

DEALING WITH DIASPORA: STRUGGLE FOR IDENTITY IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S "THE NAMESAKE"

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Abstract:

The following paper highlights the struggle of identity faced by dispersed families, thereby re-affirming that victims of diaspora struggle to find a sense of belongingness wherever they settle. The Namesake by Jhumpa Lahiri portrays this struggle by one such immigrant family to find and struggle to hold their roots.

Key Words: *Struggle for Identity, Food, Culture, Diaspora, Belongingness.*

Jhumpa Lahiri's debut novel "The Namesake" efficiently talks about the struggles faced by an immigrant family struggling to form an identity outside their homeland while simultaneously trying not feel socio-culturally alienated from their surroundings. It also portrays the internal conflict between the family as there are unavoidable conflicts if interests between the two generations.

The novel begins with a sense of Nostalgia as a pregnant Ashima stands in the kitchen of the apartment she shares with her husband Ashoke in Central Square. A time in a woman's life where she desperately feels the need to be surrounded by loved one and a sense of familiarity, we find Ashima stranded in a foreign country, struggling to recreate her homeland through the only thing she knows how to- food. She tries to recreate the snack she ate as a child in her homeland, Calcutta. Even though she is able to somewhat replicate the concoction, something feels amiss. Her sense of alienation is deep as she can barely eat the snack without feeling the pangs of missing her home. As she feels the first signs of labor, she calls out to her husband. She is promptly taken to the hospital where her innate sense of alienation and a lack of belongingness hits again as she is asked to change out her own sari and into a hospital gown. The other couples around her come to her as a culture shock as she hears them talking in a way she hadn't and wouldn't ever expect to talk to Ashoke with. Her mind drifts back to her hometown as it seems to be the only thing that can bring her a sense of comfort in an otherwise discomfoting time. She has along with her, a copy of the

magazine she brought along with her on her flight to the states, clinging to it for any sense of familiarity it might bring her. She longingly looks at the drawing of the Calcutta skyline that her father drew on one of the pages. Her mind drifts to the day she first met Ashoke. The setting of the meeting is one that was typical of arranged marriages in the 1960's. Stepping into Ashoke's shoes fills her with a sense of exhilaration and titillation as that is the closest she'd ever been to experiencing a man's touch. The snack that she makes in the kitchen for herself, the copy of the Desh magazine, her saree, the bindi, the bangles, all of these come across as desperate attempts by Ashima to maintain a cultural identity in a place where it was easy to lose it. She refuses to call Ashoke by her name, which is still an ardent practice in most Indian households. She clings on to these ancient Indian practices to prevent herself from feeling completely alienated as these are the ways she has grown up watching and following the same helps her in her struggle to find identity. As the first generation of the Ganguli family who arrives in the States, the feelings of alienation are strong and their sense of identities is firmly planted in their homeland. Within America, they create a little Bengal by sticking to their roots and following their culture. Ashoke prefers to eat Indian food and at home, he wears the kind of pajamas that are typically worn by Indian men. Even at the hospital, while we see American men right beside their wives, helping them through the labor, we find Ashoke in the waiting room, at home and then back again in the waiting room once the hospital informed him that Ashima was ready to give birth and the baby would be born anytime soon.

Ashoke and Ashima, through their lifestyle choices, conscious or unconsciously have strung along with their old habits to stop themselves from feeling lost. Over the years, they made friends with other Bengali families around them and felt content to live in their little world as that provided them with the warmth and love that they missed the most about home. The only reason all the

families became friends in the first place was that all of them hailed from Calcutta. That was the only point of commonality between them. Though, over the years, Ashima made friends with other women too. She eventually grew comfortable with her identity and expanded her social circle as she slowly but eventually learned and accepted the ways of the modern American woman. She makes friends with these women, invites them into her home along with their children. The main reason behind her doing so is that she fears that Gogol would feel like an outcast if he does not learn their ways. She does not want him to experience the same feelings of being an outsider as she did. She does the same with her daughter Sonia. For their sake, Ashoke and Ashima begin to celebrate the Christian festivities of Thanksgiving, Easter and Christmas. But they also educate them about Indian festivals like Durga Puja.

This contrast of cultures, however, is extremely confusing for both Gogol and Sonia. They are unable to completely adapt to any of the cultures as for them, as it is always a *mélange* of everything for them. Just like their parents desperately hold on to their identities from their country, Gogol and Sonia too, try to form an identity that is more accepting of their surroundings. But unlike Ashoke and Ashima, who are willing to adapt to their environment for the sake of their children, Gogol and Sonia are rigid. They have drifted off towards the new identity that their parents have tried to form. Their ways are set into the American style of life and they are both unwilling to make compromises. This begins to upset Ashima before she realizes that the American way of life is the only one they identify with. The way Ashoke and Ashima feel connected and rooted to their Indian heritage, Gogol and Sonia have a sense of connection towards their life in the United States. Having struggled with a sense of identity all his life, a grown up Gogol wishes to part with his parents' heritage as quickly as possible because he cannot identify with it and it feels suffocating to him. The need to grow apart from it is so strong that it drives Gogol to change his name. The desperate need to get away from his home and everything holding him back to his Bengali culture drives him into falling in love with an American woman. Ashima, now more at peace with her own dual identity and her children's strong inclination towards the American lifestyle, openly accepts Maxine. Maxine tries to change Gogol which he does, willingly. For him, his relationship with Maxine is the height of his being an American. Being accepted by her parents, living in their home

fills Gogol with a sense of novelty. He tries to replace his own family with Maxine's family, distancing himself from his own even more. All the choices he makes only solidify his identity as an American, thereby nullifying his Indian identity. Gogol has been so successful in isolating his old family and identity that the Ratliffs know nothing about him even though they've been living with him. On his birthday, Gogol feels the first pangs of isolation as he is surrounded by people he does not know. Once again, his struggle begins as he realizes just how empty his new American identity is. HE realizes just how incomplete he is without his roots holding him down.

Ashoke's death comes to him as the final push he needed to slowly but definitely starting the walk back towards his Bengali roots. He finds himself lingering at Ashoke's house and goes ahead to spend weeks with his mother and sister at their family home. The Bengali traditions he once hated and found burdensome, he finds himself embracing them. He tries to fill in the void Ashoke has left through the culture Ashoke held so dear to himself. He is unable to explain this sudden want to go back to the roots to Maxine as he is not slowly transitioning into it. He has jumped headfirst into his culture. He goes back to being the person he was before he met Maxine and she is unable to recognize this part of him and eventually like his American identity, she too, is separated from him.

"I don't want to get away." (Lahiri, 182)

After saying to Maxine when she suggests taking a vacation is when the true acknowledgement of Gogol's identity comes. He then he meets Moushumi, a fellow Bengali living in America. With her, he learns to accept his diasporic identity. Just as Maxine had been dismissive of Gogol's culture, Moushumi's partner from her past relationship had been dismissive too. The fact that it was unacceptable for both of them to allow their respective partners from insulting their culture is proof enough of how they are not willing to completely let go of it. In fact, that is what drives them back towards it and towards each other. The want to reconnect with their culture brings them to marry each other but as the marriage preparations begin, it makes them emotionally distant. Soon after their marriage, where Gogol has reconciled with his culture and his identity, Moushumi finds herself struggling to settle into it and misses the days of her rebellion against the Bengali culture. Gogol, who has always struggled with a sense of identity, finds an anchor in names and when Moushumi refuses to take his last name, it creates

conflict in his mind. Moushumi's refusal is also symbolic of her reluctance to completely submit to her Bengali identity. Her feelings have changed so drastically that the things that initially drew him towards Gogol now feel suffocating and stifling to her. Gogol entered her life after her breakup with an American and she welcomed the gush of culture he brought with him. But as she tries to make sense of her future, she realizes she cannot spend her life as a Bengali woman. She misses her days in Paris, being the exact opposite of what a traditional Bengali woman is supposed to be. Shortly after, she begins an affair with an old partner of hers, Dmitri. Where her relationship with Gogol feels stifling and suffocating, her relationship with Dmitri feels liberating. The only thing that attracts her to Dmitri is the promise of her old life, away from the shackles of her Bengali culture and married life. For her, Gogol represents the life her parents lived—a monotonous, unadventurous life—the kind of life she was running away from. Though Gogol has fully accepted his Bengali culture, he is willing to take a step away from it and get out of an unhappy marriage caused by infidelity and he separates from Moushumi. At a Christmas celebration hosted by Ashima as a farewell party at their family home, Gogol finally finds clarity in his identity that she never found before when he comes across the book "Short Stories by Nikolai Gogol". He finally feels at peace with himself. The novel ends the same way as it started—Ashima going home. In the beginning of the novel, Ashima struggled to find and make an identity in a strange new place. Ashima made an identity for herself, settled well and lived a rich life. After years of struggle, she finally found a sense of belongingness in both, India and America. She

decides to live out the rest of her days dividing her time equally between her two homes.

Conclusion:

A lifetime of changes in living conditions Ashima has never lived alone. From living with her parents in Calcutta to living with Ashoke in their home on Pemberton Road, Ashima lived a lifetime of struggle with identity. It finally came after Ashoke's death as Ashima now had an actual identity that was independent of anyone or her living situation. She was a woman, living in America, a woman who struggled through the throes of diaspora and emerged a victorious woman who made a home out of two countries. Where Ashima spent a lifetime searching for one, Gogol spent half his life escaping the one he was born with. A life altering event brought him back to his roots where he then firmly planted himself. The novel concludes with Ashima finally accepting her dual identity and Gogol reaffirming and settling into his old one.

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