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## Identity Crisis, Displacement and Rootlessness in Migrant Literature with Special Reference to Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*

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### **Abstract:**

Migration has become a common trend today. Though having an age long history of migration, migration studies have only gained prominence since 1980s and have started to establish itself as a new genre in literature. Migration is a voyage between two cultures in which a migrant is neither able to assimilate the new culture nor able to cast off its root culture and gets tangled in between. The immigrants face the problem of assimilation into the other culture and there is a perpetual push and pull between two traditions. The present paper focuses upon the life struggle of a Bengali couple Ashoke and Ashima who immigrate to America from India and try to incorporate the new culture. They try to keep their roots alive in the foreign land by observing some of the Indian rituals and thus developing a sense of belongingness to their homeland. But for the second generation, the couple had to adopt the tradition of the immigrant country. Gogol and Moushumi often feel as if they are torn and lost between the country of their birth and the values inherited from their parents. Not only Gogol and Moushumi but all other characters are bewildered about their self and are shuttling between two worlds. The present paper explores the theme of displacement and rootlessness in their life and a quest for the self.

**Keywords:** Displacement, Identity, Migration, Culture, Rootlessness.

Migration has become a common trend today. Though having an age long history of migration, migration studies have only gained prominence since 1980s and have started to establish itself as a new genre in literature. Migrants are the people who move from their homeland to settle in other countries either for better opportunities or for better living conditions. In history also, there are examples of mass migration of Muslims from India to Pakistan at the time of partition and ethnic cleansing of Jews from Nazi Germany. It has also formed itself mainly in the form of a problem called brain-drain. Therefore, the types of Migration, in a broader sense, range from voluntary to forced migrations. The texts written by these people or by their off springs are called migrant literature. The immigrants face the problem of assimilation into the other culture and there is a perpetual push and pull between two traditions. Jhumpa Lahiri was born in a Bengali family in London. She herself is a migrant writer. She has got Pulitzer Prize for her first collection *Interpreter of Maladies* in 2000. The present paper focuses upon the life struggle of a Bengali couple Ashoke and Ashima who immigrate to America from India and try to incorporate the new culture. They also try to keep their roots alive in the foreign

land by observing some of the Indian rituals and thus developing a sense of belongingness to their homeland. But for the second generation, the couple had to adopt the tradition of the immigrant country. Gogol and Moushumi often feel as if they are torn and lost between the country of their birth and the values inherited from their parents. Not only Gogol and Moushumi but all other characters are bewildered about their self and are shuttling between two cultures.

The present oeuvre taken for study is *The Namesake*, her first novel, published in 2003, which explores the idea of confused identities, rootlessness in the lives of its characters and especially in the life of its protagonist Gogol Ganguli, who is named after his father's favorite author Nikolai Gogol, a Russian Story writer. As the letter from Ashima's grandmother which contained the name for the new born baby according to the custom of naming the baby by the eldest family member, could never reach, the parents give the baby a pet name just to complete the hospital formalities. But accidentally this pet name becomes his good name, which is totally disliked by Gogol and his resentment is seen clearly in these lines:

...he's come to hate questions pertaining to his name, hates having constantly to explain. He hates having to tell people that it doesn't mean "anything Indian"... at times his name, an entity shapeless and weightless, manages nevertheless to distress him physically, like the scratchy tag of a shirt he has been forced permanently to wear. (76)

The protagonist is bewildered with his confused identity for associating it with his name, which, in its origin, is neither Indian nor American but Russian. Like the letter which keeps hovering between two countries, Gogol is also torn and lost between two cultures. He resents his name and finds escapism from it. Besides his birth and upbringing in America, he finds himself alien to this land and there is something that makes his association to the other country very strong. His antipathy towards his name reaches to this extreme that he says, "There is no such thing as a perfect name. I think that human beings should be allowed to name themselves when they turn eighteen," he adds. "Until then, pronouns" (245).

Sonia and Moushumi also do not feel related to India like their parents do. Moushumi likes Gogol because they share the same trauma of being in between two cultures and a name crisis. She also hates her name and abhors India. It gives her a satisfaction to break the image of a chaste Indian married lady. She does not want to be in a relationship which binds her and therefore she breaks her marriage with Gogol as she starts having an extra marital affair. In case of Sonia, she is a mixture of Indian and American identity and poses an apt illustration of acculturation.

Migration not only affects the migrant but also affects those whose lives are associated with the migrant. The problem of assimilation into the other culture occurs as a major difficulty before them. They do not want to leave their own culture and try to adopt the other one, and there is a hybridization of culture, which brings forth a cross-cultural identity. Thus, the

immigrants try to fit in the society by seeking hybridization as a middle approach and sometimes fall into a more confused situation like Gogol, who does not celebrates the difference but sets off to a more perplexed situation and is directed to a search for his identity. His quest for the self becomes the main thread in the story which unwraps various emotional and psychological layers of familial attachment in him. Moushumi, on the other hand goes neither for American nor for Indian but seeks her comfort by migrating to Paris. Ashoke and Ashima try to keep their roots alive by observing some Indian rituals and by visiting places like Apu Trilogy plays, Kathakali dance performance or a Sitar recital. But they also start celebrating Christmas and Thanksgiving for the sake of their children. Ashima tries to recreate an Indian atmosphere for herself by making some Bengali immigrant friends. The reason being “...they all come from Calcutta, and for this reason alone they are friends.” Making Indian food and observing Indian rituals like annaprasan; the food taking ceremony for the baby are the means to keep her roots alive.

Migration literature observes the loss of belongingness and selfhood in a migrant. And sometimes they face the problem of alienation. They find it very difficult to incorporate into the new culture. Ashoke moves from Calcutta to America to find better opportunities as well as due to the trauma caused by a fatal train accident happened in India which works as a push factor in his life and he starts a new life in foreign land with his newly married wife Ashima. Ashoke and Ashima always feel homesick for their motherland and now and then try to connect their lives by paying visits to Calcutta. Their visit to their homeland is seen as a big change in their personality and behaviour as noticed by their children:

And then the frosted doors slide open and once again they are officially there, no longer in transit, swallowed by hugs and kisses and pinched cheeks and smiles... Gogol and Sonia know these people, but they do not feel as 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. (81-82)

Their house in America is never referred to as home but as Pemberton road. They undergo the problem of isolation in the other land as they are away from their country of origin and do not find connected to it for the culture as well as the society is very different. The sense of security vanishes from their minds. They are not able to locate any sense of belongingness because it is a place without any friends and relatives; and moreover, most of the times Ashima compares the things around her with those in India which makes her feel more lonely and lost. For example, she gives birth to her first child alone in the hospital and she imagines if it would have been in India it had been a much different experience for her. Her craving for white rice, Indian spices, mustard oil and above everything, the letters from her family show a clinging to the past which always forbids her to adopt the other culture.

Language is also a very important factor for it affects one's life to a great extent. Ashima feels conscious while speaking in English and it is very unappealing for her when her children

speak in proper accent like their American friends, "For when Ashoke and Ashima close their eyes, it never 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).

She sends Gogol to Bengali language classes and keeps her children accustomed to all the Indian rituals and customs. She tries to give them an Indian atmosphere at home but Gogol and Sonia do not take any interest in any of these. They never feel any connection to India and it seems useless and irritating to them to go to Calcutta for Durga Pujo and to meet their relatives. They detest Indian food and long for American food while their visits to India.

Displacement is another big cause of the dilemma which is faced by the immigrants. The term 'displacement' not only signifies their physically being 'out of place' but also implies a sense of being 'aloof' socially as well as traditionally. The sense of homeliness is destroyed by migration and to leave what they call their home and to build a new one in some other country becomes very challenging for them. Ashima is never able to accept her house at Pemberton road as her home and going to India gives her the utmost satisfaction. She does not want to raise her children in America and a perpetual longing for home is always there. Her situation is projected very carefully by Lahiri:

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. It is an ongoing responsibility, a parentheses in what had once been ordinary life, only to discover that the previous life has vanished, replaced by something more complicated and demanding. Like pregnancy, being a foreigner, Ashima believes, is something that elicits the same curiosity from strangers, the same combination of pity and respect. (49-50)

Displacement also causes the problem of being 'in between the cultures' which is mainly faced by the second generation, the off springs of immigrants. They are confused about the traditions and customs followed by their parents, the first generation. Gogol and Sonia do not enjoy being forced into a culture which is entirely unknown to them. Even in the country of their birth, they are considered as a foreigner. Therefore they are not able to feel any kind of homeliness in any of the countries and their situation becomes more pathetic in comparison to their parents, because for their parents there is a home in India but there is no homecoming for them. Gogol is not able to think of India as home as his parents do. He attends a panel discussion about Indian novels written in English and feels more as an American than an Indian. As Lahiri puts it:

Teleologically speaking, ABCDs are unable to answer the question 'Where are you from?' ... Gogol has never heard the term *ABCD*. He eventually gathers that it stands for "American-born confused deshi." in other words, him. He learns that

the *C* could also stand for “conflicted.” He knows that *deshi*, a generic word for “countrymen,” means “Indian,” knows that his parents and all their friends always refer to India simply as *desh*. But Gogol never thinks of India as *desh*. He thinks of it as Americans do, as India. (118)

Gogol changes his name as Nikhil but his complications do not end and moreover he does not feel like ‘Nikhil’ at all. In his whole life Gogol maintains a distance from his culture, his roots and his family but after his father’s death he becomes aware of his strong familial attachment and the loving relationship that he and his father shared. When his mother also decides to leave America he suddenly realizes that there will be nobody to call him as Gogol. And gradually he understands that he likes his name, not because of what it is, but because of who calls him by it. He becomes conscious of the fact that “the name he had so deserted, here hidden and preserved—that was the first thing his father had given him”. It worries him now that there will be nobody to call him ‘Gogol’:

The givers and keepers of Gogol’s name are far from him now. One dead. Another widow... Once or twice a week he will hear “Gogol” over the wires, see it typed on a screen... Without people in the world to call him Gogol, no matter how long he himself lives, Gogol Ganguli will, once and for all, vanish from the lips of loved ones, and so, cease to exist. Yet the thought of this eventual demise provides no sense of victory, no solace. It provides no solace at all. (289)

The novel manages to explore the difficulties faced by immigrants such as displacement, rootlessness, loss of identity and a trans-cultural force. The feeling of being “out of place” makes them fall into isolation and trauma of being in between. All the characters go through a certain kind of psychological catastrophe which puts them in a traumatic state. But towards the end of the novel, the upbringing and the roots prove to be stronger and more peace-giving than anything else and familial attachment regains its place in the heart of the protagonist. Thus, through the quest for self, the novel projects the theme of dislocation, rootlessness and alienation as a result of migration in a striking manner and attempts at building a passage between two worlds.

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