

ALTERNATE HOMES AND BEYOND: NEGOTIATING THE IDENTITY IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S THE NAMESAKE

Abstract

Conventional paradigms of modernity operate on binary oppositional models such as “traditional” versus “modern”, or “East” versus “West”, but theories on cultural identity conceptualize cultural difference in terms of class, race and gender and their socio-historical ramifications in a global context. The paper would look at the novel *The Namesake* by Jhumpa Lahiri as a space where creative, cross-cultural, and independent identities for diasporic women might be created. The objective is also to examine the significance of place, locality and situated “racializing practices” in the constitution of identity and how it contributes to the diasporic experiences and its narratives of displacement. The paper would like to examine issues in cultural modernity from a critical perspective of gender, race, and class. Focusing on these areas of concern recent theories of culture are of interest because they consider the complexity of cultural strategies and its implications for our understanding of the contemporary world. Notions such as literature and history could be redefined to incorporate the growing confluence (as in the works of Diaspora novelists) as well as contradiction of diverse social experiences in the contemporary world. Delving deep into the psyche of the protagonists of the novel one would be able to understand how diasporic writers account for the particularity of local experiences without losing a shared sense of history.

Keywords: Identity, Diaspora, Multiculturalism, History.

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I. INTRODUCTION

“The term ‘diaspora’ signifies the political as well as individual consequences of cultural alienation, a strong sense of exile and a terrible reality of homelessness resulting in the loss of geo (physical) boundaries.... In [the] diaspora’s desperate attempt to grapple with the truth and extent of the loss, there is always a constant effort to build the lost boundaries in the host space.” (Komalesha 2004:151)

The meaning of Indian Diaspora has acquired new connotations and international migration posits a global challenge in the 21st century. The new cyber diaspora, different in form and structure from the traditional Girmitya Diaspora, not only take their profession but also their culture and lifestyle abroad. They juxtapose the native home and the adopted home and alternate between them without losing proximity to both. Indian women form half of the immigrant population to America, but their experience is different from that of men. Indian Diasporic writers in America like Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Jhumpa Lahiri have established literary roots in America and their literature is about immigrant sensibility, dislocation, and relocation. Their works are a productive blend of memory, identity, and nostalgia. These writers are primarily interested in the female psyche which they seek to define and unravel. The works of Jhumpa Lahiri deal with the immigrant experiences of Indian women in USA, torn between tradition and change, liberated, and trapped by cultural changes. Her fiction deals with women, mostly from Bengal who faces domestic violence, crime, racism, inter-racial relationships, economic disparity, abortion, and divorce in America. They struggle to put down their roots in the alien environment and rely on memory.

Conventional patriarchal systems of thought have marginalized people based on their race, religion, and gender. Immigrant women in such systems of thought have become victims of a double colonization, both in terms of their race as well as gender. Interracial families are sites for the development and articulation of hybrid identity: complex ways of representing and positioning oneself within larger social constructs of racial and social class, gender, and cultural difference. A cultural mosaic is thus created where knowledge about parallel cultures is generated through exposure to the differences and similarities between one culture and that of other groups. The narrative of an ex-patriate writer thus becomes double-edged. Being historically and geographically stratified from their native roots, these writers feel the urge to map out their own identities. There is a blending of admiration and resentment, rootlessness, and uncertainty, leading to tentativeness on the part of the writer. The coupling of homelessness and nostalgia, along with a fascination for things occidental, accounts for the diffidence and hybridity that underline the writings of Diaspora novelists.

Jhumpa Lahiri, a part of the Indian diaspora, writes in her first novel *The Namesake* about a Bengali couple Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli and their family. The novel depicts practical encounters of this family as they try to acclimatize themselves to an alien culture, which is now and again upset with a sentimental social distance, rootlessness and separation experienced by each as they are ostracized at some stage or other. There is a sense of in-betweenness, loss, despondency, lamentation, and frustration in the depiction of the characters as they try to negotiate their identity in an alien land. According to Capello he defines the term Diaspora as: “The diaspora rewrites home and presents new identities and subjectivities emerging within a confluence of heterogeneous cultures”. (Capello 2004:57)

The novel depicts the issue of cultural assimilation and absorption confronted by the women who settle in an alien land and the hybrid identity of the second-generation diasporic women. The interface of different cultures and value systems generate a dialogue which solidifies the interconnectedness between the strangers as they manifest a cultural hybridity. The position of women in Indian English fiction is delineated as the voiceless sufferer and upholder of the conventions and customary estimations of family and society as they face the crisis of establishment of their identity in a foreign land. Born and raised in India, Ashima too strives to maintain Indian qualities, customs, and culture even in America. The display of the pangs of separation and isolation is linked to the gnawing pains of disassociating from the past as they suffer from displacement and dislocation. Ashima according to her name "... will be without outskirts, without a home of her, an inhabitant all over the place and no place" (Lahiri 276). It remains to be seen if her search for an alternate home will bear fruit and if she will remain true to her name- seamless and boundless and become a part of world citizenry.

The life of Indian diasporic groups particularly women are tales of trying to exhume the problematical issues which generally pose threats to their ability to assimilate themselves to their adopted homelands. Confronted with social, religious, racial, and ideological clashes in the host nation turns out to be exceedingly significant. The idea of space is exceptionally crucial in the investigation of diasporic groups. Social otherness, generational and social estrangement from their ethnic group leaves the Indian diasporic women caught in a space between the way of life in their country and that of the host nation. They need security and enthusiastic support from their family and the detachment leads diasporic women to be emotionally and monetarily reliant on their spouses while they deal with issues like melancholy, misfortune, and sentimentality. Lahiri's *The Namesake* is a diverse multi-generational story which analyses the social clashes, agonies, goals, and quandaries of the Indian settlers who wind up in the middle of the local and host societies.

The Namesake is the tale of Ashima Bhaduri, a student in degree class who progresses towards becoming Ashima Ganguli after her marriage to Ashoke Ganguli. After marriage they move to Boston. The book opens with Ashima Ganguli who is vexed, pining to go home, suffering from nostalgia as she is estranged from her parental home and attempting to reproduce the essence of her most loved Indian nibble in a desperate bid to recreate her past. She thinks about her past with wistfulness and longing and spends her leisure time in perusing Bengali sonnets, stories, and articles. Her struggles her infinite but her grim desire for cultural assimilation is portrayed through her complete subjectivity as she strives for her real identity but is unable to solve her feelings of homelessness.

Ashima's settler encounters, personality issues, the strains identified as they are torn between family customs and individual opportunity, the connection amongst guardians and youngsters, the uneasy status of the foreigners are the significant topics depicted in *The Namesake*. Ashima epitomizes the women who are hesitant to change or adjust to the way of life of the host nation and who are in constant conversation with the metahome and trying to retain their myths about their homeland. It is a constant shift between two worlds and two homes- a voyage back and forth between two locales. Assimilating the pain of displacement becomes a part of their existence and this diasporic sensibility mirrors the plural identity of the protagonists. Race, culture, and gender are important aspects of this cultural, emotional, and geographical displacement and Jhumpa Lahiri beautifully captures

the poignancy of this identity as Ashima romanticizes her native land as she voices and problematizes the concept of homeland from the established tropes of discussion.

Sonia, the daughter of Ashima, is a second-generation migrant, and being the offspring of Bengali immigrants is expected to feel at home in Calcutta. But this is not her home as she experiences cultural friction and clearly projects the maladjustments experienced due to cultural diffusion. Ashima is wistful as she can't fathom Sonia's maladjustment and rootlessness in Calcutta. She has been treated as culturally different and the racialized notion of the "other" has made her existence distinct and detached from the others in America. Ashima's child, Gogol, weds Moushumi yet her relationship with Dimitri invades their wedded life. Moushumi after the separation goes to live with Dimitri and decides to leave for Paris which uncovers the multicultural and the global character of second-generation Indian immigrants. Even though Ashima and Moushumi belong to a similar culture, yet they are altogether different. For Ashima everything is identified with Ashoke and is significant for her yet for Moushumi the things identified with Gogol are simply products and processes conveying no significance. Ashima stands separated from every other character and can be singled out for her dedication towards her marriage.

Diaspora can prompt transculturation which happens in contact zones or social spaces where dissimilar societies meet, conflict, and think about each other. Ashima becomes a victim of the sense of alienation but both Ashoke and Ashima do not become Americanized in their ways of life. Gogol and Moushumi however are Western in their ways of existence and suffer from a cultural imbalance. We see Gogol's attempts to escape his past identity and heritage when he fails to assert his identity in his relationships with women. His inability to face the cultural dilemma is presented when he is unable to come to terms with his name which is a facet of his identity. The diaspora thereby creates new identities and spaces for growth, helps in resolving conflicts and helps in building a new culture.

II. DIASPORIC IDENTITY AND MULTICULTURALISM

Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* focuses on the cultural and linguistic transformation in the migrated country achieved by the second-generation immigrants and the nostalgia for the lost homeland is seen in a completely new geographical location. In this novel the cultural elements of the homeland and the adaptation struggle in the adopted country is reiterated. It deals with the dilemma of the identity crisis and the psychological transformations of the individuals due to displacement and resettlement in the new home. It also focuses on Ashima's struggle to maintain her native culture as she struggles to deal with the cultural hybridity and multiculturalism she perceives in her children. She oscillates between the past and the present. Jhumpa Lahiri focuses on the cultural separation between the first- and second-generation immigrants as it lends credibility to the viewpoint of the young immigrants as they discuss aspects of discrimination, East-West cultural dichotomies, disappointment, and cultural isolation in the adopted country. Ashima does not work outside the home, she is resistant to change and cannot accommodate the social mores of this new society. Ashima does not have the inspiration to change, and we see that for women like the social ties or family relationships are more prominent and significant. Their reliance on spouse and family for comfort is also bolstered because of this. They keep on wearing ensembles of their homeland as Ashima does in wearing just sarees.

Ashima's depression after the birth of her child Gogol is sensibly depicted. She needs to go home where her kid will have his doting grandparents and a large group of relatives. The forlornness and a feeling of claustrophobia at being confined inside her home leaves Ashima in an exceptionally discouraged state of mind. She generally felt nostalgic about her relatives in India. After Gogol's birth, she says to Ashoke, "I am stating I would prefer not to bring Gogol alone up in this nation. It's wrong. I need to backpedal" (Lahiri 33). She is resolved to hold up under the stress and torment and is ready to bring up the new-born child in America. She needed her grandma who is in India to dole out a name for her new-born which demonstrates her yearning to hold quick to the traditions of her way of life and the subsequent disillusionment because of the inability to do so. As her life revolved increasingly around her son, she subtly and gradually starts to hurry into the outside world, pushing the pram on little shopping campaigns: *"Interestingly, she pushes him through the soothing lanes of Cambridge ...The errand takes longer than common; for the time being she is over and over halted in the city, and in the passageways of the general store by immaculate outsiders, all Americans, all of a sudden considering her, grinning, saluting her for what she's finished. They look carefully into the pram."* (Lahiri 34)

The novel in a way depicts the issues of cultural assimilation and absorption faced by the first and in addition the second-generation settlers. Moushumi is another such Bengali brought up in America's multicultural society and is an impossible mix of Indian, American, and French cultures. Her training at New York University, her incessant visits to France and England changed her point of view and her local social cognizance. She has little thankfulness for India or Indians and is more westernized in her mentality. She has *"secretly pledged that she had never become completely subject to her better half"* (Lahiri 247). Their marriage relationship that is created in America's multicultural milieu ends in separation. Sonia bit by bit acclimatizes odds and ends of the new culture of Calcutta which is dissimilar to Moushumi's attitude. She has a feeling of obligation and weds her sweetheart a half Chinese kid Ben. She chooses to take care of her mom after her dad's death. Ashima like numerous other Bengali ladies is not socially inoculated by America's multiculturalism and is a solid adherent of Indian culture. She does her best to play out the part of a homemaker and tries to maintain the conventional qualities against the materialistic estimations of America. The dread of losing her Bengali culture and of her youngsters' disregard of this unique culture subtly torments her.

Through the existential crisis of Ashima, Jhumpa Lahiri presents the torment of a lady living in an alien land, brought about by a feeling of segregation. She misses her country and this experience of being neither in Calcutta nor in America results in desolateness in her traditional domestic sphere. She is a genuine illustration of diasporic individuals living in a cocoon with an ongoing and continuous quest for identity. Like a customary Indian spouse in appearance and in philosophies, her life revolves around her husband and kids, and she adjusts despite her spatial, cultural, and emotional dislocation. Ashima fits into the appointed part of an impeccable homemaker, however Moushumi and Sonia are unable to wear the same mantle thereby dislocating themselves from Ashima's sense of moral and cultural ideology.

III. CONCLUSION

Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* portrays the experience of a typical Bengali immigrant family as part of a Diaspora. It is both exact and figurative alluding to the physical uprooting and in addition moulding of an alternate sensibility. In the present times social orders are beset with a pessimism and sense of alienation which additionally influence the way relationships are carved. Ashoke and Ashima, the protagonists of this novel make a decent attempt to hang on to their Indian-ness by conducting themselves in a customary Indian way in their social matrix – a tribute to their way of life in India. To the second generation it is a liberating sensation as they have always looked up to the host nation as their homeland. *The Namesake* therefore negotiates, interprets, and performs an intimate study of diasporic issues and trends through its protagonists.

To sum up, it is Ashima who alternates between two homes and two cultures. Her ideas of memory and identity are strongly connected with the diasporic discourse and offers insights into the themes of diaspora and the issues of depicting history and culture of the two nations. Jhumpa Lahiri's novel swings between the homeland and the new land but the daughter Sonia effectively gets adjusted to the new world. She renders herself mainstream with her companions comfortably and ultimately marries a Chinese person and settles herself. Moushumi Mazoomdar, modest and contemplative is transformed, and her strong identity becomes horrendously shaky and indeterminate. Straddling both the worlds Ashima stands strong negotiating her metaphysical alienation from her homeland, collecting the fragments of her lost identity as she finds the imprints of her native culture preserved and frozen in her memory.

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