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AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL ELEMENTS IN *THE NAMESAKE*

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ABSTRACT

Jhumpa Lahiri's debut novel *The Namesake* attempts to give outburst to Lahiri's emotions. Being a second immigrant, she convincingly illustrates the lives of both first generation and second generation Indian migrants in the US. Here, she minutely depicts the diasporic feeling of strangeness, the conflicting ways of life, cultural bewilderment and the struggle of assimilation. Close resemblance can easily be traced between the writer and the characters of the novel. The parents struggle with raising their children in America while maintaining their culture. The children struggle with being American, but still having parents who are from India, thus facing the crisis of dual identity leaving them into state of in-betweenness. Like Lahiri, Gogol also has hard time explaining to his friends and others as to why such a name was given to him. In an attempt to search other similar name like him, Gogol tries to find his own identity. Thus the novel authentically depicts the feeling of Lahiri as a diaspora with the help of varied characters in different situations.

Key Words: Second immigrant, Diasporic feelings, Cultural bewilderment, Assimilation, Resemblance, In-betweenness.

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India constitutes a large number of diaspora all over the world. Migration of people in various countries is no longer a surprising issue. Immigrants endeavour to settle in adopted land. Though they adapt foreign way of life and culture yet the pull of past intervenes in their life. They become nostalgic and feel alienated. If out of these immigrants some choose writing as their profession, they consciously or unconsciously give vent to their diasporic experiences in their writings. They attempt to focus on pains, dilemma, discrimination and conflicts they have to face there. Through their imaginary characters they catharsise themselves.

In the fleet of diasporic writers Jhumpa Lahiri is one such name. She can be acclaimed as one of the shining stars in the galaxy of diasporic

writers. Her fiction is the result of the writer's "desire to force the two worlds I occupied to mingle on the page as I was not brave enough, or mature enough, to allow in life" (Lahiri, *My Two Lives*). She explores human predicament and the crisis of identity in the alienated land of America though she has made it her home land. Her debut novel *The Namesake* attempts to give outburst to Lahiri's emotions. The novel carries personal experiences of the novelist.

The novel is about a Bengali Hindu family, settled in America attempting to assimilate in the American cultural milieu, at the same time retaining their Bengali customs and heritage. Here, she convincingly illustrates the lives of both first generation and second generation Indian migrants

in the US. The parents, Ashoke and Ashima, like novelist's parents, struggle with raising their children in America while maintaining their culture. The children, Gogol and Sonia, like Jhumpa Lahiri, struggle with being American, but still having parents who are from India, thus facing the crisis of dual identity.

The fact that Jhumpa Lahiri has chosen *The Namesake* as the title of the novel shows the importance that she attaches to the identity of her protagonist. She herself has undergone from the trauma of a strange name as her good name Nilanjana Swadeshna was rejected by her teacher because it was very difficult to pronounce again and again and preferred to call her Jhumpa Lahiri. In an interview with Arun Aguir, she admits that she never felt comfortable with her name she asserts, "When I entered the American world as a child, I endlessly had to explain to people how to say my name and how to spell it and what it means"(n.pag). The novel deals with the same distress and discomfort that lies there in a name. Ganguli parents, forced by authorities to name his newly born son, in the state of hurry and confusion, offer the "second" name, Gogol, never meant for use as the child's public, or formal, name. 'Gogol is a Russian name and seems irrelevant to the boy as it is neither American nor Indian. Like the novelist, Gogol also has hard time explaining to his friends and others as to why such a name was given to him in the first place. He fails to understand who actually is he- American or Indian or someone else? Throughout the novel, Gogol is haunted by his name; even when he changes it to Nikhil he realizes that he cannot get away from it. The oddness of his name strikes him time and again. The name of Nikhil Ganguli is problematized at length in the novel and suggests how someone has to suffer due to unfamiliar name in foreign land and this problem intensifies trauma of immigrants. Gogol's struggle for a proper name can be seen in the context of his search for identity in a land where he took birth and which is adopted by his parents.

Being a second immigrant the novelist has deeply drunk feelings of first immigrant diaspora through her parents. She saw her mother craving for her motherland, her customs, her father remembering his family, his Indian friends etc. In the

novel, Gogol's parents, Ashoke and Ashima are also carrying same notions. Ashima spends a lot of her time crying, depressed at the lack of company, at the distance from her family and at the unfamiliarity of everything around her. She always finds herself in state of non- belongingness. As far as Ashoke's case is concerned, he is like novelist's father, who has somewhat adjusted himself in foreign land but still finds peace in motherland memories, Bengali friends and Indian attire.

Another issue which emerges again and again is cultural clash not only outside the family but inside also. The novelist writes at length to show cultural differences between immigrant parents and their children who take birth in adopted land because she finds herself torn between two cultures i.e. culture of her parents which they had left but still cling on it and the culture of United States where they are residing at present. In an interview, she accepts that on one side she wanted to please her parents and meet their expectations but on the other side she also wanted to meet the expectations of her American peers, and the expectations she put on herself to fit into American society. Same happens with Gogol and Sonia in the novel.

Gogol and Sonia have grown up with the culture of US and they understand that US is their native land- they do and think as the American do. Now they are adapted to the foreign land. On the other hand Ashima and Ashoke want them to retain their Indian heritage. They force them to learn the lesson of Bengali language and culture. Ashima, like Lahiri's mother make every possible effort to keep their children in touch with Bengali culture but children don't take interest in it. Both children Gogol and Sonia show little interest in Indian heritage. They feel more at home in host county in contrast to India. Gogol always considers himself as an American not an Indian. But other Americans do not take him as an American, they always treat him as an Indian living in America due to his colour and culture. This American attitude brings Gogol in 'no-where' situation which aggravates his sense of alienation. Jhuma lahiri has also suffered same sense of exile and outsider in all country. Despite being product of three countries - India by heritage, U.K by birth and United States by immigration; she feels

homeless. While growing up she often visited Calcutta with her parents because her mother wanted her children to know everything about her Bengali Culture, language and inheritance. But she does not feel at home in that country either. In her interview with Barbara Kantowitz to *News Week*, she told, "I've often felt that I am somehow illegitimate in both cultures. A true Indian does not accept me as an Indian, and true American doesn't accept me as an American" (59).

Thus, in the novel, Lahiri explores the ideas of cultural and personal isolations through her various characters. With personal bearings, the novelist successfully illustrates the fate of first and second immigrants, their experiences and struggles in adopted land and shows how second generation of migrants dwells between cultures, one, the culture of native land which is deeply rooted in the personality of their parents and another one, in which they are living.

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