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ALIENATION AND IDENTITY PROBLEMS IN THE WORKS OF BHARATI MUKHERJEE AND JHUMPA LAHIRI WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO *WIFE* AND *THE NAMESAKE*

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ABSTRACT

Both Bharati Mukherjee and Jhumpa Lahiri highlight the different problems faced by immigrants in their works. *Jasmine* by Bharati Mukherjee portrays the struggle faced by the protagonist right from her early days of her life till her landing in America and thereafter. *The Namesake* by Jhumpa Lahiri throws light on the problems of not only the first generation immigrants but also the second generation immigrants. Both the writers are very philosophical in their approach to the problems of immigrants. It is very pertinent to note that the writers do not take the immigrants' sides anywhere in their works. Though the writers address different issues, the paper focuses mainly on the hassles faced by immigrants in foreign countries.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Diaspora refers to dispersion. According to Webster's dictionary, Diaspora refers to scattering of Jews after Babylonian exile. Diaspora refers to trauma and pain, as people carry their culture, identity, language, idiosyncrasies etc with them to the place, where they intend to settle down. From time immemorial, man has migrated to different places in search of greener pastures. Man migrated for jobs, education, and settlement to different countries with the main intention of climbing up the social ladder of life.

An expatriate finds it hard to accept the new place in the beginning as everything around him is different. First and foremost, an expatriate has to become financially stable in order to satiate his basic needs.

Mingling with the people of the new country is another hindrance, which an expatriate has to counter. In the initial stage, the new settler

seeks solace in the company of his own people, who also face similar travails.

The myriad experiences of settlers form the staple theme of diasporic writers like Bharati Mukherjee, Jhumpa Lahiri, Uma Parameswaran etc. The above mentioned writers are in the right position to comment upon the experiences of expatriates, as they themselves have experienced the hassles of expatriates.

The literature of Indian Diaspora became popular only in the last two decades. Indian immigrants are found in different parts of the world and they want to make a mark in the field of literature. The Indian immigrants want to identify themselves as global citizens without losing their Indian identity. This is the main reason, why they are expressing themselves so forcefully through literature.

The works of Indian Diaspora are welcomed with open arms in countries, which they have adopted as their homelands. In fact, the works of Indian immigrants are prescribed under the heading "Courses in Indian Literature" in various foreign countries. The western audience also shows a lot of interest in understanding Indian sensibility, which is manifested in the literary texts. Attracting publishers is also easy for writers, who write about the different experiences of the expatriates.

One of the important themes of Diaspora literature is getting acceptance from people belonging to the country, which the immigrants have made their own. Striking a work life balance is another recurring theme in Diaspora literature. The immigrants are not easily accepted by the natives in the early days of their settlement. It takes years of sweat, toil and exertion for immigrants to become part of the mainstream society. Writers like Bharati Mukherjee, Jhumpa Lahiri and Uma Parameswaran explore these themes in their literary works.

It is interesting to note that the settlers keep in touch with their friends, relatives, former colleagues etc in different ways. In the early 1980s and 1990s, when technology was not well developed, the settlers communicated through letters, telephones, faxes etc. As technology started making rapid strides, immigrants found it easy to keep in touch with their near and dear ones. Social networking sites like Twitter, Whatsapp etc have become a real boon for the immigrants to connect with their roots.

It is very surprising to note that the women writers outnumber their male counterparts as far as contribution to diaspora literature is concerned. May be the female writers have so much matter to write as they struggle hard to realize their full potential in alien shores. The males have to make both ends meet and as a result, they strive to make optimum use of the time by getting themselves engaged in different occupations. After the initial euphoria dies down, the females find it difficult to kill time. The immigrants especially ladies unravel their dormant potential and come out with wonderful literary pieces.

Jhumpa Lahiri's female protagonist in *The Namesake*, Ashima is an ideal Bengali woman in the

beginning of the novel. Most of her time is spent in chopping vegetables and taking care of her little baby. She sticks to her Bengali roots by reading Bengali short stories, eating home-made Bengali stuff and listening to filmy songs.

Gradually, life becomes taxing for Ashima, as her husband Ashoke is not able to spend much time with her. This leads to disillusionment for Ashima, which even drives her to the point of insanity. As a consequence, Ashima keeps nagging Ashoke to finish research work quickly, so that it is feasible for them to go back.

As things get slightly complicated for Ashima, she tries to adopt hands on approach to make her life slightly better. Instead of completely depending on her husband, Ashima tries to do certain domestic chores on her own. Apart from cooking and cleaning the house, Ashima immerses herself in other activities like shopping for groceries, taking the child out in the pram etc. These activities lead to emancipation and satisfaction.

Slowly but steadily, Ashima overcomes her shortcomings and manages to shed her inhibitions effortlessly. In other words, Ashima manages to conquer the new country instead of allowing the country to stifle her. In the later stages of the novel, the readers come to know that Ashima has taken up a part time job in a library to utilize her leisure hours. There comes a point in the novel, where Ashima successfully overcomes the sad demise of her husband albeit with the assistance of her children.

Bharati Mukherjee's novel "Wife" is a stark contrast to Jhumpa Lahiri's "The Namesake." The protagonist of Bharati Mukherjee's *Wife* is Dimple, once again a Bengali woman who nurtures hopes of going abroad after marriage. The convent educated Dimple spends most of her time watching Bollywood movies and dreaming about her future husband.

Dimple's dreams turn into a nightmare after marriage. The moment she steps on foreign soil, she feels like a fish out of water. Dimple's husband is not able to understand the mental turmoil of his wife. This worsens the mental condition of Dimple.

Another problem highlighted by Bharati Mukherjee in *Wife* is the lack of space for early

immigrants. Dimple and her husband do not have any personal space to call it their own. In fact, the couple is sharing space with other friends. This compounds the problem for Dimple. Day by day, Dimple's problems multiply and add to her frustration.

Yet another difficulty for Dimple is that she is used as a prop by her soulmate. Dimple is made to wash dishes, cook for many people much against her wishes. With every passing day, Dimple condition worsens. Dimple is also to blame herself for her deteriorating situation. She is unable to mix with others and spends most of the time brooding over her past.

It is very pertinent to pay close attention to the climax scene in Bharati Mukherjee's *Wife*. Dimple gets so disillusioned with her life in the United States that she takes the extreme step of stabbing her husband. This act is a clear indication of Dimple expressing herself and demanding freedom from marital bondage.

Bharati Mukherjee's Dimple is a complete contrast to Jhumpa Lahiri's Ashima. Ashima is able to succeed because she ultimately comes to grips with the new place. On the contrary, Dimple allows herself to be stifled by the new surroundings. Ashima is ably supported by her husband and children in her attempt to taste success at the new place. In comparison, Dimple's husband adds to her misery at the new place. Both the characters Ashima and Dimple offer ample scope for researchers to analyse the different factors that contribute to the success and failure of an immigrant in an alien place.

Uma Parameswaran in her work, "Rootless but green are the Boulevard trees" has a completely different take on the problems faced by immigrants in far flung countries like Canada, the U.S.A. etc. Canada located in the northern hemisphere is noted for its harsh climate not only for Indians but also Europeans. Uma Parameswaran focuses on the travails of South Indians who migrate to Canada with the aim of settling down.

South India is famous for its typically hot climate. So, it comes as a pleasant surprise for South Indians especially people belonging to Chennai, when they experience the intense chill of a

far away country like Canada. Added to the complete change in temperature, another problem that an immigrant faces is food. South Indians who are used to steamed idlis and hot sambar struggle to get adjusted to the new food. In order to forget their travails, the immigrants try to live together with their fellow immigrants in the new place. Community living is practised by immigrants to drive away fear, boredom, ennui etc.

Jhumpa Lahiri also highlights the problem of food in both her short stories and the novel. The protagonist's father Ashoke in "The Namesake" faces hardships in the initial days of his settlement in the United States. Most of the time the characters have to restrict themselves to bread, milk and bananas, as they have to save every penny possible to make both ends meet. The immigrants have to take care of themselves in a completely different place and as a result, they cannot afford to be wayward in their spending. The lifestyle of an immigrant has to be extremely disciplined in order to be successful in unfamiliar territories.

It is a pleasant surprise to note that all the writers taken up for discussion namely Jhumpa Lahiri, Bharati Mukherjee and Uma Parameswaran are highly successful female diasporic writers. Another fascinating detail to be taken note of is that women have a rich variety of experiences to share with readers, as they have plenty of leisure time to ponder over different aspects of life in foreign shores. Meena Alexander and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni are the other names that readily spring to mind, when one contemplates the contribution of female writers to diasporic literature.

It is pertinent to observe that there are different categories in diaspora like Indian diaspora, Bangladeshi diaspora, Pakistani diaspora etc. Driven by job, education, economic stability etc people are forced to migrate to other countries. Any researcher finds it challenging to do full justice to the different categories of diaspora, as time is at a premium and also the material is exhaustive. It is of paramount importance for the researcher to narrow down the topic in order to complete the work successfully within a limited timeframe. Taking this point of view into consideration, the researcher has

taken for study only two authors namely Bharati Mukherjee and Jhumpa Lahiri.

The contributions made by Jhumpa Lahiri and Bharati Mukherjee have been manifold in the last two decades. In fact, the contribution is so immense that the literary works of these writers have been prescribed for different courses in the United States.

Starting from "The Tiger's daughter till the latest novel "New Miss India," Bharati

Mukherjee continues to enthrall the readers through her works. Similarly Jhumpa Lahiri continues her rich vein of form from her debut work "The Interpreter of Maladies" till the latest offering "The Lowland."

For their sterling contribution to literature, both the writers got literary awards instituted in the United States. Bharati Mukherjee got the National Book Critics award for "The Middleman and other stories." Jhumpa Lahiri went one step further by winning the prestigious Pulitzer Prize for her debut work "The Interpreter of Maladies."

The times of Bharati Mukherjee and Jhumpa Lahiri are completely different as both started their literary careers at different points. In fact, Bharati Mukherjee started in the late 1970s and Jhumpa Lahiri started in the late 1990s. Naturally, both the writers dealt with different issues in their literary works.

If one looks into the works of Bharati Mukherjee carefully, one can comprehend the travails of early immigrants. For instance, Bharati Mukherjee's early work "The Tiger's daughter" focuses on the disillusionment of an immigrant in one's own country. The novel "Wife" explains the mental trauma of an immigrant in an alien country. "Jasmine" elaborates on the problems faced by the protagonist in establishing herself in foreign shores. In brief, Bharati Mukherjee's works throw light on the initial setbacks of immigrants, as they struggle to get a toehold in a new place.

Jhumpa Lahiri's depiction of characters offers a fine contrast to Bharati Mukherjee's. Jhumpa Lahiri focuses on the hurdles, which the immigrants have to overcome in order to climb the social ladder of life. The characters in the works of Jhumpa Lahiri are keen to prove their mettle in the

new place. The characters are willing to go the extra mile in their quest for success. Here again, the point to be noted is that the first generation immigrants show a lot of zeal to get success. On the other hand, the second generation immigrants get into a sort of comfort zone and as a consequence, do not have the same appetite for success like the first generation immigrants.

The attitude of the first generation immigrant is best exemplified by Ashoke in "The Namesake." Even when the name board is severely damaged by the natives, he is least affected by the incident. The nonchalant attitude of Ashoke is a result of the early hardships that he faced in his life in the United States. On the contrary, Gogol, the son of Ashoke immediately wants to rebel against the offenders for the same incident mentioned above. The main reason is that Gogol is not accustomed to the hardships faced by his father. Moreover, Gogol is a second generation immigrant. The attitude of both Ashoke and Gogol to the same incident reflects the thinking of first generation and second generation immigrant respectively.

The female protagonists of Bharati Mukherjee and Jhumpa Lahiri are a complete contrast to each other. Ashima marries Ashoke not out of choice but out of compulsion. The same is the case with Dimple in Wife. The similarity between Ashima and Dimple ends here. In both the novels, The Namesake and Wife, the fathers of the female protagonists do not give any choice to their daughters even for selecting their life partners. Ashima's ability to overcome all odds helps her to become a successful immigrant. Dimple on the other hand, allows her to be trapped by difficulties and ultimately kills her husband, Amit Basu.

In the initial days of settlement, every immigrant goes through an excruciating phase. How the immigrant overcomes the excruciating phase shows the resilience and will power of the immigrant. In both the novels, The Namesake and Wife, the female protagonists nag their husbands to take them back to their place of birth.

Ashoke, Ashima's husband and Amit Basu, Dimple's husband handle the delicate situation in contrasting styles. The prudent Ashoke politely tells Ashima that she will get the hang of things in due

course of time. In contrast, Amit Basu, Dimple's husband gives a false assurance to Dimple saying that he will send her back to Calcutta by the next chartered flight.

The realistic answer given by Ashoke is a complete contrast to the unrealistic response of Amit Basu. The different ways of handling the same situation adopted by Ashoke and Amit Basu respectively lead to mixed reactions from both Ashima and Dimple. Ashima accepts her fate and gets on with life. Dimple starts building castles in the air and gets disillusioned in the process. The role of husbands in shaping the thinking of their wives cannot be undermined under any circumstances. Dimple gets so rigid that she is in no mood to listen to the words of Ina Mullick, who want her to put on trousers instead of Bengali saree. Dimple tightly holds on to her Bengali roots, till the roots strangulate her mentally and socially.

Both Bharati Mukherjee and Jhumpa Lahiri faced different types of hurdles in their places of domicile. Bharati Mukherjee's experiences in Canada were quite bitter and as a result, her early works like *Darkness*, *Wife* etc depicted the hardships of immigrants in foreign shores. Jhumpa Lahiri's trials and tribulations first in London and then in New York though not challenging were not bitter like Bharati Mukherjee. This may be the reason why the literary works of Jhumpa Lahiri are not dark like those of Bharati Mukherjee.

Technology has developed by leaps and bounds in the last two decades. The impact of technology on the literary writer is another point worth observing. A critical analysis of Jhumpa Lahiri's characters clearly reveals that they keep in touch with their near and dear ones via phone, mail, fax etc.

In "The Namesake," the sudden demise of Ashima's father prompts Ashima to leave for Calcutta at the earliest. Still Ashoke, Ashima's husband makes sure that the tickets are booked for the entire family including little Gogol at a very short notice. Jhumpa Lahiri writes about the new developments in Ashima's life as follows:-

"They leave for India six days later, six weeks before they'd planned."(46)

Nearly two decades separate Bharati Mukherjee's debut work "The Tiger's daughter" and Jhumpa Lahiri's debut novel "The Namesake." So many technological developments have taken place during these two decades. These advancements in technology invariably find a place in the works of Jhumpa Lahiri. Careful analysis of the works of Jhumpa Lahiri clearly indicates that the characters created by the author are tech savvy and they seem to live in a world of their own. As a result, characters like Ashoke, Ashima and Gogol Ganguli in *The Namesake* are mature enough to handle things on their own.

II. Conclusion

The problems of immigrants are handled effectively by both Bharati Mukherjee and Jhumpa Lahiri. It is interesting to note that the problems faced by the first generation immigrants are different from those of the second generation immigrants. In *Wife*, Bharati Mukherjee elaborates on the mental breakdown of Dimple Das Gupta which culminates with the act of stabbing her husband. It is Jhumpa Lahiri, who has captured the inner turmoil of first generation immigrants as they come to grips with the new place. Compared to the first generation immigrants, the second generation immigrants handle the different problems in a matured manner and they even mitigate the sufferings of first generation immigrants.

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