

Identity Crisis in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*

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Abstract

This paper endeavours to study the cultural disorientation, identity crisis and a sense of insecurity of the characters of Indian origin immigrants in America. The Namesake, novel by diaspora writer Jhumpa Lahiri portrays the first generation and second generation migrant's predicament to become one with the mainstream society of America. Jhumpa Lahiri has aptly described the struggle of 'dislocation' to 'relocation' and issues of cross-cultural identity.

Keywords: diaspora, mobility, identity, dislocation, disorientation

Man has always aspired for new horizons, since inception he has tried for better life. In pursuit of greater life, the man, with his efforts has transformed the old age into the age of technology. In search of progress, prosperity and comfort he explores the world. Changing patterns of employment, opportunities at far ends results in remarkable mobility. The yearning for desired life has enforced man to move from his homeland and settles down in the host land. This dislocation leaves migrated people confused. People who voluntarily leaves their country enjoy all wealth, tastes success but attachment towards homeland and urge to belong in the settled land disrupts their identity. Rise of technology results in continuous change in Eastern or Western society. In a changed location and different environment, predefined individual identities shatter, transforming into multi-faceted and constantly reconstructed forms. The perpetual shift between 'location' and 'relocation' gives rise to the notion of 'identity' and 'roots'.

Diaspora literature consists the idea of 'home land' to 'alien land' as it records the harsh journey of displacement, nostalgia and self-identity. "The Indian Diaspora is one of the most important demographic dislocation of Modern Times." (Ghosh 243) In the twentieth century thousands of Indians have migrated to America or other European countries for greener pastures. While settling down, they have faced many difficulties but they cannot cut down their roots for insecurity in foreign land. Writers of the Indian Diasporic writing have occupied the central position in the last

decade chiefly because of the speculative formulation being generated by their works. Indian diaspora writing have contributed a great lot to immigrant literature. Many Indian writers reside in foreign countries, who visit to their motherland to satisfy their inner psyche and pen down their experiences at home and outside home.

Indian diasporic writing narrates the tale of willing journeys or forced journeys, reasons behind it, their 'home away' feeling 'sense of rejection' and 'acceptance' of new social codes. In diaspora literature, all women writers have written about the predicaments of women in bicultural society. In the galaxy of diaspora women writers Bharati Mukherjee, Uma Parmeswaran, Jhumpa Lahiri, Kiran Desai and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni have received accolades for the portrayal of acculturation, marginalization, rootlessness, alienation etc. The diasporic writers celebrate races, diversity of culture, ethnicities and it tries to bridge up the gap between East-West ends. Jhumpa Lahiri, an American writer is one of the most significant writers of the Indian diaspora in the present time. She is much admired for her creative works *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008), *The Namesake* (2003) which depicts the migrants' experiences and problems being faced by immigrants. She rightly illustrates a comprehensive poetics of personal relationships. Being a daughter of an Indian migrant parents she is aware of displacement, cultural bewilderment and challenge of identity. She shifts from her homeland England to the new country USA and became an American citizen. Lahiri has portrayed uprooted individuals, their sense of alienation which shatters them badly. Lahiri basically deals with India who believes India as an exotic land for a living at any circumstances. She paints especially immigrants, their dilemma in an alien land and pursuit to become one with the host land. Jhumpa Lahiri keenly observes the experience of immigrants in multiple ways. She has aptly responded to the phenomenon of immigration with her feminine sensibility and explores the possibilities of assimilation and emotional attachments in immigrant's life.

The *Namesake* is the story of the immigrants who are

caught in the two worlds. The trauma and exile of Ashima is delineated in the light of acculturation. Bengali family moves to America for better opportunities and tries to establish themselves completely in the host country. In the course assimilation conflicts between couple, families and friends arises which affects everyone in the family. Being a second generation Indian Diaspora Lahiri reveals the ambiguity of the concept of identity and cultural conflict through the characters of Gogol and Sonia. In an interview Lahiri has admitted: "I'm lucky that I'm between two worlds... I don't really know what a distinct south Asian identity means. I don't think about that when I write, I just try to bring a person to life."

Protagonist Gogol Ganguly's experiences are modelled on Lahiri's own knowledge as a child of immigrant in America. The novel highlights confusion, nostalgia, longing for lost world and rootlessness of the first generation diaspora. Ashima, wife of Ashoke Ganguly feels dislocated in foreign land. She feels emotionally and spiritually dislocated from her comfort zone. She feels,

Being a foreigner is a sort of life-long pregnancy-A Perpetual wait, a constant burden, a continuous feeling out of sorts. It is an on-going responsibility, a parenthesis in what had once been ordinary life, only to discover that previous life has vanished, replaced by something more complicated and demanding like pregnancy being a foreigner Ashima believes, is something that elicit the same curiosity from strangers, the same combination of pity and respect (The Namesake 49-50)

She struggles to cope up with new lifestyle and surroundings. They try to preserve their culture by celebrating festivals, marriages, childbirth together with other Indian migrants. Lahiri shows how these immigrants take efforts to preserve their 'home culture' in 'host land'. Bengali migrants religiously celebrate 'Durga Pooja' and 'Saraswati puja' and this way they are attached to their religion and the old world they have left behind. To get in touch with 'our people' "Ashoke and Ashima created their own circle of immigrant Bengalis and they all came from Calcutta and for this reason only they are friends. The husbands are teachers, researchers, doctors, engineers. The wives homesick and bewildered turn to Ashima for recipes and advise." (The Namesake 22). On the other hand Gogol and Sonia born and brought up in America finds it depressing as they considers themselves westerners. Second generation migrants' revolt against their uncertain position and try to find out their real identity. Ashima and Ashoke have created their own mini India in America but at the same time they groom their children to cope up with the new western values of life. They try to teach them Tagore's poem as well as English

nursery rhymes. Ashima teaches Gogol:

to memorize a four line children poem by Tagore, names of deities at the same time when she goes to sleep in the same time when she goes to sleep in the afternoon she switches the television to channel -2 and tells Gogol to watch 'sesame street' and the electronic company "in order to keep up with the English he uses at nursery school. (The Namesake 54)

Ashoke and Ashima want their children to learn Bengali rituals and culture as they want them to understand its significance. They send Gogol to learn Bengali lessons and try to visit India every year. But Gogol and Sonia don't enjoy these trips and longs for their 'homeland'. It becomes very difficult for them to assimilate in India. "For the sake of Gogol and Sonia they celebrate, with progressively increasing fanfare, the birth of Christ, an event the children look towards too far more than worship of Durga and Saraswati". (The Namesake 64) Sonia in her growing age refuses to accept her Christmas gift after taking Hinduism classes at college. Gogol and Sonia prefers western food over Bengali dishes cooked by their mother. They like American rock music and desires to blend in American society. They constantly challenge their native identity and consider inherited cultural values as a hindrance in acclimatisation of host culture.

Names play very important role, it symbolises one's identity in life. One of the main theme of the novel is identity or quest for identity. As identity is a central issue, names too are vital for the person. With the help of names people communicate and recognise each other. Gogol is not happy with his name as it is neither Indian nor American. His real name is Nikhil but he is recognised by his pet name Gogol which he disapproves. The title The Namesake reflects Gogol's struggle to identify with his strange name. He changes his name to Nikhil and get relieved from the burden of values and parental culture, "But now that he's Nikhil it's easier to ignore his parents, to tune out their concerns and pleas". With two names he has got dual identity. The Name Gogol suggests his connection to his parents and his roots. Nikhil is much closer to American society.

In this novel every person is in search of identity. Every person is a bit lost and fighting for existence. Gogol and Sonia strive hard to establish their identity as they are caught in two cultures. They try to get along with mainstream American culture but they are not viewed as Americans by other Americans. In pursuit of his identity Gogol shuns everything which is Indian. His relationships with Ruth and Maxine does not flourish as he never want them to meet his parents. He tries to erase

his past identity as a Gogol but he cannot correlate with any of the two worlds in which he is living. After changing his name he is not able to define his identity. Gogol's father has an emotional attachment with that name, he considers it life giving force. Gogol understands the significance of his name after the death of his father. Moushumi, the wife Gogol, also shares the same ethos of second generation Bengali immigrants. She ruins her marital life in an attempt to frame her identity.

In the end Ashima adapts with the American culture and learns new way of life. Suddenly she gets connected with America. She becomes as American as she is Indian and starts a new journey after the death of her husband. On the other hand Gogol starts accepting traditional values and takes up his father's role. He is in between the Indianess and Americanness wherein he ends as a one person. The Namesake is a story of progress of two generation towards assimilation and acculturation in America. Jhumpa Lahiri credibly illustrates the dilemma and struggle of first and second generation immigrants. All members of Ganguly family face alienation, dislocation, cultural trauma in foreign system. However the second generation diaspora finds their 'roots' and 'routes' after going through cross cultural tussle and hybridity. Lahiri has correctly describes the experiences of duality, plural identity and dilemma between the home culture and host culture. While preserving their own cultural beliefs first generation diaspora absorbs the new cultural ways, they train their children to be 'bicultural' and 'bilingual'. Diaspora is all about new culture and new identities and intermingling, Gogol, Ashima, Moushumi all are evolved into the new beings and adjusts in their own way. At the end all immigrants carve a niche in the foreign land.

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