

# DIASPORIC CONSCIOUSNESS IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S *THE NAMESAKE*

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## ABSTRACT

*Indian Writing in English has come a long way since the time when there were only a few writers on the horizon who took up writing in English. But with the passage of time it is not only that many a writer chose English for creative writing, Indian Writing in English, too, established itself with diverse theme as well as its great narrating skill. Jhumpa Lahiri, one of the most celebrated women writers, took up the theme of diasporic consciousness with an immense care and concern in her novel The Namesake. The novel expresses the agony and anguish of the Indian immigrants settled in an alien land. Their displacement, loneliness and solitariness form the theme of this novel as they fail to relate with new and alien culture of the country where they have migrated for economic reasons. Albeit many a novelist approached the theme earlier, what makes this novel stand apart is that it examines the diasporic sensibility from the prism of a woman's perspective. This paper proposes to study how Jhumpa Lahiri in The Namesake explores the theme of cultural identity, the up rootedness and the longing for 'home' as the protagonist Ashima fails to find her way on a foreign land. Furthermore, it will reiterate how her struggle symbolizes the restless quest of a rootless person expressed by a depressing sense of isolation all around.*

**Key Words:** Displacement, Isolation, Immigrants, Cultural Identity, Diaspora.

In ancient Greece, the term 'diaspora' meant 'scattering' and was referred to the citizens of a dominant city-state who immigrated to a conquered land with the purpose of colonising that particular place and people and, thereby, assimilating the territory into the empire. In the Bible, the word diaspora refers to the population of Jews exiled from Israel by Babylonians, and again from Judea by the Roman Empire. A chronological study will confirm that this word came to be used to refer to the historical movements of the dispersed ethnic Israel and to the cultural development of that population in an alien land. The wider application of diaspora evolved from the Assyrian policy of two-way mass deportation of conquered populations to deny future territorial claims on their part. The first known recorded usage of the word diaspora in the English language was in 1876 referring to extensive diaspora work in the preaching of gospel among the National Protestant Churches on the continent. The term became more widely common in English by the mid-1950s, when it was started referring to long-term expatriates in significant numbers from other particular countries or regions. And in academic field, diaspora studies got established relating to this sense of the word. By all means, the term diaspora carries a sense of displacement; that is, they are the people who so described find themselves for whatever reasons separated from their native land,

carrying deep in their heart a hope, or at least a desire, to return to their homeland at some point; of course if the “homeland” still exists in any meaningful sense. Many a writer strongly believe that diaspora may result in a yearning for a single home as people ‘re-root’ in a series of meaningful displacements. And, thus, it is very important to note that an individual may have many homes throughout one’s life with different reasons and maintain some form of attachment to each. Diasporic cultural development often assumes a different line of conduct from that of the population in the original place of settlement. These aloof and separate communities tend to vary in culture, traditions, language and other factors. They fight back to retain their last evidence of cultural affiliation in a diaspora and resist to the change of language. They take pride in the maintenance of their traditional religious practices of their homeland as well.

Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Namesake* is one such novel that celebrates the uniqueness of this urge for home among the diaspora. By now it is clear that theme of rootlessness is too common and variedly dealt by various scholars of diaspora literature and almost every second scholar talks of this feeling of homelessness whenever there is a discussion on diaspora. But when we read the novel of Jhumpa Lahiri, we feel that the author has dealt the theme with the perspective of a woman. The difference lies in its approach and we see that Jhumpa is more concerned with mental diaspora rather than physical. Most of us who are well acquainted with diaspora literature know that this novel was originally published in *The New Yorker* as a novella and thereafter it was adapted by Mira Nair into a film. The event of the book moves from Calcutta to New York City to Boston, thereby, examining the nuances involved in being caught between two otherwise different and conflicting cultures with their highly distinctive religious, social and ideological differences. The story revolves around three persons, Ashoke, Ashima and their son Gogol Ganguly. They struggle to establish themselves in an alien society and find themselves misfit. This is truer about Ashima, Gogol’s mother who finds herself all alone in the foreign land and in between all miss-appropriateness. Miss-appropriateness because she finds herself more mentally than physically transported through marriage from hot-humid but colourful and vibrant weather of Calcutta to cold white landscape of New York City. The coldness of the weather overpowers her entire psyche and she struggles to identify herself with locality, foods, people and the alien culture as well.

The diasporic theme is introduced in the first line of the novel. Jhumpa Lahiri writes “on a sticky August evening two weeks before her due date, Ashima Ganguli stands in the kitchen of a central square apartment, combining Rise Kris pies & Planters peanuts and chopped red onion in a bowl. She adds salt, lemon juice; thin slices of green chilli pepper, wishing there were mustard oil to pore into the mix”.<sup>1</sup> This wish for mustard oil is not a simple wish for appropriate and delicious taste but it underlines her craving for her known surrounding, people and foods. The surrounding of her house in New York City seems colourless to her, she feels no warmth and affection around her, for everything to her seems to be shrouded with colourlessness. Jhumpa’s purposeful use of white colour while describing Ashima’s residence corresponds with her feeling of lifelessness. She is out of her known society and so she feels lifeless and desolate, and her married life is dislocated and colourless as “there is nothing to comfort her in the off white tiles of the floor, the off white panels of the ceiling, the off white sheets tucked tightly into the bed”. Colour motif plays an important role and a very strong imagery is used by the author to reflect the mental status of Ashima. She mentally lives in India, and her physical existence in America pains her as she is unable to adjust with her unfriendly surroundings. Ashima tries her best to create her own home by cooking Indian food, Bengali sweets and meeting Bengali friends every weekend. Her craving for her

motherland is so much so that she “never felt normal at all”<sup>3</sup> since she left her country. She consoles herself by reading and re-reading “a tattered copy of *Desh*,”<sup>4</sup> a Bengali magazine having a pen-and-ink drawing of her father; for this magazine and her father’s drawing gave her the feeling of home. She misses the comfort and the unique indigenouslyness of the Indian society and, hence, she is lonely like many other Indians.

The contrast between the two cultures and societies is beautifully sketched by the author. Ashima remembers how during the marriage ceremony “she was adorned and adjusted by countless aunts and countless cousins hovering around her”.<sup>5</sup> But now when she needs it the most, the comfort and love of her near and dear ones, she is lying all alone in the nursing home to give birth to her first child. At this most important juncture of her life, she is left only with her good old memories. She feels tattered between her present and her past; now she is “.... far from home, unmonitored and unobserved by those she loved.....She is terrified to raise a child in a country where she is related to none, where she knows so little, where life seems so tentative and spare”.<sup>6</sup> This discomfort of Ashima makes her abide by more and more to Bengali customs and rituals. She was compelled to follow her husband’s path like any other devoted Indian wife. When she is pregnant, she feels an ardent urge to be with her dear ones who are missing and found nowhere. On the contrary, she is in a foreign land with unknown people, food, surroundings, climate all around her. She feels isolated and lonely and becomes sad and morose at the thought of being all alone in spite of having so many loved ones at Calcutta who would have surrounded her to protect and console her during her labour pain. She also missed the Bengali ceremonies and rituals which are accomplished during the birth of a child. The author, realistically, portrays the sad feeling of a mother who feels like an alien in an unknown land. She celebrates Gogol’s *annaprasan*, rice ceremony, a Bengali custom of feeding the baby for the first time. She does not miss to call all her Bengali friends in America and cooked typical Bengali foods decking-up the little Gogol in a traditional Bengali style. “Gogol is dressed as an infant Bengali groom in a pale yellow pajama-punjabi from his grandmother in Calcutta....., his tiny forehead has been decorated with considerable struggle with sandalwood paste to form six miniature beige moons floating above his brows. His eyes have been darkened with a touch of *kohl*”.<sup>7</sup>

Ashima is very particular about maintaining her native tradition. She outrightly rejects the very idea of naming her child after father or grandfather as prevalent in America in the absence of a suitable name for her new born child. Both husband and wife decide to wait for the letter of Ashima’s grandmother bearing the name for their new born baby. It simply sounds ridiculous to them that in America one cannot discharge the baby from the nursing home without naming it. The idea of naming the baby on their own, without the consultation of the elders of the family, is unthinkable for the couple. On the contrary, the hospital staffs of New York City find it blasphemous that the parents cannot name their own child. Cultural void is distinct and apparent. The letter with the child’s name never reaches America and Ashima’s grandmother dies. The missing of the name works as a symbol and it is a powerful imagery projecting Gogol’s future. The reader finds that Gogol is a character who always feels disjointed and fractured between two distinctive different traditions. He finds himself tucked-up in between India and America like the name that got lost somewhere between the two countries. The author clearly voices the dilemma of all the immigrants who feel homelessness even in their so-called home in a foreign land. For the second generation of the immigrants, the crisis of homelessness is more challenging. The house where

they stay with their biological parents is a foreign land, and the people, residing there, maintain a completely different lifestyle to which they cannot relate themselves. These offspring grew up in a dilemma for what they should call as their culture. They are always in confusion. They cannot decide between their surroundings outside their home and inside it. They find their family culture and their societal norms absolutely strange to each other. While grooming the children in a foreign land, the mothers of these children face serious problems. They face an intricate problem of giving forth a completely different traditions and customs that they find nowhere in the society outside her own home. The mothers like Ashima try hard, although in vain, to inhibit in their children their ethnicity but the children silently reject and ignore them. This indifferent attitude of her own child pains the immigrant mother for whom the child is the only medium she finds to keep her tradition living and vibrant in a foreign land. Ashima's feeling is of mental homelessness, she never or can never consider America as her home. Her struggle is not only with her outer surroundings but with the growth of her children, Gogol and Sonia, and, hence, a new front opens up. For the children, America is their home country, their neighbourhood are their own but the home they live in gives them the feeling of an alien. At home they detested the Bengali ways of living which their parents so religiously followed especially their mother. Gogol and his sister Sonia enjoyed eating American food unlike their parents, and so "in the super market they ( the parents) let Gogol fill the cart with items that he and Sonia, but not they, consume: individually wrapped slices of cheese, mayonnaise, tunna fish, hot dogs... at his insistence, she concedes and makes him an American dinner once a week as a treat, Shake'n Bake chicken or Hamburger, helper prepared with ground lamb".<sup>8</sup> Now the situation is direr, she is now face to face with her own offspring who hated the customs, food culture and tradition she so religiously clung to for so many years in spite of residing in a foreign land. Her home is no more her, for she feels she is living with people who do not appreciate the way of life she so dearly loved and maintained so long. Her diasporic feeling expands and deepens, and she feels lonelier.

Her feelings of exasperation and dismay get deeper with the passage of time and the more she tries to adhere to her indigenous culture the more she seems to loosen her grip, and, thus, her insistence to make her son, Gogol, marry a Bengali girl ended in a fiasco as the girl, Moushumi, left her son for her boyfriend Dimitri. The character of Moushumi symbolises the co-mingling of the customs in a foreign country like America. The American Society is a cosmopolitan one where all the cultures of the world breathe under the same sky and where nobody can maintain his/her tradition in its uncontaminated form. Thus, Ashima and her family witness the warmth of this globosity and her so called indigenous daughter in law rejects her son for a foreign compliment. The urge of Ashima to stick to her own people and tradition is a common urge of all those people living in foreign lands and the author in this novel explores how the ardent push for the native land and its traditions constantly haunts and affects the personality of all those living away from their country. The question that the novel puts forth is whether the alienation and dislocation of women like Ashima is just the result of geographical migration or something else for the world today is converted into a global village where whether one is in one's native land or somewhere else one may be alienated anywhere and at any given time. The end of the novel is thoughtful and suggestive. Ashima returns to Kolkata and Jhumpa writes, "And though she still does not feel fully at home within these walls on Pemberton Road, she knows that this is home nevertheless - the world for which she is responsible, which she has created, which is everywhere around her, needing to be packed

up, given away, thrown out bit by bit”.<sup>9</sup> Her re-migration to her homeland from the home she so long lived in America and had made it her own was no less painful. The suggestion here is man needs to understand that change is a continuous process and in this present world it is metaphysical alienation that matters more than social and geographical alienation. Jhumpa Lahiri being a product of the second generation of migrants fully understands the feelings of a migrated person especially that of a woman. In the novel she projects two categories of women, first, those who are compelled to migrate as their husbands choose to live in a foreign land for economic reasons, and the second, those who are born in a foreign land like Sonia. Surprisingly enough Jhumpa shows that Sonia accepts the global culture, and unlike Ashima she does not stick to her mother traditions. The suggestion is that it is more important to accept the present rather to live in the bygone days.

It is interesting to note that the novelist talks about metaphysical alienation, and at the same time this novel celebrates the evolution of a cosmopolitan culture which has the capability to accept all the customs of the globe. Thus, the novel gives a message to embrace the new values and that is the only way to feel at home in a foreign land. It is the woman who has an inherent capability to make a home out of an unknown inhabitant, and, thus, Jhumpa Lahiri through her writing acknowledges the women power that not only accepts and lives with all awkwardness in a foreign land but also tries hard to fight back her left out emotion and the feeling of a scattered individual. This is the reason why Ashima feels bad to leave America, her present home, where she and her husband had spent most of her life sharing their joys, aspirations and sorrows, and returning to India, her homeland, she yearned for so long remains no more so celebrated an event that she visualised earlier. The fact involved in this novel is that this is an age of global civilization. The entire globe is a home to the human lot. It is necessary to realise that political, social, cultural and traditional borders are strong and unique in its way, but the greatness of a human being lies in to overcome these bars and barriers and identify themselves as global citizens. Ashima, too, at the end realises that her yearning for her homeland was her fascination; for home is where you live with your loved ones. The novel ends with a suggestion that the migrants must realise the identity crisis that they are haunted with is not a geographical or physical, but it is beyond corporeal, it is ever widening and never changing.

## REFERENCES

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