

DIASPORIC EXPERIENCES IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S
THE NAMESAKE

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Abstract

Jhumpa Lahiri, the Pulitzer Prize winner novelist is an acclaimed Indian writer of diasporic fiction. Born in 1967, Lahiri is a major contemporary diasporic Indian-American writer , whose real name is Nilanjana Sudeshna. Her debut short story collection 'Interpreter of Maladies'(1999), novel 'The Namesake'(2003) and her second collection of short stories 'Unaccustomed Earth' are widely read. In the novel 'The Namesake' the diasporic traits like family ties, cultural clash, cross-cultural relationships, assimilation , acculturation, alienation, hybridity, marginalization, cultural displacement and identity crisis are predominant. The note of restlessness and anxiety also runs through this novel. The diasporic consciousness is manifested in the sense of loss and dispossession, a feeling of entangled between two cultures. The plight of second generation Indian diasporic community has been elaborately described through the Ganguli family.

Key Words: - Diaspora, identity crisis, assimilation, acculturation, multiculturalism, hybridity, isolation, cultural clash, nostalgia.

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Introduction

The word 'Diaspora' was initially used for the dispersal of Jews when they were forced into exile to Babylonia. Diaspora means dispersion of people from their original homeland. The term 'Diaspora' in ancient Greek means 'a scattering or sowing of seeds which refers to the forcing of people to leave their traditional homelands. The term was used by the ancient Greek to refer to citizens who migrated to a conquered land with the purpose of colonization.

It is applied to any group of people dispersed far away from their place of origin (OED). Although it is an old concept, recently, it has gained special prominence in Cultural studies. Such migrated people have retained their emotional, cultural, and spiritual links with the country of their origin.

In diasporic writings, the issues like multiculturalism, gender aspects, generational conflicts, familial relationships are raised. Most of the expatriate or immigrant writers depict the picture of their country through nostalgia. The east / west cultural encounter is an important issue among the migrant writers. The diasporic writers explore multiculturalism and cultural conflicts. Diasporic consciousness is witnessed in their writings. The diasporic writers focus on migrant experiences, themes of multiculturalism, dislocation, isolation, loneliness, alienation, nostalgic feelings, homelessness, the problem of assimilation, frustration, hybridity, exile, cultural displacement and the identity crisis. Theoretical concepts like homeland, acculturation, religion, caste ethnicity, double citizenship are also of prime importance in cultural studies.

Definitions of 'Diaspora'

- 1) Merriam Webster learner's dictionary – Diaspora means a group of people who live outside the area in which they had lived for a long time or in which their ancestors lived.
- 2) Oxford Dictionaries - Diaspora means the dispersion of the Jews beyond Israel.
 - Jews living outside Israel.
 - The dispersion or spread of any people from their original homeland.
 - People who have spread or been dispersed from their homeland.
- 3) Robin Cohen : - Robin Cohen in his book *Global Diasporas : An introduction* (1997:ix) defines diaspora as 'communities of people living together in one country who acknowledge that the old country a nation often buried deep in language, religion, custom or folklore – always has some claim to their loyalty and emotions'(ix). It is obvious from the definition that a migrant community always remains associated with its native land observing its traditions and customs being attached with it emotionally.

Types of Diaspora:

Robin Cohen in his book "Global Diasporas: an introduction (1997) has categorized the types of Diasporas.

- 1) Victim Diaspora (Africans and Armenians)
- 2) Labor and imperial Diasporas (indentured Indian and British.)
- 3) Trade Diaspora (Chinese and Lebanese)
- 4) Homeland Diasporas (Sikhs and Zionists)
- 5) Cultural Diaspora (Caribbean)
- 6) Globalization Diaspora (International migrants)

In his essay 'Imaginary Homelands' (in *Imaginary Homelands: Essay and criticism*, Granta, 1991) Rushdie asserts that the physical return to the original home is an impossible task for a migrant. It can be occupied only

through the act of imagination. The migrated people escape to a new country in search of security, space and identity.

The homeland is often remembered through the lens of nostalgia. The diasporic writers like V. S. Naipaul, Vikram Seth, Rohinton Mistry, Salman Rashdie, Lakshmi Gill, Amitav Ghosh, Hanif Kureishi , Bharti Mukherjee are scattered in various countries like Britain, America, Canada, Australia, Malaysia, East Africa, Fiji, Trinidad, and Tobago and so on.

Indian diaspora

Today, the Indian Diaspora consists of the 25 million spread over 110 countries. The term Indian Diaspora refers to the people who have been migrated from the various regions of India to different countries. Indian Diaspora is recognized as an important and unique force in world culture.

Many Indian people are living abroad but they have retained their roots in India.

The Indian diaspora has been classified into two kinds.

- 1) **Forced Migration:** It involves the forced migration to Africa, Fiji or the Caribbean on account of slavery or indentured labor in 18th or 19th century. It consists of unprivileged and subaltern classes for whom return to homeland was merely a dream due to lack of proper means of transportation, economic deficiency and vast distances. The physical distance was associated by the psychological alienation. It led the migrant people and also authors to visualize home only in imaginations.
- 2) **Voluntary Migration:** - It includes the migrants to USA, UK, Germany, France and other European countries. This migration is the result of choice for material prosperity, professional and business purpose. Though this class seems to be privileged, elite and equal to the natives, it also experiences the similar feelings of rootlessness, fragmentation, homelessness and dislocation.

Indian communities abroad, whether they live as forced migrants or voluntary migrants, retain their Indianness. The Diasporas follow Indian culture,

traditions, beliefs, customs and languages. But they are identified as “others” in the western countries.

The note of restlessness and anxiety is found in the Indian diasporic writers. The diasporic consciousness is manifested in the sense of loss and dispossession, a feeling of entangled between two cultures. Immigrant people carry with them ‘the cultural baggage’ while settling in an adopted land. They are entangled between two cultures. They are placed in a situation like “Na Gharka Na Ghat Ka”. Uma Parameswaran in her book ‘Writers of the Indian Diaspora’ comments, ‘home is where your feet are, and may your heart be there too!’. Very often countries like India, UK and America are considered as the ‘melting pot’, because the people from different cultures and countries have settled and assimilated themselves in the main force. These nations are very good example of multiculturalism.

Diasporic Experiences in ‘The Namesake’

In 2003, Lahiri published her debut novel, *The Namesake*. The story spans over thirty years in the life of the Ganguli family. The Calcutta-born parents immigrated as young adults to the United States, where their children, Gogol and Sonia, grow up experiencing the constant generational and cultural gap with their parents. A film adaptation of *The Namesake* was released in March 2007, directed by Mira Nair and starring Kal Penn as Gogol and Bollywood stars Tabu and Irrfan Khan as his parents.

The Namesake can be primarily viewed as a diasporic text to which the sub themes of family ties, clash of values, cross-cultural relationships, assimilation, love, loneliness etc. contribute. The novel is about immigrant experience. Here is the Ganguli couple, the first generation Indian immigrants whose experiences in the U.S. are depicted against those of their children. There is a cultural clash between two cultures and generations.

Gogol’s search for personal identity is the major aspect of the novel, *The Namesake*. Gogol is not teased over his name and the only trouble he gets from other people is mispronunciations and the occasional questions. Gogol decides

to change his name when he turns eighteen, picking a name his father has once picked for him in the tradition of Indian society. At first, Gogol is ecstatic at his change of name. However, when Gogol finally learns the truth as to why his father gave him such a unique name, Gogol begins to feel guilty over his antipathy towards the name.

Gogol's name is not the only part of his family's identity that he objects to. Gogol feels that his parents' strict adherence to the traditions of Bengali ways is an embarrassment. . Gogol also dislikes that his parents only socialize with other Bengalis and refuse to adapt to the traditions of America. As Gogol grows, he rejects many of the Bengali traditions, resents his family's frequent trips to Calcutta, and cuts himself off from his parents as quickly as he can. Gogol embraces the affections of other families, American families that are drastically different from his own, searching for himself in their ways rather than those of his mother and father. Gogol's search for his personal identity among his parents' traditional style of living is a major aspect of this novel. Gogol is an American, a second-generation immigrant, who has no guidance as to how he should behave in his adopted country. Finally, however, Gogol discovers himself, a man who is both Indian and American, and in this way solves the struggle of his search for an identity.

The diasporic community experiences the sense of displacement from homeland to the hostland. They remember their nation through nostalgia and past experiences. Loss and nostalgia are important features of diasporic writing. In the present novel Ashima, a newly-wed wife finds it difficult to get accustomed in America. She struggles to adjust with the chilly weather. When Ashima is admitted to the hospital for delivery, she feels lonely and alienated. The scene in India is different enormously. Kith & kin, relatives and neighbours pay visit to the hospital to welcome the newly born baby. Ashima feels lonely even though there are other pregnant women in the same room.

It is a tradition to christen the new-born baby before discharge. Ashima's grandmother had suggested the name, but the letter was lost in the mail. As it is compulsory to give the baby a name before leaving the hospital, Ashoke

comes up with 'Gogol', the name of his favourite Russian author. In this way, the baby is registered as Gogol Ganguli after which they leave the hospital. There are so many passages in the novel that are devoted to the description of Ashima crying often as she feels lonely and without support in looking after the child.

The racial discrimination is also mentioned in the novel. As a child Gogol had drawn the picture of his mother in which he had put a dot on her forehead to represent the 'bindi' worn by the Indian women. He had also drawn a picture of his father with glasses and his little sister Sonia. When Mrs. Merton, the American babysitter has a look at it, she comments 'well, if that's not the spitting image' (61). There is also another incident which shows how neighbourhood ruffians, driven by prejudices of colour and race discriminate with the migrants. Ashoke, however, has learnt to cope up with this prejudiced behavior of the American people. Such actions by the natives make the immigrant people feel insecure and displaced and alienated.

Similarly, the Indians also experience the positive aspects of American life. There is one episode in which Ashima's shopping bags are left behind in the train and are retrieved later when Ashoke rings up the Lost and Found Department of the company running the trains. They get back all the bags with the contents perfectly in place. In the course of time, their food habits are changing and the Americanization process is led by the children.

The acculturation of children according to Indian values becomes problematic in an adopted country. The parents expect that their children should follow Indian values. Once the children pass out of school and start earning, they do not stay with their parents. This fact has to be accepted by the parents. The following passage explains Ashima's feelings, 'Having been deprived of the company of her own parents upon moving to America, her children's independence, their need to keep their distance from her, is something she will never understand. Still, she has not argued with them. This too, she is beginning to learn. She had complained to her friends at the library, and they had told her it was inevitable, that eventually parents had to stop

assuming that their children would return faithfully for the holidays'.(p.166).

Exile and loneliness is predominant in the present novel. Residing away from home and kith and kin , each member of the Ganguli family leads a solitary life. Ashoke is busy from morning till evening at the university. Ashima also spends her time in domestic duties and spare sometime in the library of her son's school. A grown-up Gogol moves away from family but he too faces loneliness. For the diasporic community, the exile becomes a permanent condition of homelessness.

Conclusion

Jhumpa Lahiri has presented relationships with varying degrees of acculturation of the second generation of Indian immigrants. The novel is a comparative study of two cultures, namely America and India. The lifestyle, milieu, landscape, facilities, thinking and rituals of two countries have been compared. Most of the cross –cultural relationships do not last for a long time in this novel. The second generation of Indian immigrants has been torn between two cultures, and civilization. Lahiri's dexterity as a fiction writer is praiseworthy while depicting the diasporic experiences of second generation Indian immigrants to America.

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