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Quest for Identity: A Study of Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*

Samriti Manchanda

Associate Professor
Govt. College for Women
Parade, Jammu
Jammu and Kashmir

Diasporic writers document the experiences of such people who are invariably confronted with disconcerting problems of displacement, dislocation and disjunction. Jhumpa Lahiri herself being an immigrant very skilfully deals with the trauma of dislocation, an acute sense of loneliness and the pangs of estrangement suffered by millions of 'exiled Indians' who try unsuccessfully to balance themselves between 'home' and 'abroad'. The present paper is an effort to deal with the dilemma of the first generation and the second generation immigrants. The first generation immigrants in the novel struggle to survive. In moments of their struggle, they remember their lives in the native place to compare their lives in the country of migration. The second generation immigrants also find it difficult to say 'from India'. They oscillate between the two cultures and are helpless victims of ruthless cultural situations.

Diaspora is a movement of people from one or more nations to another. They migrate to foreign nation in search of better life. Diasporic writers write about experiences of such people. Indian diasporic writing in English reach new heights after Salman Rushdie. It is true that women writers of Indian diaspora have created big impact in recent times than male writers. Writers like Chitra Bannerji, Divakaruni, Bapsi Sidhwa, Bharati Mukherjee, Meena Alexander and Jhumpa Lahiri focus on the immigrant experience from women perspective. As the South Asian diaspora is neglected by the historians, social scientists, and politicians so the contemporary women writers have challenged it by giving voice to immigrant women who are doubly exiled. Immigrant women are marginalised within their community and by the dominant culture. These contemporary women writers never disconnect their life from the past. They believe that it is their tradition, history, memory, ethnicity, which help them to re-root them in the foreign land so like a typical migrant they bring modern world and old world together in their writing.

Jhumpa Lahiri emerged as a literary heavy weight after the publication of her first novel *The Namesake*. She was born in 1967 in England to Bengali parents, who emigrated from Calcutta and was raised in Rhode Island, America. Thus, Lahiri had the experience of three continents. Since she has an Indian origin so many of her stories have an Indian flavour. As Asha Choubey says:

The personal life of Jhumpa Lahiri is the very prototype of diasporic culture. Having spent more than thirty years in the United States, she still feels a bit of an outsider. Though she has confessed that her days in India are a sort of parenthesis in her life, the fact that she is at heart an Indian cannot be denied.

The stories collected in her debut anthology "*Interpreter of Maladies*" deals with the question of identity. The protagonist...all Indians...settled abroad are afflicted

with sense of exile...(Choubey 2005)

Lahiri exposes psychologically the intricacies and complexities of human relationships of people who live in the west with their parents, born and raised in India. They stood hanging between two worlds like mythological king 'Trishanku'. She says, "My mother has lived outside India for nearly 35 years; my father nearly 40. Since 1969 they have made their home in the United States. But there were invisible walls erected around our home, walls intended to keep American influence at bay. Growing up, I was admonished not to behave like an American, or, worse to think myself as one. Actually being an American was not an option."(116). She has very beautifully portrayed the Indian American life in her novel *The Namesake*. It is a novel about two generations of Ganguli family and at the same time it is a novel about exile and its discontents. Alienation and rootlessness is experienced by every expatriate at some stage or the other. The novel very realistically portrays the experiences of a diasporic community to which Lahiri belongs. She doesn't comment on something that she is not well versed in. Lahiri explained:

When I began writing fiction seriously, my first attempts, for some reason were always set in Calcutta, which is a city I know quite well from repeated visits with my family. These trips to a vast, unruly, fascinating city so different from the small New England town where I was raised shaped my perceptions of the world and of people from a very early age. I learned that there was another side, a vastly different version to everything. I learned to observe things as an outsider, and yet I also knew that as different as Calcutta is from Rhode Island, I belonged there in some fundamental way, in the ways I did not seem to belong in the U.S. (qtd in Nayak 113)

The Namesake explores a world where characters shuttle between two worlds East (India) and West (United States). Like Jhumpa Lahiri, her characters like Ashima in the novel are caught between two worlds, one which they have left behind and the other which they have not yet accepted. Ashima is a voluntary exile, complying with the societal dictates of accompanying her husband. Ashima Ganguli migrates to America after her marriage. She views the new land with trepidation, not inclined to make it her home. She missed India very often especially during pregnancy. She remembers in India, girls go to their parent's house during pregnancy, but in America she is alone:

For the past eighteen months, ever since she's arrived in Cambridge, nothing has felt normal at all. It's not so much the pain, which she knows, somehow she will survive. It's the consequence: motherhood in a foreign land... That it was happening so far from home, unmonitored and unobserved by those she loved, had 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 so little, where life seems so tentative and spare.(6)

After the birth of Gogol, she wants to go home where grandparents, parents and all relatives will gather to celebrate the arrival of newborn. Ashima's grandmother has named all the children in the family, Ashima wants her to name her baby too. But in America the baby has to be named before he is released from the hospital.

Ashima consciously foregrounds the merits of native culture and the mysteries of acquired culture experienced in the process of her own self acculturation. Ashima represents the majority of women expatriates who are reluctant to change or to adopt the culture of the host country. She meets other Indians coming from Calcutta; they become good friends facing the same agonies. Ashima's close relation with the immigrants became an excuse to avoid customs of American life. She is not willing to learn driving, she continues wearing the costumes of her motherland and eating Indian food, and for many years she was without American friends. She doesn't pronounce her husband's name as according to Hindu belief it may lessen the life of a husband. To a great degree, her life is consumed by recreating Indian culture in America. The reluctance to change could also be direct result of the fact that she and others like her are not fully exposed to cultural mores of this new society. She at times thinks that she should go back to India as she cannot raise Gogol in a foreign land. She admits it to her husband, "I'm saying I don't want to raise Gogol alone in this country. It's not right I want to go back." (33) To comfort herself and to put Gogol asleep she sings Bengali songs.

After the death of Ashoke, her house where she has passed twenty-seven years of her life is sold off. She has now decided to stay for six months in Calcutta and six months in America. At the thought of leaving America and going back to India, Ashima becomes emotional. She is overcome by a feeling of being dis-housed, not knowing where she really belongs:

She feels lonely suddenly, horribly, permanently alone...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 way foreign...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 the country in which she had grown to know and love her husband.(278-279)

Ashoke, Ashima's husband is a brilliant professor, teaching and doing research at Harvard in the MIT Campus. But at home he continues to be a typical Indian male, fastidious about his clothing and food:

He is fastidious about his clothing; their first argument had been over a sweater she'd shrunk in the washing machine. As soon as he comes home from the university the first thing he does is hang up his shirt and trousers, donning a pair of drawstring pyjamas and a pullover if it's cold. On Sundays he spends an hour occupied with his tins of shoe polishes and his three pairs of shoes, two black and one brown.(10)

Lahiri very beautifully portrays the two roles that Ashoke played as a university professor and as a husband and father at home. At home Indian culture and value system adhered to, while in public the American code of conduct is followed. All the first generation settlers want their children to do well and get good jobs. The American dream looms in their eyes and they want their children to exploit the situation and derive maximum benefit, but they

must follow the Indian moral and cultural code at home. Ashoke and Ashima constantly deliberate only with their Bengali community. They send their children, Gogol and Sonia to have lessons on Bengali language and culture every Saturday, but this initiative by them “fails to unsettle them, that their children sound just like Americans, expertly conversing in a language that still at times confounds them, in accents they are accustomed not to trust.”(65) The fear of losing one’s culture and one’s identity makes them hold on their native culture. The first generation immigrant attempts to create an Island where the host culture doesn’t intrude but the second generation immigrants like Gogol, Sonia and Moushmi want to chart their own lives. They are not attached to their cultural past, infact they find easier to accept America’s hybrid culture. Both Gogol and Sonia grow in suburban New York and choose American over Bengali culture, which is not liked by their parents. Lahiri describes how Gogol and Sonia resent their childhood trips to India during which they are forced to interact with family and give up the material comforts of American life. They never think of India as Desh, like their parents. This has an autobiographical tone as JhumpaLahiri also could not think of India as her home. When Gogol and Sonia reach India they find their parents’ behaviour totally changed. Ashoke remains busy with his research and delivering lectures at Jadavpur University while Ashima is busy in shopping and meeting her old school friends. The children find it difficult to adjust in India, they long for America and American food “They stand out in their bright, expensive sneakers, American haircuts, back packs slung over one shoulder.”(82)Lahiri writes:

Gogol and Sonia know these people, but they don’t feel close to them as their parents do. Within minutes, before their eyes Ashoke and Ashima slip into bolder less complicated versions of themselves, their voices louder, their smiles wider, revealing a confidence Gogol and Sonia never see on Pemberton Road. “I am scared, Goggles,” Sonia whispers to her brother in English.(81)

When Gogol’s father tells him that they will be staying in Calcutta for eight months “He dreads the thought of eight months without a room of his own, without his records and his stereo, without friends.”(79) During their stay in India, Ashoke planned a trip to Delhi and Agra, upon returning back from the trip Gogol and Sonia got terribly sick. “It is the air, the rice, the wind, their relatives casually remark; they were not made to survive in a poor country they say.”

Gogol had an affair with an American girl named Maxine Ratliff. He finds her American family totally different from his Indian family.Ratliffs are generous people but they don’t go out of their way to accommodate others. Maxine’s parents do not pressurize her to do anything. Unlike his parents they do not interfere in Maxine’s matter. When Maxine came to know about Gogol’s family:

She is surprised to hear certain things about his life: that all his parents’ friends are Bengali, that they had an arranged marriage, that his mother cooks Indian food every day, that she wears sari and bindi. “Really?” she says, not fully believing him.(138)

Gogol adopts Maxine's carefree lifestyle. He even starts living in Maxine's house, all in an effort to build a wall between his country and its people whom he has left behind and country he actually lives and thrives in. But Gogol cannot ignore his name, his parents and his Indian heritage. They have shaped his character and they define him as a human being. In his youth, he tries to distance himself from his Indian roots; he doesn't hang out with Indian-American students, doesn't think India as home, as his parents and their friends do, but as "India", like the American friends. But the death of his father has changed him. When he receives the shocking news of sudden death of his father, Maxine offers to accompany him but he declines the offer. "He doesn't want to be with someone who barely knew his father, who has met him only once." (170) Gogol slowly begins to realise that he cannot walk away from who he is. He realises, "identity as a production which is never complete, always in process and always constituted within, not outside representation." (Hall 10)

The years of resisting his past has made him uncomfortable in present. He is born in America to establish an identity of his own; to live as naturalised citizen of America although the umbilical cord is still rooted in India and is difficult to sever it altogether. The realization that he is made up of two cultures strengthens his pride, instead of weakening his morale. He has assimilated American culture and values, without losing Indian culture.

It can thus be observed that Lahiri has very proficiently portrayed the struggles and anxieties faced by dislocated expatriates in the USA. *The Namesake* captured the feelings of lonely, alienated and emotionally dried up both first and second generation Indian immigrants. The novel presents the difficulties faced by Indian wife in an alien culture, without friends or family, struggling to cope with new surroundings, she can't call her home. She misses her homeland and this Trishanku experience of being neither in Calcutta nor in America nearly killed her. She is a true representative of diasporic people living in similar trauma.

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