

Transnationality and Diasporic Experiences in Jumpha Lahiri's Novel *The Namesake*

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Abstract: *Jumpha Lahiri is an Indian American writer. She is well-known for her collection of short-stories: Interpreter of Maladies, for which she won the Pulitzer Prize, and for her other full-length novel The Lowland. Lahiri's writing has autobiographical tone. It is based either on her first hand experiences or on the experiences of her community people like her parents, friends, neighbours or acquaintances. She preferred to write about the struggles, anxieties and biases. She has carefully written about the immigrant psychology and behaviour. Lahiri portrays in this novel, the simple joys and happy moments as well as struggles, sacrifices, and sufferings of the immigrants. And as to their experiences, Lahiri's subjects of focus are material prosperity and academic pursuits, dislocation and displacement, cultural conflicts, loneliness, language barrier, loss of identity, sense of belonging, gender issues, and marital status. This paper focusses on the diasporic issues the characters face in the newland and their search for identity to assimilate in the foreign land.*

Keywords: Dislocation, Identity crisis, Gender, Cultural conflict, alienation

I. INTRODUCTION

Literature is an art form and also it can include works in various non-fiction genres, such as autobiography, diaries, memoir, letters, and the essay. Within its broad definition, literature includes non-fictional books, articles or other printed information on a particular subject. Literature indeed reflects the society, its good values and its ills. In its corrective function, literature mirrors the ills of the society with a view to making the society realize its mistakes and make amends. It also projects the virtues or good values in the society for people to emulate. Jhumpa Lahiri is an American author of Bengali descent. Lahiri published her first novel *The Namesake* in the year 2003. *The Namesake (TN)* is a contemporary novel about immigration and a family's lifelong search for melting into the new world by Jumpha Lahiri. Lahiri has written about immigrant parents who struggle to keep their children acquainted with Indian culture and tradition. She has shown how parents struggle to keep their children attached to them even after they have grown up.

It covers a period of more than thirty years of Ganguli's family. Calcutta born parents immigrated to America as young adults and their children Gogol and Sonia grew up there while experiencing a generation gap as well as the cultural gap between them and their parents.

The story has also so many diasporic experiences such as language as a barrier, alienation, cultural identity, name and identity, relationship between parents and children and nostalgia. The novel is a story about the assimilation of an Indian Bengali family from Calcutta, the Ganguli, into America, over thirty years from 1968 – 2000. The cultural conflict experienced by them and their American born children in different ways, the spatial, cultural and emotional dislocation suffered by them in their effort to settle "home" in the new land. Like many "professional Indians" who in the waves of the early sixty's, went to the united states, as part of the "brain drain".

Ashoke Ganguli too leaves his homeland and comes to America in pursuit of higher studies in the field of "fiber optics", with a prospect of setting down "with security and respect". After two years stay in the USA he comes back to India, marries a nineteen year old Bengali girl from Calcutta named Ashima, who has no idea or dream of going to a place called Boston so far off from her parents, but agrees for the marriage. After the legal formalities, she flies alone to be with her husband, with a heavy heart and lots of instructions from her family members and relatives who come to see her off at Dum Airport "not to eat beef or wear skirts or cut off her hair and forget the family the moment she landed in

Boston”(TN37). Ashima often feels upset and homesick and sulks alone in their three room apartment which is too hot in summer and too cold in the winter, a removed from the description of house in the English novels she has read. She feels spatially and emotionally dislocated from the comfortable home of her father full of so many loving ones and yearns to go back. Home is ‘a mystic place of desire’ in the immigrant imagination. (*Brah: 192*).

Most of the time she remains lost in the memories of her home thinking of the activities going there by calculating ‘the Indians time on her hands’ which is ‘ten and a half hours ahead in Calcutta”(TN 3).

When she has a labour pain, she does not call her husband with his name. She belongs to the Bengali family. She was in the Maternity floor, she searches for Ashoke face. It shows our culture. She wonders because she is the only Indian person in the hospital. So she feels lonely. Then she believes that she is technically speaking, not alone. She is speaking with her child. ‘In India, she thinks to herself, women go home to their parents to give birth, away from husbands and in-laws and household cares, retreating briefly to childhood when the baby arrives.(TN4)

She spends her time on rereading Bengali short stories, poems and article from the Bengali magazines, she has brought with her. She “keeps her ears trained, between the hours of twelve and two, for the sound of the postman’s footsteps on the porch, followed by the soft click of the mail slot in the door (TN 36)”, Waiting for her parents letters which she keeps collecting in her white bag and rereads them often. But the most terrifying experience for her is ‘Motherhood in a foreign land’, so far from home, unmonitored and unobserved by those she loved, “without a single grand parent or parent or uncle or aunt at her side, and to raise a child in a country, where she is related to no one, whose she knows little, where life seems so tentative and spare” (TN35).

She is the only character in the novel who assimilates to the American melting-pot adapts herself to a transcultural lifestyle at the end. Alfonso-Forero comments in *Immigrant Motherhood and Transnationality in Jhumpa Lahiri’s Fiction*, “the uncertain young woman we encounter in the novel’s opening pages attempting unsuccessfully to recreate a favourite Indian snack in her Massachusetts kitchen is transformed through her role as an immigrant mother and wife into a transnational figure” (852). The main and primary reason for Ashima’s displacement in the American society is the distinction between two very difficult cultures. America and India culturally, they have crucial differences. While women and men seem to be equally independent in America, there are certain cultural peculiarities in the Indian perspective as to the role of the sexes in society. Ashima is the most spiritual and Indian figure of the family. Ashima is at the heart of the matter. She establishes numerous parties with the invited Indian families in America. The circle of relatives grow larger each year and she maintains the Indian customs and creates surrogate India in America. Describing the Indian family culture, Alfonso – forero writes in *Immigrant Motherhood and Transnationality in Jhumpa Lahiri’s Fiction*:

The distinction between the material and the spiritual in the domain of culture is essential to how nationalism attempts to resolve the women’s question.... The division between ghar – the home, an inherently spiritual and female space – and bahir – the outside world, which is inherently male and dominated by material pursuits – determines not only the division of labor in terms of how the Indian home is run, but more importantly it positions women as the guardian and propagators of Indian culture. In this manner Indian nationalism elevates the condition of the middle – class woman to a goddess – like status...(853–4).

It is inside the house that India should be preserved, for the outside is inevitably America. This is what Ashima is trying to do all the time: to preserve her family’s Indian identity “against the appeal to assimilate”. Gradually Ashima learns how to be independent. She takes pride in rearing up the child, moves out alone in the market with her baby, and communicates with the passersby who smile at him and goes to meet her husband on the campus, she grows confident. The very feeling of displacement is felt more by her, after their migration from the university apartments to a university town outside Boston, when Ashoke is hired as an Assistant professor of Electrical Engineering in the university. The shift to this suburban area with no ‘street lights’, no public transportation, no stores for miles makes Ashima feel ‘more drastic more distressing than the move from Calcutta to Cambridge had been’. She felt lonely and displaced in foreign land. Ashima begins to realize that,

being a foreigner...is a sort of lifelong pregnancy – a perpetual wait, a constant burden, a continuous feeling out of sorts. It is an ongoing responsibility, a parenthesis in what had once been ordinary life, only to discover 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. (TN 49 – 50).

As times goes by, Ashima indulges herself more in the American way of life which gradually provides her with the sort of confidence and independence that a typical American woman is supposed to have. She finds a job as a librarian which results in more contact with the outside world and becomes friends with her American colleagues, a kind of relationship that she had never experienced before; she eventually does her husband's duties like paying the bills, buying tickets, driving the car and changing the house which she never did before his death. She later realizes that her life in America exceeds her life in India: she is as much American as Indian.

She gains cultural and geographical fluidity by the very practice of her life through the decades. After her husband dies, she decides to divide her time between India and America: living between her roots in India and her family in America. Thus is Ashima's transformation to a transnational figure, "true to the meaning of her name, she will be without borders, without a home of her own, a resident everywhere and nowhere" (TN276).

The Namesake reflects the problem of search for identity and sense of belonging. The aimless wandering, search for identity and alienation is a common-place theme in modern fiction, but for the most Indian novelists in English this quest has peculiar Indian immediacy. Moving between events in Calcutta, Boston and New York city, the novel examines the nuances involved with being caught between two conflicting cultures with their highly distinct religious, social ideological differences. Michiko Kakutani says: "*The Namesake* is a novel that offers a Chekhovian exploration of father and sons, Parents and children, as it is resonant in its exploration of what is acquired and lost by immigrants and their children in pursuit of American Dream" (192).

Quest for identity focuses on the first-generation and second-generation immigrants' adherence to the old and new lands as can be found in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*. In this novel, Lahiri has explored the psychic condition of the first generation immigrants, Ashima and Ashoke and the second generation immigrants, Gogol, Sonia and Moushumi. The novel critically demonstrates how the concept of homeland creates an atmosphere to construct home and identity of proximity. In this age of transmigration, 'home' signifies its impermanence, displacement, and dispossession. For many critics, the idea of home is more conveyed as a sense of being between the two places instead of a rooted one. In the novel, Ashima's sense of being at home is connected with the original homeland, i.e. India. And the selves of Gogol, Sonia and Moushumi are supposed to be attached with the USA, their birth place.

This is the story of an Indian family who moves to America for better opportunities, focusing mainly on the only son, Gogol Ganguli. Although the whole family struggles to conform to the American way of life, it is Gogol who experiences the most difficulty, starting with the problem of his name which is changed in his teens. JhumpaLahiri does a wonderful job getting the reader into this character's head and feeling for him as he grows up in a culture entirely new to his parents and their attempts to keep the Indian culture true to their children. The novel highlights the confusion, the homesickness and the loneliness of the first generation Indians in a foreign country. Lahiri has written the novel providing sensitivity to both the parents' generations and children's toward both Americans and Indians.

The novel is about the Ganguli family and their story of assimilation into the foreign land. AshokeGanguli came into United States like many "professional Indians" who "in the waves of the early sixty's" went to the United States, as part of the brain drain. AshokeGanguli too leaves his homeland, and comes to America in pursuit of higher studies to do research in the field of "fibre optics" with a prospect of settling down "with security and respect". AshokeGanguli then after two years of settling down in the USA came back home and married a nineteen years old girl Ashima and took her to Boston so far away from her native land. Ashima misses her homeland and finds it difficult to call Boston her home but when they have given birth to a son and a daughter there seemed to have a change in the lifestyle.

And as second generations of immigrants the children gets themselves accustomed with life and culture of States rather than the ones their parents adheres. Throughout the novel the trauma of being torn between two worlds is seed through the character of the protagonist Gogol Ganguli who basically is not proud of his origins. He tries harder to escape his root to the Bengali culture but in the end. Lahiri beautifully portrays the changes in the minds of Gogol who eventually develops sensitivity towards his family, culture and mostly with his name and also we get to see how AshimaGanguli evolves from being a homesick housewife to a confident woman comfortable in her surroundings and finally she started to feel home at Boston.

Immigrant's cultural practices are in a constant friction with the practices of the host country. Sometimes there seemed to have clashes of cultural norms which create hostility. In the novel, Ashima and Ashoke wait for Gogol's grandmother's letter which will contain a name for the child. But the letter didn't come sooner so that they were forced to name their son. In America new born children are given name as soon as they born and get registered with a birth certificate. The inflexible rules of a multicultural land challenge their Bengali tradition. This Paper reflects the immigrant issues through the novel *The Namesake* by Jhumpa Lahiri . She as a fiction writer deals elaborately with the existential issues of immigrants and their diasporic experiences.

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