



SIGNIFICANCE OF DUAL IDENTITY IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S *THE NAMESAKE*

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Abstract

Jhumpa Lahiri is a renowned Indian American writer of Bengali origin who won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction for her debut short story collection *Interpreter of Maladies* in 2000. She is known for her craft of inventing and creating fictional accounts of Indians living abroad. The present paper talks about diasporas and the experiences of the diasporic community staying abroad. Diasporas have often been viewed as problematic; the diasporic community experiences the pangs of oppression, dispossession and displacement from their motherland. While analyzing immigration and its associated problems it must be understood that new immigrants come from a society where they had been part of the whole community. Once these people leave their original homelands they experience the pangs of alienation and the outcome of their deliberate choice is dispossession and displacement. Diasporas thus live in one country as community but look across time and space to another. The migrant diasporas experience displacement, fragmentation and discontinuity in the cultural discourse of the subject countries. The novel *The Namesake* is a documentary of immigrants' lives who feel displaced and homesick, floating in an anonymous island, far away from home.

Keywords: Diaspora, Alienation, Displacement, Cultural Dilemmas,

The study on Diasporic literature grew popular in the new literary scenario during the late 1990s. The word Diaspora originated from the Greek meaning to disperse. Diasporas, the voluntary or forcible movement of peoples from their homelands into new regions, is a historical fact of colonisation (Ashcroft 68). The story of Indians living outside India, in foreign lands is of immense curiosity especially in times of immigrant dilemmas in many places. We often

happen to hear about the troubles faced by our fellowbeings in a totally strange land. Indian diasporic writers focus on the issues of alienation, displacement, rootlessness and the nostalgia for the homeland and traditions in their novels.

Jhumpa Lahiri is a renowned Indian American writer of Bengali Origin who won the Pulitzer prize for her debut short story

collection *Interpreter of Maladies* in 2000. Her works such as *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), *The Namesake* (2003) and *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008) portray the living experiences of Indian immigrants and their children in America.

The novel *The Namesake* begins with Ashima, the wife of Ashok, who is in the hospital in US to deliver their baby without the emotional support of her family, which is in India. She feels lonely and abandoned, as she struggles through the barriers of culture and language. "There is nothing to comfort her in the off-white tiles of the floor, the off-white panels of the ceiling, the white sheets tucked tightly into bed"(4). The loneliness arises from her inability to find herself a proper identity in the midst of strange culture and language, however hard she tries to imbibe it. The emotional agony stresses her intensely and adds to her physical pain. It pains her not to have her relatives around her when she gives birth to her first child in a foreign country. She misses the comfort of her home very much. For her, the homeland stands for comfort and peace; whereas her present abode of stay suffocates her inner being. But she gradually comes into terms with her new home and manages things well when her husband is away on teaching.

The accidental naming of their first born as Gogol also brings twists to the plot. Gogol who cannot identify himself with the name starts hating the company of others who address him as Gogol. He also has a sense of alienation which arises from his inability to identify with other white children as well as his parents who are Indians. Thus forms a split or a wide gap between the two generations. Lahiri, who belongs to the second generation immigrants, has portrayed the confused states of minds possessed by the younger generation. The children, Gogol and Sonia, are not quite comfortable with the climate and rough roads in their homeland. They want to return to America, their home. Gogol's failed love affairs shows his rootlessness and his inability to settle down. In the end too, we find him alone, but rather

comfortable with the discovery of his father's gift (book of Gogol) to him. It hints on a new beginning for him.

The identity crisis faced by children born to immigrant parents is too serious. They cannot identify with their parents' aspirations, but at the same time, they are not accepted by the whites as one among them. At one point Gogol tries settling down with Moushumi, a girl of Bengali origin. But they get divorced as Moushumi develops an affair with another man. They seem to be restless souls, in search of their true identity. They wander and trip long their journey of life.

The multi-layered hybrid identity is a characteristic of diasporic cultures. Identity, here, becomes the net result of one's response to social experiences. Social identity is intended as a concept to mediate between social context and the action of human subjects. The social identity tradition is fundamentally oriented toward variability and possibility in human social behaviour, rather than toward singularity and constraint. Its broad approach fits well with the social thinker Geertz's (1993) argument that human nature is to be found not in behavioural uniformities but in the patterning of behavioural differences:

If we want to discover what man amounts to, we can only find it in what men are: and what men are, above all other things, is various. It is in understanding that variousness – its range, its nature, its basis and its implications – that shall come to construct a concept of human nature that, more than a statistical shadow and less than a primitivist dream. Has both substance and truth. (51-52)

According to Burke, the need for identification originates from division and becomes a reasonable cause for man try to identify with other fellow beings and thus, unite (qtd. In Branaman 3: 446). We witness this need for identification in Lahiri's novel *The*

namesake. They are essentially lonely in a faraway place, very distant from their culture and language. It is their need to identify themselves with something familiar that makes them long for their homeland. The usual family friends get-together that they hold in their neighbouring circles give them a feel of their distant homes, their culture and traditions which they had to leave behind for better prospects in a faraway place. The immigrants face difficulty in coping with a new culture which is entirely different from theirs. The immigrant children or rather the second generation immigrants find it more confusing when they get themselves caught between two different cultures. Jhumpa Lahiri herself has commented on her status as a child of immigrant parents. She says: I wanted to please my parents and meet their expectations. I also wanted to meet the expectations of my American peers, and the expectations I put on myself to fit into an American society. It's a classic case of divided identity . . .' (qtd. In Bhatt 40). Gogol's twin names pose a threat to his identity for a long time, almost till the end of the novel. Toward the end he almost get reconciled to his dual identity, he is ready to accept.

The dilemmas they encounter in their relationships shows their affiliation towards a western culture; they are never satisfied with their partners and do not follow the values and ethics of their parents. Their parents can never let go of their old culture and values and we can sense the nostalgia for their homeland. Gogol wants to lead an independent life, but his parents expect him to live according to Indian values, which is quite disturbing to him. He manages to have dual existence. Being both Gogol and Nikhil claim his true identity which is not purely American or Indian. Though he is born and brought up in America he is still an Indian to his fellow Americans. When he returns to India, he is referred to as an NRI. Lahiri has depicted the pain of the second generation, who has no land to be called their own. They live in a

land which they 'own' by birth, but to which they can never 'belong' because of their roots.

Lahiri also portrays the generational differences of the immigrant parents and their children. They face different problems – the first being directly related to one's homeland and second generation forming an image of culture based on the information transmitted by the first generation. We see a young Indian technocrat, Ashoke, who, returns to India to marry a girl from his place of birth. He wants to retain his identity and keep his ties with his homeland forever through his being married to Ashima. But Ashima who is new in a foreign place feels totally alienated from her homeland. It is only the memories of her home and parents which comforts her in a faraway country. For her, "Being a foreigner is a sort of lifelong pregnancy - a perpetual wait, a constant burden, a continuous feeling out of sort. Like pregnancy, being a foreigner, she believed is something that elicits the same curiosity from strangers, the same combination of pity and respect" (50). As Sunita Agarwal states "the dichotomy between private and public sphere is almost tormenting to these women immigrants who have to suffer double dependence. It becomes difficult for them to cope with multiple stresses of the two different cultures" (30).

Ashoke and Ashima celebrate all the Bengali festivals with their Bengali friends in their neighbourhood. They wear traditional clothes and practice all the rituals and ceremonies, which connect them to their home. Thus they try to retain their roots and culture. The new generation finds it hard to practice whatever their parents do, because they are aliens to their homeland, of which, they have only images given by parents. They do not belong to their parents' place; they are rather comfortable with their 'new' homes. The sense of not belonging anywhere is tormenting to the immigrant children, as they are not accepted as one among the whites in their 'comfortable' home. It is a sense of dual identity which troubles them throughout their lives. Ashoke

and Ashima are not pleased with Gogol's affair with a foreign girl, something which is quite displeasing to traditional Indian parents. They tell him, "You are too young to get involved in this way" (117). But Gogol cannot identify with the thoughts and aspirations of his parents, quite natural to children living abroad.

The feeling of loss of identity is very core to the theme of diasporic literature. It often focuses on the experience of immigrants, racism and hostility, and the sense of alienation— all arising due to displacement of people from one place to another. We get a vivid picture of the lives of immigrants in Lahiri's novels and short stories.

Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* consists of nine short stories which give an account of the diversified experiences of immigrants living in US and UK, some on a short visit to their native country, confronting cultural differences. Her characters in *The Namesake*, often find themselves in a cultural dilemma, which they cope with so elegantly. Though Ashima misses the warmth and comfort of her Indian home, she gets accustomed to the ways of her new life. It shows the strength of human beings to adapt to the new situations and experiences.

Ashoke's death and the ceremony of mourning with the extended community of Indians in New England, brings his wife, Gogol and Gogol's sister together into a renewed orientation. Going back to his life as it had been with Maxine, in which there is no room, no air for another culture or family, is predictably impossible. What is unpredictable is the trajectory of his relationship with Moushumi, whom he eventually agrees to see reluctantly, at the pleading of his mother. Moushumi is the girl his parents might have picked for an arranged marriage like their own. In a sense she represents everything that Gogol has fled. But what she offers is also every-thing that arranged marriages offer: the familiar, the comfortable, the support and understanding of family and community, "He had not expected to enjoy

himself, to be attracted to her in the least. It strikes him that there is no term for what they once were to each other. Their parents were friends, not they. She is a family acquaintance but she is not family" (199).

Ashima takes her husband's sudden death and her son's unhappy life in stride. She no longer wonders about her son's or daughter's broken love affairs; it is part of their new identity. There is no single place to which they belong and they have a sense of exile inherited from their parents. Jhumpa Lahiri herself was born in London and brought up in Rhode Island USA, but her appearance and name points to Asia, or rather India where she was not born or has lived. It is like living two separate lives; as an Indian at home and an American among fellow mates.

Ashoke and Ashima cling to their past while living in the present. They love the memories of their life in India and remain faithful to their heritage. They live in America without losing their sense of being an Indian. It is different in the case of their children, Gogol and Sonia, who do not cherish their parents' emotions regarding their homeland. They do not want to leave the material comforts in America; the journey to India becomes rather tiresome to them. Hence they do not view themselves as belonging to India. They aspire to be like Americans, adopting their culture, lifestyle, and dress codes. But they realise that the Indian part in them cannot be wiped out, especially, Gogol, who reconciles with his name and accepts it with a yearning to understand his father through the book gifted by him. He decides to live by accepting his Indian roots in the American context.

CONCLUSION

Lahiri in her novel *The Namesake* grapples with characters that are caught between two worlds. They want to keep alive the memories of their homeland and preserve their heritage. She 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.

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