

Diasporic Consciousness and Identity Trauma in Jhumpa Lahiri's The Namesake

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Abstract

In the contemporary era, immigration, exile and expatriation are related to home, identity, nostalgia, memory and isolation. These are the recurrent theme in the diasporic writings of the post-colonial writers like V.S. Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, Bharati Mukherjee, Jhumpa Lahiri and so on.

Identity is a topical issue in the contemporary study of culture with many ramifications for the study of ethnicity, class, gender, race, sexuality and subcultures. It becomes an issue when something assumed to be fixed, coherent, and stable is displaced by the experience of doubt and uncertainty. When a period of uncertainty and confusion upsets a person's identity, it becomes insecure, usually due to a change in the expected aims or role in society. This identity trauma brings a sense of longing and loss as seen in Lahiri's stories.

The present article focuses on the first generation and second generation immigrants adherence to the old and new land as can be found in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*. Lahiri

represents her characters struggling to balance the two worlds that involve the issues of immigration, race, class, and culture.

Keywords: Diaspora, Identity, Loneliness, Negotiation, Discourse.

Diasporic is an adjective that is derived from the noun diaspora and this noun diaspora has its roots in the Greek language. The word in its Greek form means dispersion and scattering of seeds in the process of sowing. So, it primarily in its original forms related to the field of agriculture. However, today the primary understanding of diaspora has changed and now it related to the dispersion of people rather than seeds. This specific association of the concept of diaspora with the dispersion of people rather than with seeds can be traced back to the book of Deuteronomy in the Old Testament of the Bible where in chapter 28 we find the use of the Greek root word for the diaspora. In the old Testament it is used to describe how if the commandments of the God is not followed then the God will cause the disobedient people to be defeated by their enemy or the God will cause them to be dispersed from their homeland and to be scattered among all the kingdoms of the Earth. Now while looking at the early occurrence of this word diaspora in the old Testament, we need to keep in mind that how the idea of diaspora is closely associated with the notion of the exile or being removed from one's homeland as a form of punishment and this connection between exile and diaspora most strongly resonates in the history of the Jewish community which was banished from its homeland in the 6th century BCE. Now the memory of this exile still informs the Jewish identity, an integral part of the cultural memory of the Jewish diaspora. This sense of the exile within the Jewish community is closely connected with the sense of nostalgia, a sense of nostalgia for the lost homeland and the desire to return to it. Now all these emotional and cultural association described here to shape our present understanding of the term diaspora.

Literally diaspora refers to communities of people living away from what they consider to be their homeland. And this state of living away from the homeland bears the negative connotation of being in exile. Finally, the feeling of being in exile evokes within the diasporic community a sense of nostalgic longing for a lost homeland and a desire to somehow return to a homeland. Now keeping in mind this general characterization of diaspora and diasporic identity, let us try and see how it relates to post colonialism and post colonial literature. By focussing on the novel *The Namesake* by Jhumpa Lahiri our intention is to identify the key concepts of exile and nostalgia for the homeland that informs the diasporic condition in general and diasporic literature in particular.

The post colonial writers of Indo-American novels equipped with a new education and sociability have different perspective of the image of women. In the era of globalization liberal thought was brought all over the world and it was propagated by western education and culture. The woman novelist were responsible for the new image of woman struggling against the oppressive social norms of the western society. In this respect there occurred changes in them, emphasis and design in the literature of women novelists like Anita Desai, Arundhati Roy, Kamala Markandaya, Bharati Mukharjee and Jhumpa Lahiri.

Jhumpa Lahiri is one of the foremost diasporic writers who portrays the feelings and experiences of immigrants. Through her writings she gives voice to the aphonic history and experience of female immigrants. Her female characters are all trapped in a world where they do not belong to. Expatriation, immigration, nostalgia alienation, despondency, conflict between tradition and modernity and conflict between Eastern and Western cultures are some significant issues in Lahiri's work. Her works illustrate the importance of multiculturalism in the contemporary world where people of different ethnicities and nation live. Since Lahiri herself is the child of immigration and multiculturalism, she could portray the characters both in the light of native and alien culture.

Lahiri writes about the situation of women and their success and failure in the fast changing socio cultural milieu of diasporas. Through her protagonist, she highlights that the women are the victims of gender discrimination as a girl child, wife and mother from male as well as from their female counterpart. Lahiri's female character are mostly diasporic women. They are from both first and second generation immigrants in America. The first generation women finds it very difficult to get adapted with an alien culture where as the second generation women assimilates themselves with the mainstream culture. Her women are not the victims of socio economic exploitation, rather they are victims cultural identity. They are mostly caught between their native past and alien present the strict traditions that they inherited from India and the baffling New World values which they encounter every day. She presents the ramifications of patriarchy on the lives of Indian women. The psychological trauma of a woman is attributed to Indian patriarchal notion of marriage.

Jhumpa Lahiri in her work *The Namesake*, travels through her antagonized experience of an Indian women across the world. She finds out the complex cultural encounter and shifts along with emotional imbalance and relationship between parents and children, lovers, siblings, husband and wife and determination of identity in general. Lahiri discusses the concept of identity as associated with post colonial concepts such as hybridity, transculturation and migration. The novel focuses on the notion of shifting identity, the portrayal of the characters as torn between respecting their family traditions and an Americanized way of life and exploitation of the "Third Space" where they create their identity. Throughout the novel Lahiri tries to depict the predicament of women. She tries to focus on the parental and marital relations. She seeks to expose the traditions by which a woman is trained to play her subservient role in the family.

The most worth mentioning feature of Lahiri's work is that women migrate not out of desire or curiosity, but due to obligation or duty towards their husbands. Husbands move to

another country for their profession or to seek good fortune. Now wives have no option but to follow their husband silently. Most of the characters in Lahiri works as told in *The Namesake* “the husband are teacher, researchers, doctors, engineers. The wives homesick and bewildered”. (Lahiri, *The Namesake*,38,ch-2). Ashima, in the novel *The Namesake* is such character. After her arranged marriage to Ashok, she has no option but follow her husband silently and moves with him to Cambridge. And the women like Ashima who get married to men doing some research work on job there, are unable to adjust to the U.S. lifestyle and stick to their Bangali roots. They are always homesick and visit India occasionally yet they never ask questions or make any demands. Instead they try to adjust even if it is at the cost of total self negation. They suffer strongly with the feeling of homelessness and loneliness. To minimise their pains they develop friendship with other Bangali women and share their feelings. Ashima, too does not feel comfortable in U.S. She always reminds her relatives whom she has left behind. Through physically she is in U.S. but psychologically she remains connected with her native land. “We have no relative in this country, Ashima informs the guidance counsellor that is why we are going to India in the first place” (*The Namesake*,79). These line aptly voices sense of alienation of a diaspora.

Most of the time Ashima is found rereading her parents letters and Bangali short stories, poem and articles from the Bangali Megazines. Lahiri beautifully portrays the inbetween situation of Ashima during the state of pregnancy in these lines

“For being a foreigner, Ashima is beginning to realize, is a sort of life long pregnancy a perpetual wait, a constant burden, continuous feeling outor sorts. Like pregnancy, being a foreigner, Ashima believes, is something that elicits the same curiosity from strangers, the same combination of pity and respect.” (*The Namesake*:3)

When Ashima is admitted in the hospital to give birth to have first child she wonders if she is the only Indian in that hospital. She thought that if it had been in Kolkata, there would have been plenty of relatives to stand by her. Though Dr. Ashley assures her that everything is normal but nothing seems to be normal Ashima. Here Lahiri tries to convey the feeling of typical Indian housewife's insecurity and longings for her relatives. After giving birth to a baby boy the new parents learn that they cannot leave the hospital before giving their son a legal name. Ashok named the baby as Gogol after the Russian writer Nikolai Gogol as it closely associated with his life. Being alone, Ashima spends a lot of her time crying, depressed at the lack of company and at the distance from her family. Ashima says "I don't want to raise Gogol alone in this country. Its not right. I want to go back" (The Namesake, 33). Here Lahiri clearly projects a young Indian girls fear, apprehension and helplessness at the unfamiliarity of everything around her, at the thought of motherhood and rearing children in an unknown land far away from home.

It is a difficult task for the first generation immigrants how to raise their children. But Ashima is well aware about this problem and brings up Gogol according to Indian and American culture in the alien land. Ashima as the first generation immigrants educate her children in the native language, literature and history and guide them about their religious customs, traditions, beliefs, good habits and social etiquettes. And every afternoon Ashima switches the television to channels 2, and tells Gogol to watch sesame street and electronic company, in order to keep up with the English he uses at nursery school.

When Gogol grew up he cannot understand the significance of his name that his parents chose for him. Rather it is because of the very name that he is teased by his friends and his name is mispronounced by his teachers. Influenced by U.S. life style, Gogol tries to adopt an American identity. Gogol thought that by switching his name to Nikhil he would get rid of his past but though he tries to escape from the past by denouncing his cultural rootstand

changing his name he is somehow connected to his roots. His parents obstinate insistence on calling him by his original name symbolizes that a simple name change does not alter the fabric of a person. The name Nikhil itself indicate Indian identity instead of the American. Here Lahiri focuses on the tension between past and present complicates Hall's idea of being and becoming.

Though Gogol considers himself an American, he is brought up between two diametrically different cultures similar to Bhabha's inbetween space where people can to a certain extent, move and negotiate within their worlds. He is both Indian and American. He belongs to Indian parents on a different geographical space than India and is acculturated as an Indian at home but outside the home, he is an American. He thinks of India as a foreign country.

Jhumpa Lahiri introduces American girl Maxine, who is culturally different from the Indian women. Gogol brings a relationship with her. Lahiri highlights cultural difference between two women Ashima and Maxine. In American culture they feel nothing wrong in kissing before parents to a beloved, drinking wine with lunch or sleeping with a boyfriend before marriage. But it is taken seriously in the Indian family, Lahiri juxtaposes two domestic space of love and sexuality – that of Ashok's house and that of Maxine's parents – to indicate how two different cultures object and appreciate love and sexuality on different moral grounds. Maxine's parents allow Gogol to sleep with her before marriage at their home. But for Gogol's parents they cannot think of it even in their dream. By contrasting the lifestyles between Gogol's and Maxine's parents, Lahiri suggests that the immigrant children are fascinated to adopt the American lifestyle. Gogol's immersion into Maxine's life in an indication of a second generation immigrant child's realization that an identity for from their own cultural roots is a necessity to live happily in the multicultural United States. When Maxine confesses her affairs with her ex boy friend to Gogol he considers Maxine's

confession as her flirtatious nature. Here it is very much clear that Gogol is caught between Indian morality and western liberalism. Gogol continuously struggles to reconcile his dual cultures. On that one hand, he is fascinated with the free and happy lifestyle of his American girlfriend, Maxine: on the other hand he feels a sense of obligation towards his parents. It is only due to cultural difference that leads Gogol and Maxine to end up their relationship.

In the beginning Lahiri's characters are seen holding strictly to their cultural roots. But later they go through changes in their demeanor. We can take the example of the character Ashima by contrasting her character in different changes of her life in the United States. When she first comes to the United States, she feels completely lonely in foreign land. She practices Indian cultural values at her new home. She cooks mostly Indian foods, only making exception every once in a while to her children when they start asking her for specific American dishes. She wears only Indian dress, the sari which is a key example of maintenance of cultural identity that traditions are so proud of. Another cultural possession that Ashima adheres to daily is the bindis, that usually adorns the forehead of an Indian married women. Although she resists U.S. culture in the beginning she starts to adopt it. She enters the U.S. culture of individualism by going out buying her groceries and pushing a stroller like all American women. This steps towards independence brings some "pride in doing it alone, in devising a routine". She begins to trust the American system and to feel connected to Cambridge in a way she has not previously thought possible. She starts inviting non Indian friends to her home. Initially, Ashima dislikes Gogol's affair with Maxine, She dislikes the way Maxine hugs Nikhil in front of her. But in the end, Ashima reconciles with all these manners and discerns that Maxine loves Gogol and for Gogol's sake she likes these manners and behaviours. She becomes positive about an intercultural love affair and marriage. Ashima's life in America of course brings certain changes in her, but not with regard to adopt in the United States, she sticks to her cultural heritage.

Finally, Lahiri projects the viewpoint that her female depictions acquire a postmodern view of life through traditional approaches. In order to attain better prospects in life they are willing to embrace the cultural identity of a foreign country, sacrificing their own individuality. Some of them do that out of various compulsions and others due to necessities. Although they experience the yearnings of exile and the emotional confusion of the outsider, the determination to make it good in the new country overcomes it all in the end.

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