trouble due to this name and also it was very strange for his son and for others to accept the Russian name of an Indian Boy, residing in America.

It is the Multiculturalism, which is believed to be the way out to illustrate the Hybrid context of different migrated generations. According to John K. Hoppe, "Multiculturalism emphasizes the difference between racial heritages. This emphasis on the difference has, too often, led to the dehumanization of the difference. And dehumanization leads to discrimination. And discrimination can ultimately lead to genocide". (Hoppe)

The moment when he decides to move to America, he freed himself from all kinds of knots in which he use to feel bonded with. He simply wanted to fade away from his home country and on the other hand his parents had no idea about his planning on leaving his home and going to abroad. On hearing about his going to abroad, his mother refuse to have meal for several days, but he didn't react to anyone's emotions and moved to America. It is the strong determination and will power of the Ashoke that whenever he found himself emotionally week, he immediately hides his emotions and shows very mature behavior. He hardly shows his inner chaos.

In comparison to his wife, he is very good at balancing even his nostalgic phase. This character is very productive and positive who doesn't stick to old cultural beliefs and always ready to face the new cultural challenges in life. Ashoke is a perfect example of hybrid culture with the changed cultural and economic scenario. Migration denotes movement of living beings and human migration involves movement of people in space. Eisensdadt defines migration as —the physical transition of an individual or group from one society or another. This transition usually involves abandoning one social setting and entering another and different one. (Eisensdadt).

The novel further takes us to Boston, where he experiences the American culture along with some of his Bengali friends. Ashoke gets married to a Bengali young girl Ashima. At some point we see that he still somewhere wants to remain in touch with his own culture. Ashoke is a first generation immigrant, has represented the journey from India to America as symbolic of the rite of passage from the constricting space of patriarchal traditions to the realm of freedom of self-assertion. Migration of the characters varies from person to person such as Ashima is unable to adjust in the new environment and on the other hand. Ashoke feels that it is the safest place where he found the life more peaceful and comfortable in U.S. in comparison to India.

He has advocated assimilation into American culture relinquishing traditional Indian roles and values. On the other hand, second generation of this immigrant couple, has tended to highlight the difficulties that the cultural assimilation at both places in homeland and hostland. This couple found themselves trapped into western culture when they try to convince their children to adapt Indian customs .

They starts neglecting their own culture because if they follow the Indian tradition than they become the source of fun among their peer groups and if they don't follow than their parents

scolds them. This is their in-betweenness which makes them the individual of nowhere. In search of isolation they left their home and found their partner, with them they try to coexist in the adopted culture. “Growing up brown and “foreign” in a town where white was the predominant theme had its challenges. There was the persistent feeling of other, not American enough, not Indian enough, of constantly straddling fences, stretching identities.” (Wiltz)

The novel centers on the Indian immigrants and the traditions in which they shuttle between the two cultures, developing capabilities to settle in alien world. Lahiri also deals with the cultural gap between American-born Indian children and their traditional Bengali parents in this novel.

There is a journey from the past to present and then present to past when Ashoke’s son also faces the train accident and when he turns to his teenage his father tries to convey the past behind his unique name by gifting him the book by Russian Author Nikolai Gogol. At this stage Ashoke realizes that it is the right time to tell him about the history and mystery of moving abroad. After knowing the past Gogol felt as exhausted as he wants to go back in the past to look upon the things in depth. Latter on he found himself attached towards his own culture.

After knowing the reality of his past he starts respecting his parents, culture, country and the inspiration behind his name. Due to the generation gap the migrants and their children live in different spaces in the adopted culture but their experiences of feeling rootless and displaced can also be of parallel in nature. Though the children born to migrant people have more chances of better settlement in that country “their sense of identity borne from living in a diaspora community is influenced by the past migrant history of their parents or grandparents,” remarks (John McLeod 207).

Lahiri is an existential thinker who knows that man is thrown into the world where human destiny is unpredictable and born without having any choice of his color, caste, creed or nationality, but still up to some extent he has the freedom to choose his circumstances. Having a positive attitude towards life he discovers a western lifestyle and settled over there. Ashoke’s journey becomes an odyssey of the mind. The destination of such a journey is not a geographical location called India but a mental reality while residing in America. His journey of thoughts begins in Indian and ends in America by transferring this to next generation.

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