

## The Question of Alienation and Identity in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland* and *The Namesake*

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### Abstract

*The term alienation has undergone a sea change in meaning over the ages. The meanings have at times been contradictory to each other too. The term identity can be described as a state of mind in which an individual is able to acknowledge, understand, and come to terms with their particular character traits vis-a-vis that of others. This paper deals with the question of alienation and identity in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland* and *The Namesake*.*

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The term alienation has undergone a sea change in meaning over the ages. The meanings have at times been contradictory to each other too. In ancient historical times the term could indicate a metaphysical sense of accomplishing an elevated state of observation, almost ecstatic in nature, to the point of becoming estranged from an inadequate existence in worldly matters, albeit positively. Alienation in a negative sense has been traced to matters of religion, when isolated from God and the faithful. The medieval times saw a strong connection between the existing social order and alienation. The concept of alienation in literature has been regularly found in the works of the German Romantics. Works of literature have seen alienation represented as the isolation of an individual from the society or community in a psychological way.

The term identity can be described as a state of mind in which an individual is able to acknowledge, understand, and come to terms with their particular character traits vis-a-vis that of others. Essentially it means who one is and what one expresses oneself as being. Several writers have explored the theme of identity in their literary works. Readers are able to equate themselves with the characters and the views upheld by them. This also means that readers are aware of the various conflicting emotions going on in a person's mind regarding their identity. Many a times an individual is not happy in being who he or she is, but would rather be someone else with different qualities. The theme of identity is not only complex, but very interesting at the same time. Writers like Julia Alvarez in *How the Garcia Girl Lost Their Accents* and Jeanne

Wakatsuki in *Farewell to Manzanar* have remarkably portrayed the theme of identity. Both the books depict characters that are not happy with the identity that they have and instead try to change it in order to have a greater sense of belongingness with the society that they are a part of.

Diasporic literature has the issues of a sense of loss and alienation at the crux. This can be stated to be a logical outcome of migration and expatriation. Diasporic literature generally deals with matters of displacement, alienation, existential rootlessness, nostalgia and quest for identity. The works of eminent diasporic writers like V. S. Naipaul, M.G. Vassanji, Bharti Mukherjee, Jhumpa Lahiri, Rohinton Mistry, to name a prominent few, stand out in this category. This paper deals with the question of alienation and identity in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland* and *The Namesake*.

Diasporic literature reflects the immigrant experience that follows any immigrant settlement. Such texts should be seen from the perspectives of location, dislocation and relocation. What should come to mind when one thinks of the word 'home' is very pertinent in diasporic literature. The designation of 'home' keeps changing. This gives rise to a sense of homelessness and associated uneasiness and also the comprehension of the impracticality of going back to one's roots. The inner conflict which follows a cultural displacement and evaluated in such a context is addressed in the two novels that have been considered in this paper. Once away from the families, the immigrants oscillate between crisis and reconstruction. They are in a state of being alienated thrice- from the land of their birth, from the land they have made their home, and their children. There is a perpetual desire in the characters to regain lost home, which often leads to creating a different version of home.

Human beings are in the practice of assigning names to everything around them, and at the same time these human beings are also given names, which become particular to them. Assigning names to individuals enforces identities to be formed and easily distinguishable from one another. This is an established and well accepted practice the world over. Individual identities are essential in the first place.

The problems surface when these identities differentiate between individuals as superior and inferior. Superior in terms of race, caste, colour, nation and gender.

"Identity emerges as a kind of unsettled space or an unresolved question in that space, between a numbers of intersecting discourses[Until recently, we have incorrectly thought that identity is] a kind of fixed point of thought and being, a ground of action, the logic of something like a 'true self.'\*But+ Identity is a process, identity is split. Identity is not a fixed point but an ambivalent point. Identity is also the relationship of the Other to oneself." (Hall, 1989: Pg. 6)

Identity is here perceived as a double- edged sword, but with equal sharpness and importance both ways.

Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*, tells the story of 'the Ganguli' family, an Indian, Bengali family from Calcutta, trying their best to make themselves comfortable in America for about thirty years. The novelist enumerates the cultural conflict experienced by their family and the American born children. The spatial, emotional, and cultural dislocation undergone by them on numerous occasions in order to settle down in a new land are vividly described. The author explores the concepts of alienation and identity as faces by the Ganguli family both as individuals and as a family. The characters are subjected to moments of crisis of identity, followed by social and cultural shocks. To begin with, Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli face problems in assimilating with the Americans owing to not having fluency in the English language. They are not able to socialize easily, making them withdraw within themselves. There are autobiographical nuances here, as the novelist draws analogies with her personal alienation in a foreign land.

The readers are first brought to face the notion of identity in the beginning of the novel when Ashima needs to call out to her husband from the bathroom. As is the custom in Indian households of not taking the husband's name, Ashima sticks to it. Even though staying in a place where these customs might not be understood, let alone valued, she refuses to let go of them. The second chapter brings forth another aspect of identity. Here the concept of pet names. 'daknam' in Bangla, as against 'bhalonam' is highlighted. The pet name is supposed to be used in close family circles, while the formal name is meant to be used for official purposes. The couple wait for the grandmother in Calcutta to decide on a 'daknam' for their new born son. When there is a delay in selecting a name from the grandmother's end, Ashoke names the child Gogol, after the Russian writer. In India, the family name is very important, validating social and cultural status. The

parents want to maintain relations with their parent country, reluctant to sever the umbilical cord. This thinking however, does not have any significance for the children, who are in a state of indecisiveness. Gogol Ganguli also has to face this dilemma, when his parents would rather have him called 'Nikhil' in school. He is not able to understand why Gogol is not good enough. He does not identify with 'Nikhil', a complete stranger to him. Her the novelist puts in her experiences with pet names and formal names. She was born Nilanjana Sudeshna, with the pet name of 'Jhumpa'. Her teacher found it difficult to pronounce the formal name and so preferred to call her by her pet name, which stuck on. Jhumpa Lahiri found it odd to be called by her pet name by total outsiders, but had little choice in the matter, but not without going through her share of anguish on account of it. Gogol's anguish is that of the author's. Lahiri's parents were not first generation Americans, so were identified easily by their accents, which always gave them away. All these traumatic experiences find their way in *The Namesake*. A similar situation is found in Tony Morrison's novel *Tar Baby*. The writer says,

"In eight years he'd had seven documented identities and before that a few undocumented ones. So he barely remembered his real original name himself. Actually the name most truly his wasn't on any of the Social Security cards, union dues cards, discharge papers, and everybody who knew it or remembered it in connection with him could very well be dead Son. It was the name that called forth the true him. According to him that he never lied to, the one he tucked in at night and the one he did not want to die. The other selves were like the words he spoke - fabrications of the moment, misinformation required to protect Son, from harm and to secure that one reality at least." (Morrison, 1991:139)

Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland* highlights the concept of alienation. Udayan feels a sense of loss and separation from his brother Subhash when the latter went to America for higher studies. They have sketched out different ways in their lives. The elder chose to pursue higher studies in America, and the younger chose to support the Naxalbari movement. However diverse their ambitions and callings in life, they feel comfort in each other's presence. Udayan feels lonely and writes to Subhash:

"The days are dull without you. And though I refuse to forgive you for not supporting a movement that will only improve the lives of millions of people, I hope you can forgive me for giving you a hard time. Will you hurry up with whatever it is you're doing? An embrace from your brother." (Jhumpa Lahiri, 2013:38)

Udayan strongly believes that the society is imperfect and in evil hands, for which he would have to endeavour to set it right. So he stays in lowland, and marries a girl, Gauri, against the wishes of parents from both sides. Whenever he feels sad he writes to his brother for solace. Gauri is another character who is alienated from the others. After her husband Udayan's death, she is absolutely lonely, as she is not accepted by any family members. It is Subhash who comes to her rescue, and takes her to Rhode Island with him. However, after giving birth to her child she does not conduct herself as a good wife to Subhash. Bijoli, Subhash's mother also is an alienated soul in the novel. She is widowed, and dies in a hospital surrounded by strangers. Subhash returns to see her, but a little too late, as she had died by the time he reached her bedside. She pined for his company in life, but did not live to see him return.

Sartre describes existentialistic alienation in his book, *Being and Nothingness* as:

"In the shock that seizes me when apprehend the other's look, I experience a subtle alienation of all my possibilities, which are not associated with the objects of the world far

from me in the midst of world."(Sartre, 1963:18)

In *The Namesake*, Ashima senses complete alienation after throwing a party. She feels and comprehends a total divide between herself and her husband. She does not identify with the country she had left behind thirty years ago, nor does she feel comfortable in America with her children. Both these novels of Lahiri thus explore the questions of alienation and identity from various perspectives.

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