

DIASPORIC IDENTITY AND CULTURAL ALIENATION IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S THE NAMESAKE

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Abstract

This paper looks into the predicament of identity and belongingness of the characters of the Indian origin and immigrants in the U.S.A in The Namesake, the novel written by Jhumpa Lahiri. The Namesake discusses about the life of first and second generation immigrants and their cultural disaster. Ashima Ganguly, who find herself bewildered in between the native culture and host culture. This lack of certainty diverted the culture of next generation and gave a cultural break. The fact that Jhumpa Lahiri is the child of Indian immigrants when she migrates from England to America makes her both a migrant and Diaspora writer. She has written on the Indian Diaspora and narrated stories that reveal the inconsistency of the concept of identity and cultural difference in the space of Diaspora in her works.

Keywords: predicament, bewildered, host, immigrants.

Introduction

Jhumpa Lahiri was born in London to Indian parent's in 1967. She later moved to the United States to continue her higher education. Though she is an Indian by birth, majority of her life was spent in U.S only. As a writer, her first book was *Interpreter of Maladies*, a collection of short stories connected with Indian-American identities and Diaspora. *The Namesake*, Lahiri's first novel was published in 2003. It deals with the themes of immigrants experience, identity and displacement, and ties and clashes between the generations. It aims to discuss and question the sense of displacement in the lives of the characters in *The Namesake* and especially its main character Gogol Ganguli.

As we take distance from the colonial world when the transaction of cultures and identities seemed to be obligatory for the people who lived in such an era, we get closer to the world of transnationalism where that obligation seems to be intentional. This means that people in post-colonial times are not necessarily forced by war or colonization to abandon their homes or live under the hegemonic control of a foreign country. They have more freedom to move and choose where to live. Nevertheless, the later consequences of this movement are unknown and cannot possibly be controlled by these people. In this sense, they intentionally begin a new life in a new place that will have its own new necessities and obligations which can be unknown and unpredictable to them.

If there is displacement in today's world, it is not exclusive for the immigrants and their following generations: everyone in whatever situation, immigrant or not, is liable to be displaced. The borderline between the ethnic or cultural past and present dissipated. Therefore, effects of a powerful ethnic or cultural past are not likely to last for a considerable period of time. Moreover, American culture, which is a blend of different cultures, and being American add to the confusion of the characters in the story.

The Indian immigrants involved in *The Namesake* have an internal dialogue and opposition between their ethnic culture and the culture of the country in which they abide America. For the children who were born in America, the site of the confusion is their household or parental home in America where the Indian culture and customs still exist even if in a diluted form.

Discussion

The life of Indian diasporic communities especially that of women and the social, cultural and religious, racial and ideological conflicts faced by them in the host country becomes highly relevant here. The concept of space is very relevant in the study of diasporic communities. Cultural otherness, generational and cultural alienation from their ethnic community leaves the Indian diasporic women trapped in a space between the culture of homeland and that of the host country. They lack security and emotional support from their family and this isolation leads diasporic women who are emotionally and economically dependent on their husbands to the problems like depression, loss and nostalgia.

Lahiri's *The Namesake*, a cross cultural multi generational story examines the cultural conflicts, pangs, aspirations and dilemmas of the Indian immigrants who find themselves in between the native and host cultures. Namesake is the story of Ashima Bhaduri, a student in degree class who becomes Ashima Ganguli after her betrothal to Ashoke Ganguli of Alpire. After marriage they shift to Boston. The book opens with Ashima Ganguli who is upset, homesick, spatially and emotionally alienated from her ancestral home, trying to recreate the taste of her favorite Indian snack, thereby trying

to reconstruct her past. She thinks of her past with nostalgia of her home and spends her leisure in reading Bengali poems, stories and articles.

The first generation especially Ashima finds it very difficult to accustom to the host culture. Pregnancy was a hard time for her as there was no one to soothe her in the alien land. Motherhood is a glorious stage for a woman but for a migrant in a foreign alien land, loneliness and strange surroundings nearly kill such feelings. She was the only Indian in the hospital with three other American women in the adjoining room. Ashima "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". She is always nostalgic about her relatives in India. After Gogol's birth she says to Ashoke, "I am saying I don't want to raise Gogol alone in this country. It's not right. I want to go back". Ashoke feels guilty for bringing her to this alien land. But she is determined to bear the pain and to give birth to the infant in an alien land for the sake of the child. She wants her grandmother who is staying in India to assign a name to her new born which shows her desire to hold fast to the conventions of her culture and the resulting disappointment because of the failure to do so. She suffers from sleep deprivation in a house alone with her baby and she visits the supermarket where everyone is a stranger to her. Often recalls her paralyzed move out and explore the world, teaches the culture of her own country but never force them to do or practice it.

Ashima is always reminded of the words of her elders who told her "not to eat beef or wear skirts or cut off her hair or forget her family" (The Namesake 37). But the second generation does not abide to these rules and lives a life of their own. The novel in a way portrays the problems of acculturation and assimilation faced by the first as well as the second generation immigrants. Moushumi is a new generation Bengali born and raised in America's multicultural society and is a peculiar combination of Indian, American and French identities. Her education at New York University, her frequent visits to France and England changed her perspectives and her native cultural consciousness. She has little appreciation for India or Indians and is more westernized in her attitude. She has "privately vowed that she had never grown fully dependent on her husband (247). Their marriage relationship that developed in America's multicultural milieu ends in divorce. The second generation immigrants Sonia when they visited Calcutta did not feel alienation and nostalgia in her. She gradually assimilates bits and pieces of the new cultures unlike Moushumi have a sense of duty and marry her boyfriend a half Chinese boy Ben. She decides to look after her mother after her father's death.

Ashima like many immigrants Bengali women is not culturally immunized by America's multi culture, is a strong follower of Indian cultures and gives importance to family and relationship. She does her best to perform the role of a homemaker and tries to upload the traditional values against the materialistic values of America. The fear of

losing her Bengali culture and of her children's neglect of their original culture secretly torments her.

'Multiculturalism' suggests the co-existence of a number of different cultures. It does not prescribe homogenization and conformity directly. It also does not encourage openly different ethnic religions, lingual or racial constituents of a particular society to degrade and alienate each other so that such a society is damaged or destroyed permanently. *The Namesake* is a perfect reference for Lahiri's story about the strangeness of the Indian immigrant experience in the United States and that is somewhat true also because the child of immigrants begins in a kind of nowhere place. Gogol or even Lahiri is firmly of America but is not quite an American in part because they are not recognized as such by others. Gogol desires to blend in the American society. He wants to live unnoticed. But he is not viewed as an American by other Americans, even though he is a native born citizen. He tries to put a wall between his past and his present but it is not easy. The adoption of 'Nikhil' is a part to live only in the present, but the ghost of Gogol clings to him that he signs his old name unconsciously, he does not respond immediately when he is addressed as Nikhil. He tries to become an entirely different person from what really he is. Gogol struggles to carry the burden of two names. Nikhil resembles American names, yet 'Gogol' and his past follow him everywhere. He experiences a feeling of being in-between. Jhumpa Lahiri tries to focus on the issue of identity what she had faced in her childhood. The problem of Gogol's name symbolizes the problem of his identity. He wants to be connected to the strange names in the graveyard when the students were taken to the graveyard for the project. He wants to relate himself with American locate but his name hinders his way to be recognized as an American. Nikhil replaces Gogol when he enters Yale as a freshman. Here nobody knows his earlier name. He feels relief and confident. No one knows him as Gogol but Nikhil. His life with new name also gets changed. Gogol is an outsider in American society whereas he does not feel intimacy with Indianness. So 'who he is' becomes a great problem. It is the name which determines identity. Gogol is trying to get identity. Even after making all efforts to erase his past, his failure to assert his identity is seen in his relationship with women. He does not want Ruth or Maxine to meet his parents. Such efforts are made to escape his past identity and heritage.

Lahiri uses Gogol's name to, literally and figuratively, represent the ways in which is cultural heritage serves him from the social sphere, forcing a gap between him and his American friends, and serving as a constant reminder of the depth of this disparity. He already knows that his Indian heritage sets him apart from his schoolmates, and that his inner turmoil is evident from young age. He tries desperately to distance himself from being Indian. He would rather attend art classes than Bengali lessons and he could rather listen to Beatles than his father's classical Indian music.

Gogol is often unhappy because it is difficult for him to reconcile the different cultures, countries, and people that define him. For Gogol, the universal difficulties of adolescence are compounded because he is the son of first generation immigrants. He begins to address his parents in English, while they speak to him in Bengali. Gogol wants to adopt to American values and life concepts, which are firmly resisted at home.

Conclusion

The Namesake is a story of identities. It begins with the migration in the first generation and follows with its specific concerns to the second generation. Alienation is a part of the experience of the Indian diaspora and even if people are at home in any part of the world it does not mean that they will not become victims of the sense of alienation. The novel depicts how the immigrants face cultural dilemmas in the foreign system. The second generation diaspora finds their roots only after undergoing cultural imbalance. Diaspora is all about the creation of new identities. Their own children groomed to be 'bilingual' and 'bicultural' face cultural dilemmas and displacement more. But at last Lahiri also shows that all immigrants carve their own 'routes' in the course of time and it's not necessary that they should settle in the country of their own origin.

References

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