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Diasporic Experiences in Jhumpa Lahiri's 'The Namesake'**Dr. Prakash M. Joshi***S.S. Mehta Arts & M.M. Patel Commerce College, Himatnagar, (Gujarat) India***Abstract**

Born in 1967, Jhumpa Lahiri is a major contemporary diasporic Indian- American writer. Her real name is Nilanjana Sudeshna. She is highly praised Indian writer of diasporic fiction. She belongs to the second generation immigrant writers. Her work includes the Pulitzer Prize winning short story collection 'Interpreter of Maladies'(1999), novel 'The Namesake'(2003) and her second collection of short stories 'Unaccustomed Earth'. 'The Namesake', the second book by Jhumpa Lahiri was originally a novella published in The New Yorker and was later expanded to a full length novel. It explores many of the same emotional and cultural themes as her Pulitzer Prize-winning short story collection Interpreter of Maladies. 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, and ideological differences. It describes the struggles and hardships of a Bengali couple who immigrate to the United States to form a life outside of everything they are accustomed to.

Key Words: Diaspora, immigrants, cultural clash, migration, loneliness.

Introduction

Diaspora means dispersion of people from their original homeland. Basically Diaspora is a minority community living in exile. It also means living peacefully immaterially but losing home. Diaspora involves an idea of a homeland, a place from where the displacement occurs and narratives of harsh journeys undertaken on account of economic compulsions. The term 'Diaspora' in ancient Greek means 'a scattering or sowing of seeds which refers to the forcing of people to leave their traditional homelands. It was first used in Hebrew Scriptures in Alexandria to describe the Jews away from their homeland. At first, the word 'Diaspora' was used for the dispersal of Jews when they were forced into exile to Babylonia. Thus, Diaspora had a purely religious connotation.

It is applied to any group of people dispersed far away from their place of origin. 'Diaspora' now also refers to 'anybody of people living outside their traditional homeland. Hence in the 16th century B.C., the term Diaspora was applied to the Africans who were exported to new lands in order to populate as well as to serve as bonded labourers. Moreover the word Diaspora has two morphemes- 'Dias' which means 'cross' and 'pora' which means to 'sow seeds'. Hence today the word has become multivocal. Although it is an old concept, recently, it has gained special prominence in Cultural studies. Such migrated people have retained their emotional, cultural, and spiritual links with the country of their origin.

Definitions of 'Diaspora':

According to Oxford Dictionary Diaspora means the dispersion of the Jews beyond Israel.

- Jews living outside Israel.
- The dispersion or spread of any people from their original homeland.
- People who have spread or been dispersed from their homeland.

Merriam Webster learner's dictionary defines Diaspora as a group of people who live outside the area in which they had lived for a long time or in which their ancestors lived.

Classification:

Robin Cohen in his book "Global Diasporas: an introduction (1997) classifies Diaspora as under:

- 1) Victim Diaspora (Africans and Armenians)
- 2) Labor and imperial Diasporas (indentured Indian and British)
- 3) Trade Diaspora (Chinese and Lebanese)
- 4) Homeland Diasporas (Sikhs and Zionists)
- 5) Cultural Diaspora (Caribbean)
- 6) Globalization Diaspora (International Migrants)

William Safren points out that the term Diaspora can be applied to expatriate minority communities whose members share some of the common characteristics like retaining a collective memory, vision or myth about their original homeland-its physical location, history and achievements. They regard their ancestral homeland as their true, ideal home and as the place to which they or their descendents would eventually return when conditions are appropriate. However, in his essay

'Imaginary Homelands' Rushdie states that the physical return to the original home is an impossible task for a migrant. It can be occupied only through the act of imagination. The migrated people escape to a new country in search of space, safety and identity. The diasporic writers like V. S. Naipaul, Vikram Seth, Rohinton Mistry, Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, Bharti Mukherjee and so on are scattered in various countries like Britain, America, Canada, Australia, Malaysia, East Africa, Fiji, Trinidad and Tobago and so on.

Indian Diaspora:

The term Indian Diaspora refers to the people who have been migrated from the various regions of India to different countries. Indian Diaspora is recognized as an important and unique force in world culture. It consists of the 25 million spread over 110 countries today. Many Indian people are living abroad but they have retained their roots in India.

The Indian Diaspora has been classified into two Kinds:

- 1) **Forced Migration:** It involves the forced migration to Africa, Fiji or the Caribbean on account of slavery or indentured labour in 18th or 19th century. It consists of unprivileged and subaltern classes. The return to Homeland was next to impossible for them due to lack of proper means of transportation, economic deficiency, and vast distances so the physical distance became a psychological alienation, and the homeland became the sacred icon in the diasporic imagination of the authors also.

2) **Voluntary Migration:** It includes the migrants to USA, UK, Germany, France and other European countries for the sake of professional, business or academic purposes. It was the result of man's choice and inclination towards the material gains, professional and business interests.

Indian communities abroad, whether they live as forced migrants or voluntary migrants, retain their Indianness. The Diasporas follow Indian culture, traditions, beliefs, customs and languages. But they are identified as “others” in the western countries. The note of restlessness and anxiety is found in the Indian diasporic writers. The diasporic consciousness is manifested in the sense of loss and dispossession, a feeling of entangled between two cultures. The Indian Diasporic writers are equipped with bundles of memories and articulate an amalgam of global and national strands that embody real and imagined experience. Suketu Mehta, who is advocate of idea of home, says: “You cannot go home by eating certain foods, by replaying its films on your T.V. screens. At some point you have to live there again.” Uma Parameswaran in her book ‘Writers of the Indian Diaspora’ comments, ‘home is where your feet are, and may your heart be there too!’

The Namesake

Lahiri published *The Namesake*, her first novel in 2003. In the novel ‘The Namesake’ the diasporic traits like family ties, cultural clash, cross-cultural relationships, assimilation, acculturation, alienation, hybridity, marginalization, cultural

displacement and identity crisis are predominant. The note of restlessness and anxiety also runs through this novel. The diasporic consciousness is manifested in the sense of loss and dispossession, a feeling of entangled between two cultures. The plight of second generation Indian diasporic community has been elaborately described through the Ganguli family.

The story spans over thirty years in the life of the Ganguli family. The Calcutta-born parents immigrated as young adults to the United States, where their children, Gogol and Sonia, grow up experiencing the constant generational and cultural gap with their parents. A film adaptation of *The Namesake* was released in March 2007, directed by Mira Nair and starring Kal Penn as Gogol and Bollywood stars Tabu and Irrfan Khan as his parents. Lahiri herself made her appearance as “Aunt Jhumpa”. *The Namesake* can be primarily viewed as a diasporic text to which the sub themes of family ties, clash of values, cross-cultural relationships, assimilation, love, loneliness etc. contribute. The novel is about immigrant experience. Here is the Ganguli couple, the first generation Indian immigrants whose experiences in the U.S. are depicted against those of their children. There is a cultural clash between two cultures and generations.

As *The Namesake* opens, Ashima Ganguli is a young bride who is about to deliver her first child in a hospital in Massachusetts. Her husband, Ashoke, is an engineering student at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). The diasporic community experiences the sense of displacement from homeland to the

hostland. They remember their nation through nostalgia and past experiences. Loss and nostalgia are important features of diasporic writing. As she prepares to give birth, she realizes how isolated she has become. She feels lonely and alienated. The scene in India is different enormously. If she were still in Calcutta, she would have her baby at home, surrounded by all the women in her family who would administer all the proper Bengali ceremonies and would tell her what to expect. In the United States, Ashima struggles through language and cultural barriers as well as her own fears as she delivers her first child. She feels lonely even though there are other pregnant women in the same room.

It is a tradition to christen the new-born baby before discharge. The traditional naming process in Ashima-Ashoke's families is to have an elder give the new baby a name. They have chosen Ashima's grandmother for this honor. They have written the grandmother to ask her to give the baby a name. The grandmother writes down the name on a piece of paper and mails it to them. But the letter never arrives and soon after, the grandmother dies. As it is compulsory to give the baby a name before leaving the hospital, Ashoke comes up with 'Gogol', the name of his favourite Russian author. In this way, the baby is registered as Gogol Ganguli after which they leave the hospital. There are so many passages in the novel that are devoted to the description of Ashima crying often as she feels lonely and without support in looking after the child.

Gogol's search for personal identity is the major aspect of the novel, *The Namesake*. Gogol is not teased over his name and the

only trouble he gets from the people is mispronunciations and the occasional questions. His father tries once to explain the significance of it, but he senses that Gogol is not old enough to understand. As Gogol progresses through High School he hates his name more and more and starts to hate the name. He is quite uncomfortable with his name. It is neither a Bengalese nor an American name. No one he knows has a name like his. In school, kids make fun of it. He decides to change his name, his father has once picked for him in the tradition of Indian society. He informs his parents that he wishes to change his name. His father is rather indifferent to the idea and agrees. Shortly before leaving for college, he travels to the courthouse and has his name legally changed to Nikhil Gogol Ganguli. At first, Gogol is ecstatic at his change of name. However, when Gogol finally learns the truth as to why his father gave him such a unique name, Gogol begins to feel guilty over his antipathy towards the name.

Various aspects and challenges of immigration and assimilation are explored in *The Namesake*. Lahiri offers insights into the everyday life of Ganguli family, who comes to the United States but live separate from the American culture. Ashima always dresses in traditional clothes. Once her children are in school, she observes American celebrations, such as Christmas, but only reluctantly so. Rather, she puts most of her effort into creating a Bengalese circle of friends and brings them together to share traditional Bengali feasts. Gogol feels that his parents' strict adherence to the traditions of Bengali ways is an embarrassment. The distance, both

geographically and emotionally, between Gogol and his parents continues to increase. He wants to be American, not Bengali. Gogol also dislikes his parents only socializing with other Bengalis and refusing to adapt to the traditions of America. As Gogol grows, he rejects many of the Bengali traditions, resents his family's frequent trips to Calcutta, and cuts himself off from his parents as quickly as he can.

Gogol embraces the affections of other families, American families that are drastically different from his own, searching for himself in their ways rather than those of his mother and father. He shuns his family mostly because of their cultural ties to India. Gogol wants to fit in with the culture around him and fears that if he embraces Indian culture, Americans will reject him. In his mind, in order to be considered fully American, he has to cut his ties with his family. Gogol's search for his personal identity among his parents' traditional style of living is a major aspect of this novel. He goes home less frequently, dates American girls, and becomes angry when anyone calls him Gogol. During his college years, he smokes cigarettes and goes to many parties, and loses his virginity to a girl he cannot remember.

Gogol is an American, a second-generation immigrant, who has no guidance as to how he should behave in his adopted country. Finally, however, Gogol discovers himself, a man who is both Indian and American, and in this way solves the struggle of his search for an identity. Gogol's father dies of a heart attack while he is working on a temporary project in Ohio. Gogol travels to Ohio to gather his father's belongings and his father's

ashes. Something inside of Gogol changes and is surprised by how much he misses his father. He slowly withdraws from Maxine, his American girlfriend as he tries to sort out his emotions. Maxine tries to pressure him to open up to her. Gogol breaks off the relationship and begins to spend more time with his mother and sister, Sonia.

Later, when Gogol's mother suggests that Gogol contact the Bengalese daughter of her friend, Gogol resists, for a little while. Then he gives in, somewhat curious about dating a Bengalese girl named Moushumi. He meets her anyway, to please his mother. Moushumi and Gogol are attracted to one another and eventually are married. However, by the end of their first year of marriage, Moushumi becomes restless. She feels tied down by marriage and begins to regret what she has done. Gogol suspects something is wrong. She turns away from him and enjoys an affair. The result is obvious i.e. Moushumi and Gogol divorce.

Exile and loneliness is predominant in the present novel. Residing away from home, each member of the Ganguli family leads a solitary life. Ashoke is busy from morning till evening at the university. Ashima also spends her time in domestic duties and spare sometime in the library of her son's school. A grown-up Gogol moves away from family but he too faces loneliness. Towards the end of the novel, Ashima decides selling the family home so she can live in India with her siblings for half of the year. Sonia is preparing to marry to an American man named Ben. So, Gogol is once again alone. For the diasporic community, the exile and loneliness becomes a permanent condition of homelessness.

Summing Up

Jhumpa Lahiri's 'The Namesake' is a comparative study of two cultures: American culture and Indian culture. Various aspects and challenges of immigration and assimilation are explored in the novel. Lahiri has presented relationships with varying degrees of acculturation of the second generation of Indian immigrants. The second generation of Indian immigrants has been torn between two cultures, and civilization. Likewise, Lahiri's fiction offers

a wonderful variety of experiences gathered from the cultural clashes. Moving between events in Calcutta, Boston, and New York City, *The Namesake* examines two conflicting cultures with their highly distinct religious, social, and ideological differences. The novelist has given us acute comparison of lifestyle, landscape, traditions, facilities and rituals of two countries. On the whole, as a fiction writer Jhumpa Lahiri is admirable in depicting the diasporic experiences of Indian immigrants to America.

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