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THE SOJOURN TO WEST AND IDENTITY CRISIS IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S *THE NAMESAKE*

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ABSTRACT

Being a proponent of diaspora writing, Jhumpa Lahiri, in her novel '*The Namesake*,' encompasses an immigrant family's picture where they suffer from their cultural rootlessness and identity crisis. In this novel, Jhumpa shows how a family disintegrated from their inborn culture in pursuit of better opportunity in the foreign land gets frustrated and disillusioned. At the outset of the novel, Jhumpa wants to shed light on the present situation of immigrants' lives where they try to accommodate and assimilate the adopted culture. Ashok and Ashima Ganguly try their best to adopt the lifestyle of the foreign culture but the reminiscences of their ancestral culture create in them homesickness and nostalgic attitude. The debilitation of their ancestral culture in their children generates anxiety in them making them eager to inculcate the home culture through practicing Durga and Saraswati Puja in the foreign soil. But their children being obsessive for inborn culture, traditions and festivals create in them antipathy towards their origin culture. So Ashok and Ashima are impelled to organise the birth of Christ to delight their children. On the other part, Ashima spends different life from rest of the family since coming to America. From her pregnancy to her husband's death, she feels lonely, alienated and 'other' in the foreign culture. The protagonist Gogol feels identity crisis from his childhood period. During his admission in the school, his father wants to change his real name from Gogol to Nikhil that ignites in him a feeling of dual identity. The name 'Gogol' becomes horrible for him in adolescent period where he has to confront many ridiculous questions which lead him into identity crisis. He alters his name as Nikhil to escape from his continuous agony but after sometime, his altered identity becomes a dilemma for him which never gives him proper comfort in his life. The paper aims to explore how the displacement of a family from their native land deconstructs their identity and creates a gap from their culture and how second generation immigrants-born children find themselves in hyphenated situation where their parents' Desi culture and their inborn culture demolish their proper identity.

Keywords: Diaspora, rootlessness, identity crisis, immigrant, alienation, other.

Jhumpa Lahiri, the recipient of Pulitzer Prize, was born on July 1967 in London. As a child, her parents took her with them to Rodh Island where

she spent most of her adolescent period. Basically she explores the plight of the post colonial people in her novels. She incorporates an array of themes like

diaspora, migration, border, identity crisis, family relations, travelling, feminism, race, violence and politics. Jhumpa Lahiri pays a visit to India, now and then, with her parents and coming in close contact with the miserable or pathetic situation of the Indians. She experienced the impact of the colonialism as well as the unfavourable effect of diaspora by dint of which most of the families were impelled to leave their homeland for the sake of new journey in unknown land. She became the mouthpiece of those second generation migrants who find themselves in abject and despicable situation among the two cultures where they suffer as foreign born children of the Desi Indian parents. She continued to establish bonhomie with her Bengali heritage from her childhood. Lahiri has an edge over other writers with respect to her exposure to the culture of three countries- India as ancestral culture, United Kingdom as a birth place and United States by immigration that generates in her a sense of unbelongingness and identity crisis. As being second generation immigrant of Indian diaspora, she is not able to rightly claim her original identity among the three countries where the search for identity keeps her on the tenterhooks. Regarding the aforesaid situation, she herself expresses in an interview with Barbare Kantrowitz to *News Week* "I've often felt that I am somehow illegitimate in both cultures. A true Indian doesn't accept me as an Indian and a true American doesn't accept me as an American" (59). Jhumpa Lahiri drew a nice portrayal among her characters of her own pathos experienced by her among the three countries. She could not endorse the ascendancy of one culture which might have proved her original identity being transited firstly as the daughter of the old generation parents and secondly as the citizen of the new land America. Amid these two dimensions, her original inborn identity gradually crumbled down, if not vanished.

From the ancient period, people had to migrate from their own birth place for the sake of ample reasons like economic problems, educational purposes, communal violence, political turmoil, partition etc. but among them some were able to accommodate, assimilate or acculturate the foreign culture and some were still striving to locate their

position between the two cultures. To explore the new identity in the foreign land, sometimes the first generation migrants find themselves into conundrum between the two cultures losing their inborn original identity. They have no one to share their painful agonies. Coming to the foreign land, the feelings of homesickness, homelessness, cultural disparity and racial discrimination vex their present existence. In foreign soil, the sense of homelessness in immigrants produce in them a void that lead them to consider themselves as other, outsider, alien or stranger but the recent development of globalization makes it easier for them to assimilate or acculturate the host culture. In the past, immigrants felt the pang of homelessness due to lack of communication tools. Nowadays, social networking and modern communication tools such as telephone, mobile, whatsapp, facebook and twitter etc. help them to find an escape from the feeling of homelessness, alienation or isolation. Since the second generation migrants tie with two cultures, they have to identify themselves first with the culture where they are born and, on the other side; they have to learn their parent's home culture. "The first generation's story was about adaptation and learning acculturing and also discovering new things about themselves. The second generation finds itself presented with two conflicting realities and cultures and sets of expectations - one of the host countries through the socio-cultural surroundings and the other of the home country through their parents." (Batra- 50).

In foreign land, first generation Indian housewives find themselves into deplorable situation. After coming to foreign land, they have been destined to suffer with their fate there. In the wave of numerous foreigners outside their home, they feel lonely, stranger, other or different. Similarly, in *The Namesake*, Ashoke Ganguli belongs to Bengali family migrated to America to shape his future with his newlywed wife Ashima. They have left no stone unturned to accommodate the American culture with their children Gogol and Sonia but the reminiscence of their ancestral culture does not provide them relief and solace. They are frightened of diminishing the morality of their native culture in their children and also increase the apathy

towards the Bengali festivals like Durga and Saraswati Puja as their free mingling with the foreigners culture inculcate in their children an antipathy towards the ethical values of their ancestors' cultures. Contrary to it, their children show interest in foreign culture in such situation. Ashima and her husband are forced to organise the celebration of the birth of Christ to delight their children although they have no interest in such festival. "For the sake of Gogol and Sonia they celebrate, with progressively increasing fanfare, the birth of Christ, an event the children look forward to far more than the worship of Durga and Saraswati"(The Namesake- 64).

The second generation 'American-born' children have to deal with two cultures confounding their identity and making them precarious whether they should be called American where they are born or Indian from the root of their parent's native land from where they (first generation) came. The first generation immigrants always nourish a desire to keep their old culture alive in the foreign land and, on the other hand, they try to adopt the customs, manner and lifestyle of the host people. But it becomes difficult for 'American-born' children to inculcate in them their parents' ancestral cultures, values and moral ethics in the foreign land and also maintain the customs of their birth place simultaneously. 'The skin colour' of a human being helps in the recognition of a man's ancestral native land especially in western culture where Europeans inherently feel superior for their white colour. Someone taking birth in America from Indian born parents have to face identity problem due to their genetic skin colour thus forcing them to make a claim to be recognised as authentic American. But now they are confused with their dual identity and are not able to continue with two cultures. "American- born children of Indian parents, showing how they do well between the assumptions and dominant form of the American society, on the other hand, and the values of their ancestral homeland, on the other"(Ashcroft 138).

At the outset of the novel, Ashima does not feel comfortable in Cambridge since she has arrived here for the last eighteen months. Ashima Ganguli feels upset, homesick and sulky during her

pregnancy at the hospital where she finds no one who might give her some consolation. Being a woman, at the stage of pregnancy she expects someone who might take care of her but she, in Newlands, is devoid of such opportunity that generates in her a terror for her son Gogol's future and now she is hapless to build her son's future where there are no relatives, kinship and life seems to be haphazard in the unknown culture. Generally the immigrant women have to undergo two responsibilities in the adopted land first to give birth to their offspring and second to revive their ancestral cultures among their children. Ashima had undergone all the stages of her life coming into contact with different sorts of women but she is alone in a faraway country to rear her children. " she 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" (Namesake 6). Jhumpa Lahiri has shown a glimpse of nostalgic attitude in Ashima for her native land who, as a Bengali wife, feels herself as alienated and deprived of the love of her family members in the alien land. Lahiri tries to draw the image of a Bengali family in America where they now experience the dual culture among them, one from ancestral culture and another from adopted land. The juxtaposition of these two cultures creates the feeling of identity crisis in them.

After being discharged from the hospital, Ashima once again loses the company of Patty who serves her the Jell-O and ice cream timely but when she returns home, the feeling of loneliness rush to overpower making her feel irked. At home, she finds no one to sweep the floor, wash the clothes or make the dishes. Ashok tries to spur her on to come out from inapt thinking. The blanket of loneliness keeps her in the corner from where she fails to look after the baby and her husband. She persuades her husband to finish the degree (education) as early as possible. For the first time, cultural disparity raises in her apprehension about her son Gogol's future. She argues with her husband to return home as soon as possible because it is not suitable place. She does not want to shape her son Gogol's future in unknown land. "I'm saying I don't want to raise Gogol alone in this country. It's not right. I want to

go back” (The Namesake- 33). Staying lonely at home, the absence of family members creates perturbation in Ashima who cries with her new born baby boy. No one is there who may respond to her call even her soul companion Ashok fails to answer her call. The absence of kinship leads her to search them in her son Gogol. She observes a number of pictures of her family members in Gogol’s face like her mother’s smooth eyes, her father’s slender lips and her brother’s lopsided smile. She can’t help to control her emotion during Gogol’s feeding where she expects her own brother’s presence who will feed Gogol but it is done by Dilip Nandi. Her son also misses the opportunity of getting the blessing name from her grandmother who sends it into a letter but due to lack of communication, it remains in out of sight from Ashima and her husband. All these present agonies of loneliness and insecurity have pushed Ashima in the corner where she wants someone’s presence who will accompany her in her lonely home. As a typical Indian wife in America, she finds herself busy with domestic work. Being the first generation immigrants, Ashima and Ashok bear the brunt of identity crisis and class difference in America. Lahiri in *The Namesake* portrays the picture of Bengali family in America where contamination of the foreign culture affects their life. Jhumpa divides early migrants into two classes in America, the first belonging to the husband group and another to the wives group. Their profession are totally different, for instance, the husbands are teachers, researchers, engineers and doctors while on the other side, the wives are destined to be housewives.

For Ashima, the displacement from Cambridge to the suburbs is more acute than her immigration from Calcutta to Cambridge. Being a housewife, she has to confine herself within the frontiers of a city where she does not find anyone familiar to talk to. The absence of streetlights, public transportation or stores stuns her. In the dissimilar atmosphere, she finds her as stranger going through her continuous wait, a perpetual burden in her life. For being a foreigner, she alienates her from the society and can’t find any way to escape from such a sort of lifelong pregnancy. “ For being a foreigner, Ashima is beginning to realize, is a sort of lifelong

pregnancy- a perpetual wait, a constant burden, a continuous feeling out of sorts” (The Namesake- 49). Ashima feels the absence of her ancestral culture in her children that raises in her a fear of losing her inborn culture. In Bengali culture, to call elder brother as ‘Dada’ is customary but her daughter Sonia prefers to call Gogol by his name instead of Dada. Ashima is now in conflict with herself by the adverse impact of American culture on her children. Generally first generation immigrants try to linguistically bind themselves with their ancestral culture. Similarly Ashima finds herself at home in Bengali language instead of American English language. In her solitary state in the hospital, she spends time to read ‘a tattered copy of desh magazine’ which provides some relief to her from the ongoing agony. She makes tireless effort to inculcate the convention of Bengali culture in her children making them learn the name of Gods and Goddesses but the antagonistic attitude from her children towards her home culture shatters her totally in isolation.

The protagonist Gogol’s loneliness starts at the time of his admission in the school where Ashok attributes a new name to Gogol as Nikhil. Gogol feels like stranger with his new name that keeps him silent before his teacher. He prefers to be known as Gogol and rejects to bear dual identity. Now in adolescence, he is being suffered to utter, listen and use as signature with his meaningless name. He dislikes saying people that behind his name there is no root of India. The repeated questions by his class fellows, neighbours and school teachers force him to say it has nothing to do with who he is that it does not have any root in India or America but it totally belongs to Russian. He ponders over the name of Nikolai who does not bear Gogol as his first name the way it is used by him. He becomes frustrated with his ridiculous name which has no significant meaning, self-respect or deference; even he is unable to find someone who has the same name in Russia, India or America. He desires to be known as American where he was born but his strange name does not allow him to feel like American. When he is informed about the fact of his namesake, the Russian author, he tries to get rid of this name and even shows his disinterest towards reading Nikolai

Gogol's books because he considers it "would mean paying tribute to his namesake, accepting it somehow" (The Namesake- 92). Even he feels embarrassed in his class room where his classmates show disinterest in reading the story of the Russian Writer Nikolai Gogol. He takes the comment of his friends personally as if his own work is being criticized. The bearing of his own name 'Gogol' leads him into self-conflict so much that he fears to introduce himself to Kim. He does not want to change her natural beautiful eyes grow wide by uttering his actual name. Jhumpa expresses her personal agony through Gogol who becomes a butt of ridicule before others. Jhumpa Lahiri's real name was Ninaljana Sudeshna but like Gogol she also bore a pet name Jhumpa which was so easy for everyone to utter it that helped her to become Jhumpa Lahiri. She did not like to be called by her second name Jhumpa like Gogol. Gogol wants to get rid of the feeling of alienation developed in him from the people of India and America as they are not ready to accept his name. As an immigrant child in America, he devotes himself entirely to be American but the Americans do not accept him like themselves. He endeavours to run away from his prevailing agonies by changing his name from Gogol to Nikhil. But his lifelong depression does not leave him alone as he now finds himself busy to remind people about his altered name "I am Nikhil now" (The Namesake-119).

Gogol wants to start a fresh journey of his life with his new name Nikhil at Yale where no one knows about his past. He feels here secure and starts doing many activities after becoming Nikhil. But a new dilemma is engendered in him slowly and gradually. He transforms his old name but "he does not feel like Nikhil" (The Namesake- 105). He feels insecure with his new name lest the old name Gogol should not get exposure before the public. At the new place he finds some relief with his changed name but the ghost of his old name does not provide him inner satisfaction. He tries to escape from his immigrant identity provided by his parents but fails. "After eighteen years of Gogol, two months of Nikhil feel scant, inconsequential" (The Namesake- 105). His past heritage exterminates his new identity reminding his old name Gogol which

impels him to be shameful of it. He now does not like to be called as Gogol. The transformation of old name makes him unable to forget his past heritage. During holidays, he returns home with his changed name but "Nikhil evaporates and Gogol claims him again" (The Namesake- 106).

The second generation immigrants of Indian parents' like Gogol, Sonia and Moushumi are born in America bearing confusing names which make them unable to define their identities. They claim to be called American but their name clearly indicates the root of Russian and Indian. Owing to their different names, the male protagonist of the novel Gogol considers him as 'other' in America, his birth place. Gogol persistently fights to find his transited identity or sense of belongingness as a child of immigrant parents in America. Gogol is ordained to bear dual identity as a child of immigrant parent trying to obey his parent's cultures but as a citizen of America, he tries to fit or assimilate American cultures. Jhumpa Lahiri who herself was a child of an immigrant couple had admitted in an interview, "I wanted to please my parents and meet their expectations; I also wanted to meet the expectations I placed on myself to fit into American society. It's a classic case of divided identity, but depending on the degree to which the immigrants in question are willing to assimilate, the conflict is more or less pronounced. As a young child, I felt that the Indian part of me was unacknowledged and therefore somehow negated, by my American environment and vice-versa; I felt that I led two separate lives" (Mangayarkarasi- 58).

To pursue a quality life in the foreign land immigrants dislocate themselves from their home land but their expectations come to an end with the termination of the relationship among the family members. Within an immigrant family everyone is so preoccupied with their own tasks that they have no time for each other. In *The Namesake*, Ashima longs to meet her children who have situated themselves in different places. During her husband's departure to Ohio, she expects her children's presence there but neither Gogol nor Sonia has time to see off their father. Contrary to it, Gogol falls back upon excuse of heavy load of work to her mother but actually he has different plan. Actually Gogol gives more importance to Maxine's parents instead of his own

parents which acts as a big blow for Indian immigration. In *The Namesake*, each of the characters live their own part lonely but among them Ashima is totally different. At the age of forty eight, she is not able to lead solitary life like her husband, son and daughter. According to her children everybody should live their life at some stage on their own. But Ashima finds her too old to live by her own and also dislikes living in the dark or empty house where she has no one to interact with. On the other side, Gogol comes to realize the situation of his parents after breaking his married life with Maushumi who leaves him for the sake of another man.

Now, Ashima after demise of her husband is preparing to leave for Calcutta but the situation is not same now. The irony is that she looks at Calcutta as a foreign land. Once, from America she pangs for Calcutta as her home but now some memories with her family in America produce the same feeling that she was experiencing while leaving her home land after her marriage with Ashok. "For thirty three years she missed her life in India. Now she will miss her job at the library ...she will miss the country in which she had grown to know and love her husband" (*The Namesake*, 279). Towards the end of the novel, Lahiri resolves the dilemma of Gogol who is always burdensome of bearing his ridiculous name but now he understands the meaning of his name given by his father and he is also proud of being Gogol after knowing the whole incident from his father. He again feels another burden for hating the name of Gogol for the last thirty two years. He understands his root and learns that it is not the proper way to erase either Indian or American culture because his identity belongs to both cultures. He always wanted to liberate himself from his parents' Indian root but the unexpected death of his father altered his perspective and now associated himself with his mother and sister as an elder son. "Through Gogol, Lahiri portrays that the total rejection or adoption of either culture is not a way towards adjustment or re-adjustment rather mesh the both and gain the best of both the cultures. He found himself steeped in American culture and values, at the same time remaining

faithful to his parents' Indian heritage" (Qtd in-Sharma).

Jhumpa Lahiri defines beautifully the immigrants' feeling of dislocation from their home land and initial agonies and practices of the cultures of the adopted land and their effort to assimilate the American culture. She delineates a host of diverse cultures and segregated life of her characters. Ashima spends her whole life in America almost alone; consequently her husband's death keeps her once again lonely. Her existence seems to be akin to cipher because loss of her origin cultures while leaving Calcutta keeps her abandoned in America which she is again going to lose connection with her adopted land. Jhumpa also depicts the vain attempts of the first generation immigrants who make an effort to inculcate their cultures among the second generation. On the other side, through Gogol she finds the root of the ancestral culture and values. Gogol throughout his tremendous journey comes to realize the importance of his parent's culture and his inborn one. Thus immigrants learn to assimilate the foreign culture with the passage of time and also to prove that it is not necessary that they should accommodate themselves only their original land.

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