

Diasporic Commemoration and Existential Experience in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*

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Abstract:

Jhumpa Lahiri has come to occupy an eminent place among the writers of the diasporic English fiction. The literature of diaspora has affluence, assortment and comprehensive coverage and appears to be growing into an independent branch of literature. Jhumpa Lahiri presented on the literary scene with the publication of *Interpreter of Maladies* in 1999. The book is a collection of nine brilliant short stories which won the Pulitzer Prize 2000 for fiction for the portrayal of family life and Indian immigrants trying to make a new home in a foreign country. *The Namesake* is a Lahiri's debut novel which continues to develop the themes of diasporic commemoration and existential experience adopted by immigrants to surpass the obstacles of adjustment in exile. The themes are derived from Lahiri's own experiences of life.

Keywords: Alienation, Diaspora, Existential, Identity, Immigrant, Postcolonial

Introduction:

Nilanjana Sudeshna "Jhumpa" Lahiri (born July 11, 1967) is an American author known for her short stories, novels and essays in English, and, more recently, in Italian. Her debut collection of short-stories *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and the PEN/Hemingway Award, and her first novel, *The Namesake* (2003), was adapted into the popular film of the same name. Her second story collection *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008) won the Frank O'Connor International Short Story Award, while her second novel, *The Lowland* (2013), was a finalist for both the Man Booker Prize and the National Book Award for Fiction. In these works, Lahiri explored the Indian-immigrant experience in America. In 2011, Lahiri moved to Rome, Italy and has since then published two books of essays and in 2018, published her first novel in Italian called *Dove mi trovo* and also compiled, edited and translated the *Penguin Book of Italian Short Stories* which consists of 40 Italian short stories written by 40 different Italian writers. She has also translated some of her own writings and those of other authors from Italian into English. In 2014, Lahiri was

awarded the National Humanities Medal. She has been a professor of creative writing at Princeton University since 2015. She is a well-known literary figure in the postcolonial literature.

Analysis:

The Namesake was originally published in *The New Yorker* and was later expanded to a full-length novel. It explores many of the same emotional and cultural themes as Lahiri's Pulitzer Prize-winning short story collection *Interpreter of Maladies*. The novel moves between events in Calcutta, Boston, and New York City, and examines the nuances involved with being caught between two conflicting cultures with distinct religious, social, and ideological differences. This novel is an incisive portrait of the immigrant experience follows the Ganguli family from their traditional life in India through their arrival in Massachusetts in the late 1960s and their difficult melding into an American way of life, in a debut novel that spans three decades, two continents, and two generations.

“Postcolonialism” is the theoretical wing of postcoloniality. It refers to a mode of reading, political analysis and cultural resistance/intervention that deals with the history of colonialism and present neo-colonial structures. It is a mix of rigorous epistemological and theoretical analysis of texts and a political praxis of resistance to neo-colonial conditions. It is in short, a critique. It invokes ideas such as social justice, emancipation and democracy in order to oppose oppressive structures of racism, discrimination and exploitation. It asserts the formerly colonized subjects ‘agency’—defined as the ability to affect her/his present conditions – in the face of continuing oppression. Postcolonialism seeks to understand how oppression, resistance and adaptation occurred during colonial period.

Postcolonial writing can now be defined as the textual, literary processes through which formerly colonised people assert their difference form, resistance to and negotiation with, European colonial masters and cultures while attempting to develop similar strategies to tackle contemporary globalising and neo-colonial processes of domination by Euro-American powers. In one of the first major theorisations about ‘postcolonial literature’, Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin defined it thus:

Who use the term ‘post-colonial’ ... to cover all the cultures affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day. This is because there is a continuity of preoccupations throughout the historical process initiated by European imperial aggression. We also suggest that it is most appropriate as the term for the new cross-cultural criticism which has emerged in recent years and for the discourse through which this is constituted. (1989:2)

Postcolonial literature deals with the themes of race, ethnicity, culture, social milieu, alienation, diaspora, existential, identity, immigrant, East-West encounter, hybridity, ambivalence and name a few.

The diasporic commemoration must involve a significant crossing of borders. These may be borders of a region or a language. The passage must involve some significant tension between the source and the target culture. The immigrants who struggle to negotiate a new territory, culture and milieu often suffer from painful fragmentation and psychic alienation. Faced with insecurity immigrants search for their existential in these present scenarios. That is their primary goal and ethics of life. Ramraj refers to two types of diasporas: *traditionalist* and *assimilationist*. The former retains its separate identity while the later gradually merges with the mainstream of the host country and eventually ceases to regard itself as a diaspora (King 217). The immigrant is neither fully of one world or the other. The legacy of migration creates a position of “in-betweenness”.

The spatial move involves a de-territorialisation and a re-territorialisation connected by journeys/travel. The former one involves the loss of territory which is both geographical and cultural but the later one is the restructuring of a place or territory. Diasporic writing across the world, to make a sweeping generalisation, is concerned with spaces, landscapes and journeys. Since diaspora involves a change of place through a journey, this is a self-evident literary theme. What is also significant is that the loss of territory is almost always accompanied by the gain of new ones. Dislocation *from* is followed by a re-location *to*. Diasporic literature’s dealings with space thus move between ‘home’ and ‘foreign country’, between the familiar and the strange, the old and the new.

Diasporic writing, especially in the age of globalisation is a consciousness-raising genre, where political issues of cultural citizenships, cosmopolitan justice and global inequality run alongside themes of nostalgia, imaginative reconstructions of the homeland and identities. The theme of identity in diasporic writing is not merely an exercise in exploring multiplicities of location and subjecthoods. It is a larger political issue of global justice, cultural rights, self-determination and cosmopolitanism. Pramod K. Nayar in his book *Postcolonial Literature: An Introduction* explains the features of diasporic culture/literature in the following ways:

- The shift contrast and relation between centre (from where their ancestors/parents originated) and the periphery (into which they dispersed)
- The memory – individual or communal – of home including details of childhood landscapes, historical events, people
- The sense of alienation in a new society/culture/land
- A need to retain features from the ‘homeland’ – this includes a determined effort to retain rituals, language, forms of behaviour
- A reclamation of history of the homeland and childhood spaces

- A conscious attempt to assert ethnic identity in terms of the homeland, while simultaneously seeking acceptance/assimilation in the new cultures (PCL: p 190)

These themes can be categorised under the three main heads:

- Nostalgia, memory, ‘imaginary homelands’
- Hybridities and new identities
- Globalisation and cosmopolitanism

Vijay Mishra in his monumental work “*Literature of the Indian Diaspora: Theorizing the Diasporic Imaginary*” discusses in detail the works by renowned Indian Diaspora writers like Salman Rushdie, V.S. Naipaul, Bharati Mukharjee, Rohinton Mistry and M.G.Vassanji. He makes a distinction between old Indian Diaspora and their reasons after leaving the country as well as new Indian Diaspora, subject and their reasons for preferring to settle in other land. Mishra in this book emphasizes the importance of understanding the history and background of a writer if one is to relish the book produced by that writer. Mishra discusses almost all the important texts by Naipaul and Rushdie and tries to state how diasporic experiences shape their imagination and plots. He observes:

“They are precariously lodged within an episteme of real or imagined displacements, self-imposed sense of exile; they are haunted by specters, by ghosts arising from within that encourage irredentist or separatist movements.” (Mishra, 2007)

Lahiri presents diasporic experience in her novel carefully. What's in a name? For Gogol Ganguli, American-born of Bengali parentage bearing a Russian writer's surname, this question is neither easily answered nor easily dismissed. Straddling two generations, two cultures, and with two first names, Gogol moves through life with a sense he never quite fits in. His quiet angst and personal questioning almost derail him, careening—like the train that links him to his father and his destiny—from relationship to relationship. Jhumpa Lahiri's understated exploration of identity and cultural assimilation in *The Namesake* illuminates for us the entire question "Who am I?" while bringing alive the colours, flavours, and textures of immigrant Indian life in America. This is clearly and beautifully she narrated in the novel. That shows her skill of art and craft of novel writing.

Lahiri has analyses and interprets how a father and mother, a son and daughter: two generations of a typical Bengali–American family, poised uneasily atop the complex and confounding fault lines common to the immigrant experience. Her novel *The Namesake* deftly demonstrates the familiar struggles between new and old, assimilation and cultural preservation, striving toward the future and longing for the past, play out in one particular set of foreign-born parents and their American born children. As a result this indicates her ingenuity talent of plot and narration.

The themes of cultural alienation and loss of identity that the immigrant faces in making a new home in a foreign land and receive evocative treatment in Lahiri's novel *The Namesake*. The themes are directly derived from the author's own diasporic experience. She has also made use of the diasporic observation of her parents. Born of Bengali parents she settled down in America. She was equally influenced by the two cultures, the Indian heritage and the American dream. She draws heavily on the memories of her parents to depict India that she is not familiar with. She also depends on her own impressions of India when she used to visit India in the company of her parents as a child. In an interview to R. S. Shankar, she recounts:

These trips to a vast, unruly, fascinating city, so different from the small New England town where I was raised, shaped my perceptions of the world and the people from a very early age. I learned that there was another side, a very different version to everything... I learned to observe this as an outsider, and yet I also knew that as different Calcutta is from Rhode Island, I belonged there in some fundamental way. In this ways I did not seem in the Unites States (rediff.com)

The Namesake is an evocative and deeply felt portrayal of family life and the complexity of relationships, the difficult process of trying to assimilate into new culture and maintain their own cultural connections and identity. The novel deals with the diasporic commemoration of the Indian migrants in the United States with special reference to the life of Ashoke and his wife Ashima. Ashoke has taken a doctoral programme at MIT. Striving for existence in the foreign land, the diasporas feel themselves marginalised. Ashima's feeling of nostalgia for her own family roots behind and the cravings for her country are reflected when she is hospitalised for delivery:

But nothing feels normal to Ashima. For the past eighteen months, ever since she's arrived in Cambridge, nothing has felt normal at all ... That it was happening so far from home, unmonitored and unobserved by those she loved, had made it more miraculous still. But 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. (Namesake 6).

Bengali visitors are only substitutes for her own people in Calcutta. Lahiri writes as without a single grandparent or parent or uncle or aunt at her side, the baby's birth, like most everything else in America, feels somehow haphazard, only half true. Ashoke remains busy with his teaching and research but Ashima has nothing to occupy her. Ashima feels lonely there. Sometimes she decides to return Calcutta. In the foreign land both of them move with a difficult adjustment in the day to day life and with American culture. Ashima is extremely worried about foreign life style but Ashoke receives it easily as he is busy with his professional life. In this difficult time, they are maintaining existential experience to face

multi-culture balance. They turn to their native place, friends, acquaintances, relatives through correspondence and also interval visits and make connections time and space that serve as their emotional link as well as psychological strength. They celebrate Indian festivals also. This indicates their passion and interest for our tradition, culture and heritage. As a result they feel proud of being an Indian. It clearly depicts physically they are present at America but mentally they accept Indian culture and way of survival.

The hybrid identity that the immigrants carry creates a tumultuous situation regarding the belongingness. In the opinion of Homi K. Bhabha, hybridity is the 'third space' which makes the other positions to emerge. The identity as suggested by him indicates the impure identity rather than fixed identity. Dual or hybrid identity construct an identity crisis in one's creating home of familiarity in the overseas countries. The second generation immigrants find it hardly possible to adhere to the identity of the parental land. The national identity of the first generation may be changed politically, but they are able to fasten with their original homeland culturally, linguistically and ethnically. In the contemporary era, immigration, exile and expatriation are related to home, identity, nostalgia, memory and isolation. These are the recurrent themes in the diasporic writings of the post-colonial writers like V. S. Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, Bharti Mukkerjee, , Jhumpa Lahiri, Kiran Desai and name a few.

Social milieu and interaction with the people of the target countries bring about transformation in the manners of living and thinking of the immigrants. In spite all their efforts to maintain their cultural identity Ashoke and Ashima pick up some of the ways and habits of their neighbours. The struggle for adjustment does not help the immigrants to fully belong to the foreign culture. They remain an outsider till end. Ashoke is subjected to insult by Americans. Gogol Ganguli, Sonia Ganguli and Moushumi Mazoomdar are born, brought up and are educated in the United States. They must absorb American ideology and grow different to the moral values of their parents. Lahiri's character portrayals are powerful and show the individual's conflicting emotions. Gogol faces the initial problems connected with an unusual name. As Gogol grows older, he is keen to fit in with his class mates; he begins to hate the name – it is neither American nor Bengali. So, when he is old enough, Gogol changes his name to his formal name Nikhil Ganguli which sounds better to audible.

Nikhil studies Architecture and begins his career in New York which brings him into contact with his girlfriend Maxine Ratliff and her parents Gerald and Lydia. Being influenced by American style of living and culture, Nikhil considers his parents are inferior to other Americans. He is very much interested to celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ with Sonia rather than Indian festivals like Durga Puja and Saraswati Puja. They are affectionately behaved by their close relatives in India but they are not interested to attach with them. They wish to lose their Indian values and also going to lose their own identity. This indicates the American influence supersedes their Indian tradition, culture and heritage. They were the laughing stock in India because of their American accent. Both Gogol and Sonia desire to leave behind

the inherited Bengali values of their parents. As a consequence, they have to pay a lot in the future life.

Moushumi Mazoomdar is the young girl whom Sonia's mother eagerly wants her son Gogol to marry. And who after marriage betrays him for an old foolish man called Damitry. Moushumi's secret studies of the French language and her sexual affinity with a large number of strangers in Paris are all the instances of disappointed Indian values and ethics. In Paris she is openly involved with sex affairs. Lahiri remarks: "With no hesitation, he had allowed men to seduce her in cafes, in parks, while she gazed at paintings in museums" (Namesake 215). The second generation immigrant's attitude towards marriage and married life undergo a drastic change under the influence of the Western culture (American culture). Gogol, Sonia, and Moushumi are representative of the opened identities created by the dislocation of their parents. The apprehension observed by the parents because of migration, immigration, emigration and exile from their native places or home lands is in the intense oppose to the sense of belonging to the American civilisation realised and repented by the American Indians Gogol and Sonia. The old generation believes that marriage is a social institution where they will attach till their last breath.

Jhumpa Lahiri has expressed the acronym 'ABCD' that stands for American Born Confused Deshi. This term emphasises that our origin/homeland always invites you mentally, ethically, affectionately and spiritually whatever distance we may have. Gogol is obviously an American Indian hybrid who oscillates between two worlds. The lives of Ashima, Gogol and Sonia are completely affected after the sudden death of the head member of their family i.e.; Ashoke. The novel *The Namesake* ends with the solitudeness and search for their identity of Gogol and his mother Ashima. At the end, the vibrant novelist rejuvenates the two cultures and tries to reconcile their ideologies. Ashima whole-heartedly declared that she wished to spend ½ of the year in India and rest ½ of the year in America. This symbolises our motherland and work land are equally important. She expresses that she would be now without borders, without a home of her own, a resident everywhere and nowhere. Lahiri presents succinctly:

Ashima feels lonely suddenly, horribly, permanently alone, ... she feels both impatience and indifference for all the days she still must live ... For thirty years she missed her life in India ... She will miss the country in which she had grown to know and love her husband. Though his ashes have been scattered into the Ganges. It is here in this house and in his town, that he will continue to dwell in her mind (278-279).

The Namesake explores a family of Indian immigrants in the USA and their adjustment to a new culture, parenthood, cultural conflicts, and trauma. Jhumpa Lahiri's portrayal of cultural

displacement and consequent identity crisis deserves acclaim. Lahiri's novel *The Namesake*, indicates that all expatriation involves anxiety and belonging to two ethnic groups which force a kind of struggle with something. That is really painful, but that is an inextricable part of the immigrant experience. Expatriation is the recognition of hyphenated fluid identity and an acknowledgement of alternate realities.

Conclusion:

Jhumpa Lahiri is a powerful novelist of international repute for her narration, language and style of presentation. She realizes her parents' acute sense of belonging to nowhere fully and their incessant struggle to remain attached to Bengali culture in the foreign land. In the post colonial discourse, the question of identity always gets emphasis. This crisis arises chiefly from the feeling of culturally displaced and transformation of ideology. In the current time, people are leaving the boundaries of their own countries to go to the other nations in the hope of better life and opportunities. As a result, in this globalised situation they are ready to sacrifice all only for the sake of fulfilment of their dreams. Under these circumstances they are losing their identities and continue a life of loneliness there. At the crisis period once again they are compelled to return to their motherland/homeland. *The Namesake* negotiates with the themes of cultural alienation and loss of identity that the immigrants face by approaching a new residence in abroad. The immigrants scuffle to adopt a new cultural social milieu through the outcome of diasporic commemoration, bitter experience and existential examination. Jhumpa Lahiri comes forward to accommodate the standards of the two contrasting cultures. In this way, I have endeavoured to highlight Lahiri's achievements which lend universal significance to the hopes and aspirations of the diasporic characters in their approach to identity and response to multiculturalism in the midst of the trials and tribulations of their diasporic environment.

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