

**ALIENATION TO ACCULTURATION IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S**

***THE NAMESAKE***

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**Abstract:**

This paper attempts to observe the twin issues of estrangement and acculturation in Jhumpa Lahiri's novel *The Namesake*. The first generation expatriates from Bengal find the problem of alien culture, trauma, alienation, isolation and nostalgia while the second generation migrant's attempts to assimilate by embracing this alien culture and they invariably try to distance themselves from their parents' native culture. Aashima Ganguly finds herself in a perpetual state of in-betweenness, caught up between her Bengali culture and the American culture. She feels the *trishanku* experience as she is in fact accepted neither by the Americans nor by the Indians. She seems to be losing grips with her roots while her children accept their host culture and they also struggle for their belongingness and identity. It lays bare the inconsistency of the displacement and acculturation where they find a culture difference.

**Key Words:** Diaspora, Alienation, Acculturation, Transnational, Multiculturalism.

Jhumpa Lahiri (real name Nilanjana Sudeshna) is a novelist whose writings deal with women concerns and diasporic consciousness. When Jhumpa was enrolled in school, her teacher decided that Jhumpa nick name will be easiest to pronounce. (www.bookbrowse.com). She says about her nickname, “I’m like Gogol in that my pet name inadvertently became my good name” (qtd. in Nigamananda Das 13) She was born to Bengali parents who migrated to London. She went to the United States when she was just a child. She was brought up in Kingston, Rhode Island. She did her graduation in English literature in 1989 from Barnard College. She did MFA in creative writing; M.A. in English and Ph.D. in Renaissance Studies from Boston University. Jhumpa Lahiri’s first short-story collection entitled *Interpreter of Maladies* was published in 1999 which won The Pulitzer Prize in 2000. She got married in 2001 with a journalist name Alberto Vourvoulias-Bush. She lives with her husband in Brooklyn, New York and her two children named Octavi and Noor.

Jhumpa Lahiri’s debut novel *The Namesake* speaks about the problems of adjustment of the first generation emigrants of the Gangulis and their children’s assimilation into American culture. Culture reflects people, nations and their beliefs, customs, arts and institutions, hence, enabling one culture to distinguish from the other. This further makes way for strengthening the national identity among its citizens. However, the works of most diasporic writers strive to project for its readers, a multicultural and transnational worldview. This is where; I must focus my attention to Edward Said’s notion with regard to the concept of cultures as something which is fixed and representative of a certain group or nation in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993). Said contends, “Culture is a concept that includes a refining and elevating element, each society’s reservoir of the best that has been known and thought, as Mathew Arnold put it in the 1860’s. Arnold believed that, culture palliates, if it does not altogether neutralizes, the ravage of a modern, aggressive, mercantile and brutalizing urban experience...in time, culture comes to be associated, often aggressively, with the nation or the nation or the state, this differentiates ‘us from them, almost always with some degree of identity, and a rather combative one at that...(xii)(Said:1993) Within his context of culture, that Said brings up ‘Multiculturalism and hybridity’(xiv).

The cultural, spatial and psychosocial dislocations, alienation, identity-crisis etc. have been the recurrent issues explored by Lahiri in this novel. The novel, on the one hand, focuses on Calcutta

and on the other; it is about Cambridge and New York. The narrative begins in August 1968. When the novel opens Ashima and Ashoke, the migrant couple from West Bengal, India are seen in their apartment in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Ashima does not feel comfortable on this alien land. Her husband Ashoke is an electrical engineering student who is reading in his bedroom. Ashima wants to recreate herself by making her favourite Indian snacks. Ashima is busy in the kitchen work, “She wipes sweat from her face with the free end of her sari. Her swollen feet ache against speckled grey linoleum. Her pelvis aches with baby’s weight. (1) Ashima is pregnant and her labour pains start and that’s why they head to the hospital. Ashima feels alienated in the new surroundings. She has great fear in the hospital as she feels very strange for the very first time: “It is the first time in her life she has slept alone, surrounded by strangers; all her life she has slept either in a room with her parents or with Ashoke at her side. She wishes the curtains were open, so that she could talk to the American woman” (3). She tries to talk to an American in the hospital but she does not get good response from there. “She has gathered that Americans in spite of their public declarations of affection, in spite of their miniskirts and bikinis, in spite of their hand holding on the street and lying on top of each other on the Cambridge Common prefer their privacy” (3). Ashima again feels uncomfortable just because her husband goes for his work and she has to stay alone in the hospital. Ashima does not feel alienated in the hospital. Neither her husband nor other family members are there. She has the nostalgia about deliveries in India: “In India she thinks to herself, women go home to their parents to give birth, away from husbands and in-laws and household cares, recreating briefly to childhood when baby arrives. (4) Their son is born at 5:05 a.m. They face the problem of their name on their birth certificate. The hospital staff does not discharge her until final name is told by them to write on the birth certificate. After discussion, they name their child Gogol. After the birth of their first child, Gogol follows the death of Ashima’s father, which brings them back to the land of their birth i.e. Calcutta.

The child enters the world: “Without a single grandparent or uncle or aunt, at her side, the baby’s birth, like most everything else in America, feels somehow haphazard, only half true. . . . She never knows of a person entering the world so alone, so deprived” (25). When their son is born, she doesn’t want to live there anymore. She wants to go to Calcutta but she stays back there just for Gogol. 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 ones, but decides to stay back for Ashoke's sake, and brings up the baby in the Bengali way. "To put him to sleep, she sings him the Bengali songs her mother had sung to her" (Lahiri 35). She keeps all her emotional hazards and disappointments to herself and not intending to worry her parents, she presents in her letters a good picture of the domestic facilities. Tejinder Kaur observes, "The shift to this suburban area with no streetlights, no public transportation, no stores for miles makes Ashima feel more drastic and distressing than the move from Calcutta to Cambridge had been" (268).

The narrative delves deeper into the issues of alienation and dislocation. Gogol starts going to nursery school and Ashima delivers her second baby Sonali (nickname Sonia). Gogol lives in the United States but his children are not satisfied with their present situations because they are embarrassed due to their differences from the Native Americans. Gogol wants to blend in the American culture while his friends never really give in to the feeling of his belonging to the American soil the same way as they do, despite the fact that he was born in America.

Gogol does not like the name Gogol which was imposed on him by his father. Ashoke bestowed him with this name on the name of a Russian writer Nikolas Gogoi just because his son was saved from a train wreck. His father was reading Nikolas Gogoi's book when there was train wreck. He was found lying injured in the rubble of the wreck during rescue operation and the book was still in his hand. He goes to a party in the university where his father teaches, he tells his name Nikhil to Kim, a girl. This new name gives her much energy and courage that's why he musters his courage to kiss the girl. Officially also, he changes his name to Nikhil. In Bengali families "...individual names are sacred, inviolable. They are meant to be inherited or shared" (Lahiri 28).

Gogol makes many attempts at assimilating into American culture. At Yale, goes to drink and loses his virginity:

It is as Nikhil that he loses his virginity at a party at Ezra Stiles, with a girl wearing a plaid woolen skirt and combat boots and mustard tights. By the time he wakes up, hung over, at three in the morning, she has vanished from the room, and he is unable to recall her name. (105)

The narrative explores Gogol's dilemma and his sense of in-betweenness through a number of relationships that he has. Faced to face with Ruth when he boards the train in New Haven to go to his home. She was sitting in front of him. After conversation he gets to know that she is also a student in his university. When she departs for Oxford he remains alone. And when she returns at the fall, there both broke off and part their ways. Thereafter, Gogol starts dating with his co-worker name Maxine who is an Anglo-Saxon American. Ashoke dies in the hospital. When Gogol comes to know about the death of his father, he immediately heads to Ohio for his father's cremation. It is during his flight he recollects that according to the rituals of the Bengalis when the parents die the son has to get her head shaved. During ten day mourning, Ashima, Gogol and Sonia receive many visitors to soothe them. On eleventh day Maxine also comes there and they enjoy a party with her to mark the end of their mourning. She invites Gogol to New Hampshire but he refuses her just because he wants to live with his family in this tough time. Gogol spends more time with his family now and Maxine does not like this. She is angry with Gogol for not giving her proper attention and time. There is a break up between them and Maxine is engaged with another man now. In the architect's registration exam review group Gogol meets a married woman named Bridget whose husband was working in Boston, and he starts an affair with her. He has his final affair with a girl named Moushumi Mazoomdar who was his childhood friend and belonged to another Bengali family. They have the same cultural background and have many things in common between them. They eventually marry in New Jersey according to Hindu rituals. On their wedding ceremony they wear traditional dresses. Gogol wears his father's traditional Punjabi top and Moushumi wears a sari. They go for honeymoon and enjoy their lives. Moushumi gets an opportunity to work on her dissertation to pursue research in France but she rejects it because she doesn't want to be away from Gogol. But the destiny has something else in their storehouse, Moushumi also starts dating with Dimitri a boy, her old love whom she meets on a bus ride to DC. Their marriage breaks up just because Moushumi starts having sexual relationship with him.

Thus, the novel has many instances where Ashima feels lonely, displaced and alienated in America. When she is not pregnant she realizes 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, replaced by something more complicated and demanding. Like pregnancy, being a foreigner, Ashima believes, is something that elicits the same curiosity from strangers, the same combination of pity and respect (49-50).

Though both Nikhil and Sonia are born and brought up in the USA but they feel alienated from their American friends and acquaintances, just because they don't consider them the part of that country. They become the butt of their mockery and fun. They laugh at their names. Gogol tries to assimilate into their culture while Gogol's parents wants to make him rich with Indian culture. Towards the end of the novel, we sense that Gogol is absolutely free to take all kinds of decisions. Ashim struggles and is still unable to assimilate into American culture and she is very close to her grandmother. She tells her grandmother that she will not change in an alien culture also:

She has fed her sweets with her own hand. Unlike her parents, and her other relatives, her grandmother had not admonished Ashima not to eat beef or wear skirts or cut off her hair or forget her family the moment she landed in Boston. Her grandmother had not been fearful of such signs of betrayal; she was the only person to predict rightly that Ashima would never change. (Lahiri, *Namesake* 37)

Gogol's family has to face many difficulties, "In so many ways, his family's life feels like a string of accidents, unforeseen, unintended, and one accident begetting another." (286). Thus, Lahiri has authentically delineated the identity crisis faced by the first generation and then the second generation migrants, in their attempts to belong to the new place. In my limited analysis, I have tried to delve deeper into the extent to which an immigrant writer locate their 'dislocations' and evolve strategies to come to terms with this nostalgia through the means of their character portrayals.

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