

**Confluence of Cultural Contours: Convergence of the
heterogeneous cultures & languages and hybridization of
diasporic identities in Jhumpa Lahiri's Namesake and
Unaccustomed Earth**

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Abstract

Diaspora is a state of transience where an individual constantly wavers between whether to imbibe the culture of a nation, usually a new one where one has immigrated to or to retain the culture of one's homeland which one has forsaken for reasons varied and innumerable. The immigrants who are displaced from their homeland face the most difficult challenges of life beginning with heart rendering feeling of being uprooted, dilemmas of multiculturalism, identity crisis, a constant sense of alienation and the hardships of being exiled. Jhumpa Lahiri's writing is a case in point. The Indo-American diasporan Jhumpa Lahiri narrates the traumatic stories of exile of the protagonists in her 'Namesake' and 'Unaccustomed Earth'. The writings display the convergence of the heterogeneous cultures and languages and hybridization of identities.

In this paper an attempt has been made to focus on the women in Jhumpa Lahiri's writing who pine and try hard to maintain their original values and ethics, yet be open to welcome the new, constantly vacillating between diasporic identities. Here the cultures converge, languages get assorted and identities hybridize, ultimately the characters emerge as cosmopolitan citizens of today's globalized world where the concept of home synchronizes with that of a wanderer, wavering between the innate and the assimilated heterogeneity of two different realms.

“The formation of a diaspora could be articulated as the quintessential journey into becoming; a process marked by incessant regroupings, recreations, and reiteration.” — Okwui Enwezor

The word diaspora has originated from the Greek word *diaspeirō*, which means "I scatter", or "I spread about". In Ancient Greece it was used for the emigrated citizens of city-state who conquered land with the purpose of colonization and shifted to it in search of greener pastures. Subsequently it came to be used as a term to refer to the historical movements of the dispersed ethnic population of Israel, to the cultural development of that population or to that population itself. Consequently it started to mean migration, exile or alienation. It is a term inclined towards transience. The term diaspora carries a sense of displacement. The population so described finds themselves in an alien land for whatever reason, separated from its national territory, and usually its people have a hope, or at least a desire, to return to their homeland at some point. It is a feeling combined with a sense of accomplishment where one moves to another nation for a better future or to achieve one's dream and proceeds to achieve the heartfelt desires juxtaposed with a feeling of sacrifice and loss which often accompanies, but remains inexpressible. It is often these people who become a part of a hybrid culture, desperately trying to adopt a new culture and at the same time unable to forget the innate culture of one's native land. Diaspora is also the study of this hybrid culture that the people become a part of, after abandoning their homeland.

Culture is the art, customs and institutions of a particular nation or people, which help us to distinguish between people of different nations. Diaspora points towards the state of transience where an individual vacillates between imbibing the culture of one nation, usually a new one where one has immigrated to and retaining the culture of one's homeland which he has forsaken for reasons varied and innumerable. The immigrants who are displaced face the most difficult challenges of life beginning with heart rendering feeling of being uprooted, dilemmas of multiculturalism, identity crisis, a constant sense of alienation and the hardships of being exiled. To be in a diaspora is to be part of a larger group in transition.

Literature of the Diaspora constitutes introspection into the lives of the people who have migrated to a foreign land, due to circumstances, a common feature after colonialism. The calamity expressed in all diasporic writings is the feeling of dislocation, being uprooted, forced or self-imposed exile coupled with a poignant feeling of alienation. The diasporans suffer the acute pain of being homeless, loss of identity, cultural dilemmas and alienated in

the foreign land. Diasporic writings occupy a significant position around countries, cultures and places. Cultures get dislocated and individuals refresh nostalgia.

Jhumpa Lahiri's writing is a case in point. The Indo-American diasporan Jhumpa Lahiri narrates the traumatic stories of exile of the protagonists in her 'Namesake' and 'Unaccustomed Earth'. The writings display the convergence of the heterogeneous cultures and languages and hybridization of identities. It involves sense of displacement away from homeland, yet a feeling of intimacy and proximity with home. The migration of the people across varied countries distorts the concept of true home. The immigrants suffer tremendously from identity crisis. The essence of 'The Namesake' is a narrative about the constant struggles and hardships of an immigrated Bengali couple who at first find themselves out of place in United States and struggle immensely to adapt to the loneliness, cultural and emotional dislocations in an alienated land in an attempt to make it their own. In Jhumpa Lahiri's Namesake, we find Calcutta on one hand and New York and Cambridge on the other contesting in the culture, thoughts, believes of the diasporic protagonist Ashima Ganguly, who cannot forget the Indian roots nor can she not accept the American way of life. The Namesake brings forward many such issues that Indians, settled in the promising land of opportunities face in countries like America and so on. The chronicle revolves around the difficulties faced by a Bengali couple in an alienated country –where the clash of cultures, the bonding between parents and children, identity crisis are dominant features. It talks about the journey of a woman of India Ashima, the protagonist of the narrative, who undertakes the sojourn from India to America after her wedding and starts to miss her country in every way. The novel begins with Ashima fondly reminiscing the memories of her motherland particularly her family, who lived miles away from America in Calcutta. She is admitted to a hospital in her advanced state of pregnancy. The lines stated below illustrates vividly her feelings of isolation, cut off from her near and dear ones in this crucial juncture of her life:

... Nothing feels normal to Ashima. For the past eighteen months, ever since she has arrived in Cambridge, nothing has felt normal at all. It's not so much the pain, which she knows, somehow, she will survive. It's the consequence: Motherhood in a foreign land. . . It was happening so far from home, unmonitored and unobserved by those she loved.

Ashima reminisces how she was introduced to Ashoke, her husband in Calcutta by their parents. Before she even entered the room where Ashoke was waiting for her, she slid her feet into his shoes that had been left by the door. This is perhaps an indication showing how Ashima tries to fit into the shoes of her husband symbolically adapting to the ways of her

husband. This is her first step towards, the hybrid culture of India and America one being her native country and the other she would move to. That moment felt especially intimate to her. It was only after they were betrothed, she learned his name.

In this age of globalization, 'home' is a concept related with temporariness, displacement, and dispossession. The idea of home is now more a concept of transience rather than a sense of being rooted to a place. In a foreign alienated land of exile, Ashima's pang for abandoning the home country is emphasized through her imagining the picture of her immediate family in far off Calcutta and this feeling of nostalgia seems to surround her. Ashima's binding with the varied Bengali rituals in the new land shows her strong connection with her homeland. But with the passage of time national identities get eroded and replaced by the hybrid identities. Ashima and her husband Ashoke holds a rice ceremony for her son Gogol when he is six months old. Inviting all their Bengali friends they host a little party in which Gogol is fed his first solid food. He is also offered some mud or soil, a dollar bill, and a ballpoint pen, a customary for all infants having rice for the first time, according to Indian Bengali culture. It is thought whichever item he reaches for is meant to indicate his profession, He will either be a landowner, a businessman, or a scholar. Ashima does offer the soil but she still yearns in her heart that her son doesn't touch the soil, because the soil does not belong to her native land, it belongs to the land where they stay now, alienated from their homeland and its soil. However, to the much relief of Ashima, he does not reach for any of the items.

She even realizes that the pickled mangoes that she ate in Calcutta would never be replaced by the pickles she now makes buying the same spices from the shop. She bitterly misses her motherland and her immediate family. In this regard it is important to mention that the name "Ashima" means beyond boundaries, in Bengali. The name connotes that Ashima's predicament is to cross borders to gain diasporic identity. But her innate nature is such that she adopts the culture of a foreign land and at the same time retains her homeland culture. She is the one who perhaps unites both the culture in a seamless blending. It is her this acceptance because of which at the end of the novel she decides to spend six months in Calcutta with her relatives and the other six months in United States with her children and friends for the rest of her life.

In 'Unaccustomed Earth' Indian women encounter paradoxical nature in retaining their original roots and adapting to the new environment and situation. In this paper an attempt has been made to focus on the women in Jhumpa Lahiri's writing who pine and try hard to maintain their original values and ethics, yet be open to welcome the new, constantly wavering between diasporic identities. In 'Unaccustomed Earth' the diaspora gets revealed

after the death of a family member who somehow managed to hold the roots of Ruma in a foreign land. Jhumpa Lahiri's fiction in general offers an exquisite postmodern picture of familial bonding, relentlessly breaking all former idealizations of the concept of home. Herself a second generation American, born to Bengali parents who are immigrant, Lahiri in her works like *Interpreter of Maladies* (collection of stories, 1999), *The Namesake* (novel, 2003) or *Unaccustomed Earth* (collection of stories 2008), focuses on the fact that there is an incessant conflict within the members of a diasporic family. The protagonists of the first generation immigrants in Jhumpa Lahiri's "Unaccustomed Earth" are Ruma's parents and Mrs. Bagchi. Ruma's parents came to the United States in quest for the "American Dream" which they partially fulfill in search of better education and lucrative job offers which gives scope for the family to settle comfortably in a foreign land. The mother passively takes care of the house, becoming only a secondary or even a tertiary participant in the quest of the dream, her ornate goal being cultivation of motherland customs in an alienated culture. Ruma, her daughter, was very attached to her mother and her death shook her. Now she suffers from a sense of rootlessness and gets involved in generation conflicts. Ruma and her mother had a very intimate relationship with each other, so her death completely shatters her. But Romi, the boy of the family, contrary to Ruma shows absolute separation from his parental ties. It is furthermore important to be noted that he showed absolutely no feeling when their parental house was to be sold. Ruma, much closer to her mother, takes after her and absorbs and assimilates some of her parents' morals and ethics demonstrating cultural hybridity. She has learnt to speak Bengali, with much labored efforts:

"Her mother had been strict, so much so that Ruma had never spoken to her in English. ... On the rare occasions Ruma used Bengali anymore, when an aunt or uncle called from Calcutta to wish her a Happy Bijoya or Akash a Happy Birthday, Ruma's father, as he grows older, feels happier and happier with his life in America."

Ruma tries in every possible to prepare Indian dishes for her American husband and quitting her job she proved that like her mother, for her too looking after her family becomes her first priority. But proving true to her hybrid culture that diasporans ultimately absorbs she assimilates the American culture becoming independent in her choices be it for her profession or in marrying a person who was not from her native land. Ruma seems to be torn between the claims of the two absolutely varied cultures, the Bengali culture that she has inherited, and the American culture that she has willfully accepted. Mrs. Bagchi too is not untouched by this hybrid culture. She too is driven by a dream while entering America. She escapes India fearing forced remarriage by her parents, being widow at an early age. In America she

is free choosing a career of her choice and deciding about herself unrestrained by customs or conventions.

Jhumpa Lahiri's writing represents the true colour of diasporans, revealing the multiculturalist characteristics of the multifaceted characters. Here the cultures converge, languages get assorted and identities hybridize, ultimately the characters emerge as cosmopolitan citizens of today's globalized world where their concept of home synchronizes with that of a wanderer, wavering between the innate and the assimilated heterogeneity of two different realms.

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