

A Study of Diasporic Sensibility in Jhumpa Lahiri's The Namesake

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Abstract

This paper is an effort 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. The fact that Jhumpa Lahiri is the child of Indian immigrants and that she also crosses borders when she migrates from England (where she was born) to America, makes her 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. Keywords: Diaspora writing, Immigrants, identity, Indian Diaspora, Cultural dislocation. Diaspora.

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 adjustments, adaptability, mobility and accessibility. During the ancient times a large number of Indians migrated to other parts of Asia to spread Buddhism and to trade. During the British period, 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 on till present date following the footsteps of the succeed lot.

Keywords: *Diaspora, Immigrants, identity, Cultural dislocation, and Political*

The Diaspora Indian is like the banyan tree following the traditional Indian way of spreading strong roots of affection. He spreads out his roots in several soils as that of the motherland and 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 suffer intense homelessness due to lack of communication means.

Diaspora Indians on foreign land expressed themselves best through creation of literature. Earlier it was possible only when a non-resident Indian come 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 a foreign land. Literature of the Indian Diaspora constitutes a major study of the literature and other cultural texts of the Indian Diaspora. It is also an important contribution to Diaspora theory in general. Looking at the Diaspora literature in a broader perspective it is seen that such literature helps in understanding various cultures, breaking the barriers between different countries, globalizing and spreading universal peace. Good fiction embellishes facts and adds interesting layers to hold readers' attention and makes people aware about the contemporary society. Diaspora writing raises questions regarding the definitions of 'home' and 'nation'. Literature, as a product of culture thus becomes the source by which we would come to know about the global scenario and multiculturalism. It is also important to question the nature of their relationship with the work of writers and literatures of the country of their origin and to examine the different strategies they adopt in order to negotiate the cultural space of the countries of their adoption.

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 style 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. When she becomes pregnant not a soul to give her suggestions.

The history of immigration is the history of alienation and its effects. It is but a reality that for every freedom (life in a new land) won, a tradition (that of home land) is lost. For every second generation assimilated, a first generation in one way or another spurned. For the gains of goods and services, a better life style, an identity gets lost, and uncertainty found. S. Naipaul first tried for Diaspora writing through his collection of short stories. It lays the foundation for subsequent narratives of the Diaspora. As a Diaspora writer, Rushdie transcends mere geographical and physical migration dealing with spiritual alienation and rootlessness.

The subject of Anita Desai, a remarkable novelist and proponent of a feminine sensibility, has been solitude and alienation. She usually has dealt with personal lives of people in general and women in particular. Bharati Mukherjee's childhood memories harkens her time and again. All the same it is necessary to realize the importance of cultural encounter, the bicultural pulls which finally help in the emergence of the new culture. Diaspora writing elaborates issues such as marginalization, cultural insularity; social disparity, racism, etc. as the migrants are in a dilemma whether they should remain with old values with least interaction with the majority, or break the barriers and get assimilated with the attracting new culture.

The Diaspora writers turn to their homeland in their writings for various reasons. Literature should remain the faithful representation of contemporary society. So, it is the moral duty of the Diaspora writers to remain faithful while mixing the facts with fiction in their writings. They would be considered, to some extent the flag bearers of the history of their time. Majority of the Diaspora writers write about their own experiences, the problems they face while settling on the new land. The Writers of Indian Diaspora, as William Safran observes: "Continue to relate personally or vicariously, to the homeland in one way or another, and their ethno-communal consciousness and solidarity are importantly defamed.

The title *The Namesake* reflects the struggle of Gogol Ganguli, son of Ashoke and Ashima, Indian immigrants to the U.S.A. to get identity in the culture where he is born and brought up with his unusual name. Names do have some meaning in India. A lot of practice is done when a child is named in India. An Indian child generally carries two names, a pet name and an official one. Pet names are for the family and neighbors and acquaintances. They carry or may not carry meaning. But official names are kept with a lot of care and practice. AshokeGanguli gives the name Gogol after the Russian author whose book or a page once had been served as a savior of his life. He named his son Gogol for three reasons. Ashoke and his wife are waiting for the official name to come from India as to follow Bengali tradition. They have not thought of any name/s up till the birth of the baby as they are becoming parents for the first time.

They are required to give one name in order to be written on the birth certificate before they release from the hospital. Indian system never demands such emergency as compared to the systematized American system. So Gogol name is selected. They might think of it as a pet name. At that time the parents were also not aware that it is going to be the official name in future and that Gogol himself will have problems with the name in future. ‘Gogol’ never fits as an Indian or American name. As a child Gogol is used to of his this name so much so that when his parents wished his name Nikhil to be his official name when he starts schooling that he is reluctant to accept the new name and the parents got letter from the school authority that he should be called Gogol.

About the controversy of name of Gogol, Lahiri says in an interview, “But I think that for the child of immigrant, the existence of two names kind of speaks so strongly for the very predicament of many children of immigrants. On the other hand, 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” (Book Browse, 2007 2004). He feels sandwiched between the country (India) of his parents and the country (U.S.A.) of his birth. His father has migrated to the U.S.A. to make a career at MIT and in due course he had settled there. He had always tried to follow the Indian traditions, customs in America and had found Indian, Bengali friends.

In the *Namesake*, the question of identity plays a vital role. Jhumpa Lahiri was born as Nalanjana Sudeshana. But as Jhumpa was found easier to pronounce, the teacher at her pre-school started addressing her Jhumpa. In the course of time it became her official name. Jhumpa Lahiri tries to focus on the issue of identity what she had faced in her childhood. The problem of Gogol’s name symbolizes the problem of his identity. He wants to be connected to the strange names in the graveyard when the students were taken to the graveyard for the project. He wants to relate himself with American locale but his name hinders his way to be recognized as an American.

The *Namesake*’ provides different models of life among people representing distinct cultures and worldviews. Lahiri emphasizes not only the immigrants who leave home to make a new home in the United States but also the endless process of coming and goings that create familial, cultural, linguistic and economic ties across national borders. Her characters live in

between, straddling two worlds, making their identity transnational. Cultural change is a major problem faced by the diasporic community especially by the first generation people. When they try to settle in a new place, they find several changes in the new society. It shocks them and they try to cling to their homeland culture by following it strictly.

The Namesake deals with the life of Ganguli family between the two different worlds: the Bengali and the American. They represent the world of Bengali immigrants who while maintaining the customs of their homeland struggle to assimilate into main stream American culture. Lahiri stresses the fact that for Diaspora people 'home' is a very flowing concept which changes its meaning along with the prevailing mindset of the person. Question of identity has remained a source of conflicts and has led to wars in history.

Through Namesake, Lahiri sends a crystal-clear message to people who are quite keen on dreaming of settling with strong aspirations for a better future on a foreign land without realizing that this displacement demands greater adaptability in terms of both climate and culture. The dilemma of name cannot be solved by the name on record. The identity of the individual, which is consistently affected by society, is something one has to discover through a process of reflections and negotiations. The question of identity never affects when one is born on his mother land. He is a son of a father who has a social status. He grows up among the same people and society. He never bothers about his identity even if he goes to other city. If the same child is born on a foreign land, the question of identity starts hammering.

He is like an alien on a new land. He is identified as an immigrant as he differs from the natives. The immediate sign of difference is the skin color. He struggles to get an identity as a second generation. Diaspora, is therefore, a scattering of the seed in the wind, the fruits of which are a new creation and a fight to survive. .Diaspora is all about the creation of new identities, spaces for growth, resolution of conflicts and a new culture. Every Diaspora movement holds a historical significance, as it carries within itself the core of the nation's history. Diaspora is a journey towards self-realization, self-recognition, self-knowledge and self-definition. There is an element of creativity present in the Diaspora writings and this creation stands as a compensation for the many losses suffered. The principle of Struggle to Acculturate in the Namesake simultaneity displays 'the core' human predicament in the countries of the West and the East. Indian Diaspora writings help in many ways and is a powerful network connecting the entire globe.

Conclusion:

Diaspora literature helps in the circulation of information and in solving many problems too. It helps to re-discover the commonality and inclusiveness of India. The Namesake works as a channel to strength the bonds between the different states of India and of India in relation with USA and the other countries at large. Indian philosophy describes that the world is a family. In this context multiculturalism should be considered as amalgamation of various cultures, achieving the great ideals of world peace, harmony, and universal fraternity. Gandhiji also believed in the same principles, never wanted to be bound by walls and limitations. Same way, the efforts of Gujarat government has initiated to attract the world to come and invest through Vibrant Gujarat Festival, Industrial Meet with the NRIs. At the same time, it tries to spread Indian cultural heritage into the second and successive generations of the Diaspora by celebrating kite festival etc.

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