

UNHOMELINESS AND TRANSCULTURAL SPACES IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S 'THE NAMESAKE'

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ABSTRACT

Generally, diaspora (expatriate) refers to people of a nation or region living outside the boundaries of their own country and sharing some common bonds. Originally the term 'Diaspora' was used to refer to the dispersal of Jews from their homeland. Recently diaspora writing receives unprecedented acclaim because of globalization. Dislocation creates severe problem for the immigrants living abroad. This article discusses unhomely home of the diasporas which is constructed geographically and psychologically by encountering the alien culture based on Jhumpa Lahiri's novel The Namesake. The notion of home for Diasporas has become an injured concept which forces them to face scars and fractures, blisters and sores, and psychic traumas on the move. In such a situation, unhomely home refers to the condition of living here and belonging elsewhere. Jhumpa Lahiri tells the story of two generations of Indian family and their struggle to acculturate themselves in the west. It looks into the predicament of name and sense of identity and belongingness of the characters of the Indian origin and immigrants in the USA.

Keywords: *Diaspora, Globalization, Alien Culture, Psychic Traumas, Unhomely Home.*

Introduction

As Terry Eagleton writes in, *The Idea of Culture* (2000) that the very word 'culture' contains a tension between making and being made. Most Diaspora writers concentrate on generational differences in exploring how new and old Diasporas relate to their land of origin and the host culture. Often their major concerns in works are split and flowing nature of individual identities. The rootlessness, coupled with the indifferent attitude of host culture adds to sense of otherness and alienation. Indians of almost all Diasporas have sought to record the manner in which they have adapted to their environment. They have tried to demonstrate how they have experienced both identification with new world and alienation from their old homeland. Jhumpa Lahiri has said, "The question of identity is always a difficult one, but especially for those who are culturally displaced, as immigrants are who grow up in two worlds simultaneously". Due to the displacement, in 'The Namesake' (2003), Lahiri, a second generation Indian immigrant, reflects the immigrants' inner psyche, identity crisis, sense of belongingness, loneliness, alienation, the clash of culture, the conflicts of adjustment and the baffling ties between the first and second generation.

Jhumpa Lahiri (whose real name was Nilanjana Sudeshna) is an emerging star of international repute on the Diaspora sky. Born to Bengali parents in London and settled after two years of her birth in Rhodes Island, America, Jhumpa Lahiri is a second generation Indian immigrant. She has visited Calcutta (Now Kolkata), India several times with her parents because of the family links. Her parents were very keen to keep up their Bengali culture in an alien land. Growing up with ties to all the three countries made her feel a sense of homelessness and unable to feel accepted. She explains her parents' ties with India: "It's hard to have parents who consider another place 'home' – even after living abroad for 30 years, India is a home for them. We were always looking back so I never felt fully at home here (the United States). There's nobody in this whole country that we're related to. India was different – our extended family offered real connections." Lahiri's familial ties with India were not strong enough to make

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India a 'home' for her. She says in an interview with Vibhuti Patel: "I didn't grow up there, I wasn't part of things. We visited often but we didn't have a home. We were clutching at a world that was never fully with us." (News – Week International, dated 20th Sept. 1999). She minutely observes her parents' the sense of exile, belonging fully to nowhere and cultural clash in the alien land.

Ashoke leaves his own country to go to America for better education and in the hope of better life. He is a doctoral candidate in Boston, researching in the field of fiber optics. After his study he is able to manage a job and settles there. In the meantime, going through an arranged marriage in Calcutta (Now Kolkata), Ashoke and Ashima Ganguly move to settle in Cambridge and Massachusetts in the U.S.A. In the case of Ashoke his move is voluntary whereas Ashima's move is involuntary. She feels a sort of pain in her heart leaving behind her extended family in Calcutta and living in an alien land when she is related to none. In the opening of the novel we find Ashima recalling her homeland: "But nothing feels normal to Ashima. For the past eighteen months, ever since she's arrived in Cambridge, nothing has felt normal." (The Namesake, 5-6). Ashoke adapts life in America quickly but Ashima adapts willy-nilly in America slowly. She resists all American things and pines for her family in Calcutta. Pregnancy and consequent motherhood are regarded as boon in the life of a couple. It cements the relationship strongly. But the motherhood causes anxiety in the lives of immigrants also in the alien land. In the beginning of the novel Ashima is brought to Mount Auburn Hospital in the states for delivery following pain. Here she undergoes a trauma fearing the child birth in a foreign land far away for her family. She perceives a sort of divided world lying on the bed of the hospital and everything seems to be abnormal for her here: "Now she is alone, cut off by curtains from the three other women in the room.....It is the first time in her life she has slept alone, surrounded by strangers; all her life she has slept either in a room with her parents, or with Ashoke at her side. She wishes the curtains were open, so that she could talk to the American women." (The Namesake, 3). Brooding over the child-birth a pathetic feeling crosses her mind: "Ashima thinks it's strange that her child will be born in a place most people enter either to suffer or to die. 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 the bed. In India, she thinks to herself, women to home to their parents to give birth, away from husbands and in-laws and household cares, retreating briefly to childhood when the baby arrives." (The Namesake, 4). But here she will never get this type of treatment at child-birth. But her feeling of loneliness is removed momentarily when she realizes: "She wonders if she is the only Indian person in the hospital, but a gentle twitch from the baby reminds her that she is, technically speaking, not alone." (The Namesake, 3-4).

Ashima's anxiety over giving birth and rearing up the child in the foreign land is revealed poignantly: "That was happening so far from home, unmonitored and unobserved by those she loved, had made it more miraculous still. But she is terrified to raise a child in a country where she is related to no one, where she knows little, where life seems so tentative and spare." (The Namesake, 6). No doubt, the birth of a baby boy at five past five in the morning gives to both Ashoke and Ashima unspeakable joy. But this joy does not last long in the hospital. Naming the new born assumes an instrumental role here. In Bengali culture naming the new born is left to the elders. Ashoke and Ashima left the matter of naming the baby to Ashima's grandmother: "As for a name, they have decided to let Ashima's grandmother, who is past eighty now, who has named each of her other six grandchildren in the world, do the honors." (The Namesake, 25). On the eve of release from hospital, the authority informed, "For they learn that in America, a baby cannot be released from the hospital without a birth certificate. And that a birth certificate needs a name." (The Namesake, 27). They failed to convince Mr. Walicox, compiler of hospital birth certificates, about the tradition of naming in Bengal culture that in Bengal a child always does have two names – a good name (bholo nam) and pet name (dak nam). As the mail containing the name for Ashima's grandmother fails to reach them: "The letter contains one name for a girl, one for a boy. Ashima's grandmother has revealed them to no one. Though the letter was sent a month ago, in July, it has yet to arrive." (The Namesake, 25). Thus, they, under the compulsion of the hospital authority, willy-nilly registers the baby boy after Ashoke's favorite Russian writer Nikolai Gogol as Gogol Ganguli.

As has been stated the boy is named after a Russian writer, whose book Ashoke attaches much importance considering the role played in saving his life in a fatal train accident when he was on the way to Ranchi. But Gogol does not know this grim fact remained behind his naming. Growing up he feels a kind of itching for his name. It is neither American nor Indian. He starts to hate his name from the age of 14. He becomes a butt of joke in his school for his name and feels inferior. His inferior feeling intensifies when he learns that Nikolai Gogol was a frustrated man and spent his life away from home. He is desperate to do something to save himself from the embarrassment he is facing. As a child, he does not willingly respond to his official name to Nikhil (As his parents wanted) in school. So, the principal of the

school registers his name as Gogol. Later on, in 1986, when he entered Yale as a freshman, Gogol changed his name to "Nikhil". But this change of name fails to put an end to the problem and created a different kind of psychological problem for him. His father's revelation of the tragic train accident and his rescue makes Nikhil somehow depressed. He feels a sort of guilt for changing his name thereby disobeying his parents' wish and charges his father for not revealing the mystery behind choosing this name before. Towards the end of the story his reading of "The Short Stories of Nikolai Gogol" given to him by his father on his fourteenth birth, leaving party downstairs reveals his guilty conscience. The question of identity looms large for those living in alien culture, but belonging to another. They feel culturally displaced as they are simultaneously living under the pressure of two cultures. One the one hand, they have the feeling of emotionally detached and identity; while on the other, they cannot fully adopt the identity of the new culture and thus unable to get accepted among the members of the new culture.

Jhumpa Lahiri is well aware about the existing problem of cultural diversity in the foreign land. In an interview to Mira Nair, Lahiri opined, "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 American society. It's a classic case of divided identity." (<https://books.google.co.in/books?isbn=8126906898>). We get the pen picture of this struggle in the efforts of Ashoke and Ashima to bring up their children the way it is done in their home country India. Their constant struggle to keep Bengali culture alive in their lives in the foreign land gets reflected in their decision to send Gogol for Bengali language and culture classes at the home of one their Bengali friends. But the children take this as burden: "The children in the class study without interest, wishing they could be at ballet or softball practice instead." (The Namesake, 66). The first-generation immigrants try at their level best to follow the mannerisms, values and beliefs of their own culture and they feel bafflement noticing clash between their concept of 'home' and their beliefs. But for the sake of fulfilling the demands of their children, they often assimilate with the culture of the land. As in the case of Ashoke and Ashima they willy-nilly give their consent to the celebration of Christmas, Thanks giving and having American dinner once a week for the sake of their children. Despite this, Sonia and Gogol feel alienated both from their parents and American friends. The attitude of the first and second generations to the cultural heritage left behind in the home country and the adopted country is in sharp contrast. The first generation makes leaves no stone unturned to maintain the culture left behind.

Ashoke and Ashima find a temporary relief in foreign atmosphere in the celebration of Gogol's Annaprasan (rice ceremony). The presence of Bengali members, their dress, speaking, and performance of ritual testify to their sense of belonging to their own culture. On the other hand, the absence of the family members makes them nostalgic. The importance the immigrants attach to the Bengali rituals reveals their inner feeling of remaining away for home. But the second generation – Gogol-Sonia's apathetic attitude to accept the Bengali customs and rituals seems to evade his Indian identity. Their hyphenated position, Indian– American, creates identity crisis in them. Their apparent attachment to the American customs makes them indifference to the Indian one. Gogol and Sonia fail to attach due importance to and obey the rules and regulations of the Indian religious ceremony after their father's death: "...it was a Bengali son's duty to shave his head in the wake of a parents' death." (The Namesake, 179). The study explores how cultural bearers such as food, language and traditions are rendered in context of clashing culture. An instance may be cited in support of this. Gogol is invited by Maxine, a white girl, for dinner. While having dinner with Maxine's parents, he recalls his mother's hospitable nature: "His own mother would never have served so few dishes to a guest." (The Namesake, 133). That his parents don't fit into American culture makes him ashamed. Here Lahiri focuses on the comparison between Indian culture and Western Culture that are bound to occur. In a panel discussion about Indian novels in English, the question about marginality is discussed: "Teleologically speaking, ABCDs are unable to answer the question 'Where are you from?'" the sociologist on the panel declares. (The Namesake, 118). Here Gogol realizes that ABCD ('American-Born Confused Deshi') refers to him also. He realizes the question of identity and ponders over it deeply.

The immigrants are always on the periphery of culture and feel unaccepted in the adopted culture of the foreign land. The cultural differences also give birth to marital disharmony that gets reflected in the lives of Indian immigrants. The marital conflict comes to the fore because "in India a strict set of guidelines dictates how husbands and wives act both publicly and privately, in America, such guidelines are not as clear-cut and often, are thrown out guidelines together." (Pradhan). The first-generation and the second-generation immigrants are at loggerheads over marriage. To the first generation immigrants like Ashoke and Ashima, marriage is a sacred thing and it instils in their mind that

it is their duty to remain as couple till their last breath on the earth. But the second-generation immigrants like Gogol and Moushumi, fail to remain loyal to this parental tradition. After leading a happy life for a year and a few months, Moushumi doesn't want to continue her married life with him. She now wants to be a life partner of Dimitri, with whom she had had a relationship even before she married Gogol. She applies for a divorce and flies back to New York. The second-generation immigrants' attitude towards marriage and married life undergo a drastic change under the influence of the Western culture (American culture). The feeling of exile and loneliness become moving for the immigrants when they find it practically impossible sometimes to the co-sharers in joys and grief of relatives staying in home country.

The young generation that has left his own country India to go to America in the hope of better life, has the old parents in India. As they feel strong family ties, so both sides feel the absence of each other. A feeling of remorse overtakes the immigrants when they get the death news of a close relative or one of the parents. When Gogol leaves Cleveland for Boston with the ashes of his father, his state of mind is similarly described by Jhumpa Lahiri: "He knows now the guilt that his parents carried inside, at being able to do nothing when their parents had died in India, of arriving weeks, sometimes months later, when there was nothing left to do." (The Namesake, 179). Lahiri poignantly remarks: "Who had forsaken everything to come to this country, to make a better life, only to die here?" (The Namesake, 180). Lahiri portrays loneliness very poignantly. Away from home and kith and kin, each member of the Ganguli household leads a solitary life. In the end of the novel "The Namesake" we find Ashima preparing to go back to Calcutta. But she undergoes a drastic change in her attitude. She is not the same person as she was in the beginning of the story: "She feels overwhelmed by the thought of the move she is about to make, to the city that was once home and is now in its own way foreign. She feels both impatience and indifference for all the days she still must live, for something tells her she will not go quickly as her husband did. For thirty-three years she missed her life in India. Now she will miss her job at the library, the women with whom she's worked. She will miss throwing parties. She will miss living with her daughter, the surprising companionship they have formed, going into Cambridge together to see old movies at the Brattle.....She will miss the country in which she had grown to know and love her husband. Though his ashes have been scattered into the Ganges, it is here, in this house and in this town that he will continue to dwell in her mind." (The Namesake, 278-279). Towards the end of the story Lahiri portrays the imbalance feeling of Gogol. Now he feels comforted by the mystery behind choosing that name for him. At 32, he feels proud for his name and its meaning, Nikhil Gogol. Ganguly accepted his name and destiny. Now he feels burden of his hating himself for hating his name. He deeply ponders over his name, his identity, his namesake and realizes that one has to take the responsibility to carve his own path to explore the life in this world. He realizes his roots and feels belonging to his mother, sister and other people. He comes to the realization of the grim truth that it is not a way to diminish either Indian or American culture. Jhumpa Lahiri's portrayal of the diasporic traits in her novel "The Namesake" is commendable.

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