



Diaspora in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*

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Abstract:

In the present age of globalization, the immigration process has become quite common and frequent. As the western societies offer alluring possibilities in economy and intellectual advancement, the migrant identities of Asia, Africa and Caribbean countries go to different topographies in search of better opportunities. Crossing the national and continental boundaries, these Third World migrants undergo a hugely perplexing experience in the First World's cultural atmosphere. The present novel, like her Pulitzer Prize winner collection of short stories *Interpreter of Maladies*, explores the theme of immigrant experience and the clash of cultures in the U. S. The novel is a narrative about the assimilation of an Indian Bengali family from Calcutta, the Gangulis, into America, over thirty years from 1968-2000; the cultural dilemmas experienced by them and their American born children in different ways; the spatial, cultural and emotional dislocations suffered by them in their efforts to settle "home" in the new land. Like many professional Indians who in the waves of the early 60's went to the United States, as a part of the brain drain, Ashoke Ganguli too leaves his homeland and comes to America in pursuit of higher studies to do research in the field of fiber optics with a prospect of settling down with security and respect. After two years stay in the United States he comes back to India, marries a nineteen year old Bengali girl from Calcutta name Ashima. After the legal formalities, she flies alone to be with her husband, with a heavy heart. She also faces many difficulties in the new environment due to the diasporic consciousness. Therefore, the present paper tries to explore the concepts of diaspora and displacements of immigrants in Jhumpa Lahiri's novel *The Namesake*.

Full Paper:

Diaspora is a post-colonial phenomenon. It means displacement or migration to an alien land. It historically referred to displaced communities who have been dislocated from their native land through the movements of indentured labour, voluntary movements of skilled workers, and intellectuals. The term in Jewish tradition emphasizes the circumstances of the origin of the migration and to those settlements inhabited by Jews in all parts of the world outside the state of Israel. The earlier versions of expatriate such as exile, refugee, emigrant, ethnic and racial minority community are today subsumed under this term of 'diaspora.' The terms like alienation, exile, in-betweenness, uprootedness, homelessness, hyphenated identity, identity crisis, search for roots and belongingness all have been associated with 'diaspora.' Writers such as V. S. Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, Bharti Mukherjee, Jhumpa Lahiri, Kiran Desai, Vikram Seth, Monica Ali, all have created waves in the West and made their impact on contemporary diasporic literary scene. Jhumpa Lahiri is an Indian English writer, whose origin is India, though she was born in London. She herself is a diaspora and her writings show different problems of expatriates like sense of alienation, loss, exile, guilt, racial discrimination, homesickness, quest for identity.

The Namesake is Lahiri's first novel published in 2003. This novel is a narrative about the assimilation of an Indian Bengali family from Calcutta, the Gangulis, into America, over thirty years from 1968 to 2000; the cultural dilemmas experienced by them and their American born children in different way; the spatial, cultural and emotional dislocations suffered by them in their efforts to settle "home" in the new land. The novel is resonant in its exploration of what is acquired and lost by immigrants and their children in the pursuit of the American dream.

Like many professional Indians who in the waves of the early 1960s went to the United States, as part of the brain drain, Ashoke Ganguli too leaves his homeland and comes to America in pursuit of higher studies to do research in the field of "fiberoptics" with a prospect of settling down "with security and respect" (TN 105). After two years' stay in the U.S.A. he comes back to India, marries a nineteen year old Bengali girl from Calcutta named Ashima, who has no idea or dream of going to a place called Boston so far from her parents. But in America, Ashima often feels upset and homesick and sulks alone in their three room apartment. She feels spatially and emotionally dislocated from the comfortable "home of her father, full of so many loving ones and yearns to go back. Most of the time she remains lost in the memories of her "home." But the most terrifying experience for her is "motherhood in a foreign land," "so far from home, unmonitored and unobserved by those she loved,

“without a single grandparent or parent or uncle or aunt at her side” and “to raise a child in a country where she is related to no one” (*T N 6*). After the birth of her son Gogol, she wants to go back to Calcutta and raise her child there in the company of the caring and loving one but decides to stay back for Ashoke’s sake and brings up the baby in the Bengali ways. She keeps all her emotional hazards and disappointments to herself. Feeling lonely and displaced in a foreign land, Ashima, though not pregnant now, begins to realize that,

Being a foreigner. . . is a sort of life-long pregnancy—a perpetual wait, a constant burden, a continuous feeling out of sorts. It is an ongoing responsibility, a parenthesis in what had once been ordinary life, only to discover that previous life has vanished. (*T N 49-50*)

Like immigrants of other communities Ashima and Ashoke too make their circle of Bengali acquaintance, get known through one another. They become friends only for the reason that “they all come from Calcutta” (*T N 38*). In this context Rober Cohen rightly remarks that “a member’s adherence to a diasporic community is demonstrated by an acceptance of an inescapable link with their past migrant history” (56). These Bengali families gather together on different occasions like the rice and name ceremonies of their children, their birthdays, marriages, deaths, and Bengali festivals. They celebrate these as per Bengali customs trying to preserve their culture in a new land. In fact, their beliefs, traditions, customs, behaviours and values along with their possessions and belongings are carried by migrants with them to new places.

While making efforts to preserve their home culture in their new homes, the first generation immigrants train their children in Bengali language, literature and history at home and through special Bengali classes, and expose them to their own family lineage, religious customs, rites, beliefs, food tastes, habits and mannerisms. They also groom them to cope with the way of life in America. How these immigrants face cultural dilemmas in the foreign systems is shown through the problems faced by Ashoke and Ashima. They find it difficult to make understand their cultural practice of having two names—pet-name at home and good name for formal purposes. Hence on their daughter’s birth they decide not to give her two names.

Further, Lahiri shows that the immigrants in their enthusiasm to stick to their own cultural beliefs and customs gradually imbibe the cultural ways of the host country too. Though, initially Ashoke did not like the celebration of Christmas and Thanksgiving but as Gogol recalls “it was for him, that his parents had gone to the trouble of learning these customs” (*T N 286*). Though, they invited American children too on the birthdays but still

Ashima found preparing a number of Bengali dishes for above forty Bengali guests less stressful than the task of feeding a handful of American children. Their own children groomed to be “bilingual and bicultural” face cultural dilemmas and displacements more. Though, forced to sit in pujas and other religious ceremonies along with the children of other Bengali families, Gogol and Sonia like them relish American and continental food more than the Bengali dishes and enjoy the celebration of Christmas.

Lahire, like other writers writing of immigrant experiences, also shows in this novel that the immigrants and their children might adopt and assimilate the culture of the new country but they are not taken to be part and parcel of the host country and their identity is related to the migrant history of their parents and grandparents. The Orientals continue to be looked down upon by the Occidentals. There are many situations in the novel which prove this point as the criticism of a picture prepared by Gogol and the behaviour of the employers of American Departmental store towards his parents. Though, Gogol makes a conscious effort to be different from his parents and he wants to live in a world free from the Bengali culture, adjective and history but being a sensitive child he experiences the cultural dilemma and identity crisis, the feeling of “in-betweenness” and belonging to nowhere is experienced by him more intensely during his school trip to the cemetery where finding no grave of his ancestors he felt that being a Hindu/ Bengali “he himself will be burned not buried, that his body will occupy no plot of earth, that no stone in this country will bear his name beyond life” (*T N* 69). A series of his broken relations with Ruth, Maxine and his wrecked marriage with the second generation Bengali girl Moushumi and the conflict between the unconscious Bengali cultural way and the conscious adoption to the American way make him a boy sandwich broken and fragmented. Lahiri herself clarifies her aim in creating such a character in that is to write something focusing on the experiences of Bengali-American kid.

How the first generation migrants overcome their cultural dilemmas and sense of displacement and bring change by refashioning and mobilizing received ideas from their home culture and host culture and how through this act of “performance” new “hybrid identities are negotiated” (Mukherjee 2002: 1) has been shown by Lahiri through Aashima’s decision to draw and paint on this year’s Christmas cards an elephant decked with red and green jewels, instead of choosing the Merry Christmas cards with angels or nativity scenes. Through this act of hers, one can say, a new hybrid cultural identity is in the “process of formation and “transformation” (Hall 1994: 392-304). This shows that the diasporas and migrants too intervene in the dominant culture. Thus new subjectivities are born, and fixed borders are “crossed” imaginatively and from the “in-between” marginal status the migrants

go “beyond” the binary fixities of natives/ migrants and carve new “routes” instead of lamenting over the lost roots, as Homi Bhaba theorizes in his *The Location of Culture*. In this sense, the novel *The Namesake* can be called a new narrative of diaspora identities.

By presenting Ashima grow with the passage of time during her thirty two years of stay in America—retaining her culture in dress and values, as well as assimilating the American culture for her personal growth and for the sake of her children, and ultimately deciding to divide her time every year both at Calcutta and in America which has made her confident and where she had grown to know and love her husband, thus enjoying the best of both cultures—Lahiri shows that all migrants carve their own routes in the course of time and it is not necessary that they want to settle in the countries of their origin; Sonia’s decision to marry Ben (a half Chinese boy) and Moushumi’s attitude of not sticking to anyone culture or country shows how the second generation migrants are going Global and becoming multi-cultural, and are exploring new identities through transnational contingencies of routes. Gogol (Nikhil) is also in this process of multi-culturalism.

Lahiri in this novel also presents that it is not only the Indian migrants who feel dislocated in other countries and face cultural dilemmas, the immigrants from any culture feel the same in the other “dominant culture.” For example Graham, Moshumi’s fiancé, during his visit to Calcutta finds the Bengali’s customs and culture taxing and repressed as there were no drinks and he, “could not even hold her hand on the street without attracting snares” (*T N* 217). Hence he decides to break with Moshumi. Even Gogol and Sonia do not feel at home in Calcutta where their parents find solace and comfort. Whereas Ashima feels sad “staring at the clouds as they journey back to Boston,” (*T N* 87) Gopal and Sonia feel relieved. Not only this, Lahiri also shows, what Stuart Hall calls, the “power of the cultural politics” (392-403) in the majority group of one culture. Whereas in Maxine’s house, among the Americans, Gogol is made to feel displaced and the other, in Gogol’s house Maxine is made to feel alien and out of place among the Bengalis.

After all being done and said, we can safely conclude that Lahiri in this novel beautifully explores and shows all the nuances of the immigrant experiences and dilemmas and now this novel has become a mighty contribution by a mighty writer in the literature of diaspora.

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