



CULTURAL DISPLACEMENT AND IDENTITY CRISIS: A STUDY OF JHUMPA LAHIRI'S *THE NAMESAKE*

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ABSTRACT

Unbelievable development in the field of communication has made the world a global village, thanks to globalization. Globalization has created a new wave of migration and almost erased from our mind the concept of international geographical boundaries. Now people are leaving the boundaries of their own countries to go to the other nations in the hope of better life and opportunities. People are, in this globalised state, ready to sacrifice all only for the sake of fulfillment of their dreams. The movement often creates multi-problems for the migrating people. This process of movement makes people foreigner to the world they are living in. Under the influence of globalization, modern man loses the sense of belonging to any person, or society or country. Jhumpa Lahiri, a second generation immigrant, deftly explores in her debut novel '*The Namesake*' the the immigrants' inner psyche, identity crisis, sense of belongingness, loneliness, alienation, the clash of culture, the conflicts of adjustment and the baffling ties between the first and second generation.

Keywords: *Alienation, Culture, Generation, Identity, Immigrant.*

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Jhumpa Lahiri, a powerful storyteller of international repute, is a second generation immigrant of India. She was born to Bengali parents in London and settled after two years of her birth in Rhodes Island, America. In her childhood she with her parents visited Calcutta (Now Kolkata) several times because of her parents' familial ties. As a second generation Indian immigrant she realizes her parents' acute sense of belonging to nowhere fully and their incessant struggle to remain attached to Bengali culture in the foreign land. As immigrants in the U.S.A. her parents feel the threat to their culture that, in turn, leads to their identity crisis at every walk of life. The present paper penetrates into the themes of immigrant experience, identity crisis, displacement, and the first and second generations' ties and clashes.

Lahiri's novel 'The Namesake' tells the story about the assimilation of an Indian Bengali family from Calcutta, the Ganguli into America, over thirty years(1968-2000); the cultural displacement that the Ganguli family and their American born children face in their effort to settle 'home' in the new land. Ashoke Ganguli leaves his homeland Calcutta, India to go to America in the hope of better life and opportunities and to settle down "with security and respect." (*The Namesake*, 105).

After two year's stay in America he comes back to Calcutta, India, marries Ashima, a nineteen years old girl from Calcutta. Ashima has no high dream of going to Boston, a place so far from her parents, but the marriage creates no ill feeling in her get "Wouldn't he be there"(*The Namesake*, 9). Ashima leaves Calcutta to fly alone to be with Ashoke, with a heavy heart and lots of instructions from her family members and relatives who come to see her off at Dum Dum Airport "not to eat beef or wear skirts or cut off her hair and forget the family the moment she landed in Boston." (*The Namesake*, 37).

In the three rooms apartment in Boston Ashima feels homesick and upset. She feels spatially and emotionally dislocated from the comfortable 'home' of her father full of loving ones and wishes to go back. Ashima remains lost in the memories of her 'home'. She spends her time on re-reading Bengali short stories, poems and article from the Bengali magazines she has brought with her from Calcutta.

Thinking of motherhood in foreign land disturbs her badly:

"That was happening so far from home, unmonitored and unobserved by those she loved, had made it more miraculous still. But she is terrified to raise a child in a country where she is related to no one, where she knows little, where life seems so tentative and spare." (*The Namesake*,6).

She sinks in nostalgia: In India, she thinks to herself, women to home to their parents to give birth, away from husbands and in-laws and household cares, retreating briefly to childhood when the baby arrives."(*The Namesake*,4). After the birth of Gogol, she earnestly desires to go back to Calcutta to raise her child there in the company of dear and near ones: "I'm saying don't want to raise Gogol alone in this county. It's not right. I want to go back." (*The Namesake*, 33). But for her husband's sake, she decides to stay there and keeps all her emotional hazards and disappointments to herself and not intending to worry her parents.

As time rolls on, she somehow manages to be independent at rearing up the child, marketing, communicating the passersby. The feeling of displacement grips her acutely after their migration from the University Apartments to a University town outside Boston when Ashoke is "hired as an Assistant Professor of Electrical Engineering at the University." Lahiri catches the traumatic feeling of Ashima's displacement in a foreign land thus : " She is stunned that in this town there are no sidewalks to speak of, no streetlights, no public transportation, no stores for miles at a time.....Though no longer pregnant, she continues, at times, to mix Rice Krispies and peanuts and onions in a bowl. For being a foreigner, Ashima is beginning to realize, is a sort of lifelong pregnancy – a perpetual wait, a constant burden, a continuous feeling out of sorts." (*The Namesake*,49).

As Ashoke and Ashima are immigrants in the U.S.A., so with the passage of time they make links with their circle of Bengali immigrants living there. They all become close friends because of their invisible yet visible background Calcutta : "They all come from Calcutta." (*The Namesake*, 38). Robin Cohen states succinctly " a member's adherence to a diasporic community is demonstrated by an



acceptance of an inescapable link with their past migration history." (Cohen:ix:1997. These Bengali immigrants celebrate the different customs and ceremonies like, marriage, childbirth, death, festivals, Annaprasan etc. together as per Bengali customs, wearing their best traditional dress, enjoying Bengali food, speaking in pure Bengali etc. Thus the Bengali immigrant families living far away from their home culture but they try their best to preserve the home culture in the new alien land. They also feel displacement politically as is reflected from their discussion: "They argue riotously over the films of Ritwik Ghatak versus those of Satyajit Ray. The CPIM versus the Congress Party. North Calcutta versus South. For hours they argue about the politics of America, a country in which none of them is eligible to vote." (*The Namesake*, 38).

In an interview to Mira Nair, Lahiri Jhumpa Lahiri expressed the existing problem of cultural diversity in the foreign land: "I wanted to please my parents and meet their expectations. I also wanted to meet the expectations for my American peers, and the expectations I put on myself to fit into American society. It's a classic case of divided identity." (<https://books.google.co.in/books?isbn=8126906898>).

Ashoke and Ashima's constant struggle to keep Bengali culture alive in their lives in the foreign land gets reflected in their decision to send Gogol for Bengali language and culture classes at the home of one of their Bengali friends. But the children take this as a burden: "The children in the class study without interest, wishing they could be at ballet or softball practice instead." (*The Namesake*, 66). The attitude of the first and second generations to the cultural heritage left behind in the home country and the adopted country is in sharp contrast. The first generation makes no stone unturned to maintain the culture left behind. Ashoke and Ashima find a temporary relief in the foreign atmosphere in the celebration of Gogol's Annaprasan (rice ceremony). The presence of Bengali members, their dress, speaking, performance of ritual testify to their sense of belonging to their own culture. On the other hand, the absence of the family members makes them nostalgic. The importance the immigrants attach to the Bengali rituals reveals their inner feeling of

remaining away from home. But the second generation – Gogol-Sonia's apathetic attitude to accept the Bengali customs and rituals seems to evade his Indian identity. Their hyphenated position, Indian-American, creates an identity crisis in them. Their apparent attachment to the American customs makes them indifferent to the Indian one. Gogol and Sonia fail to attach due importance to and obey the rules and regulations of the Indian religious ceremony after their father's death: "...it was a Bengali son's duty to shave his head in the wake of a parent's death." (*The Namesake*, 179).

The cultural displacement damages the sacred bond of marriage in the lives of Indian immigrants. The marital conflict comes to the fore because "in India a strict set of guidelines dictates how husbands and wives act both publicly and privately, in America, such guidelines are not as clear-cut and often, are thrown out guidelines together." (Pradhan). The first-generation and the second-generation immigrants are at loggerheads over marriage. To the first generation immigrants like Ashoke and Ashima, marriage is a sacred thing and it instills in their mind that it is their duty to remain as a couple till their last breath on the earth. But the second generation immigrants like Gogol and Moushumi, fail to remain loyal to this parental tradition. After leading a happy life for a year and a few months, Moushumi doesn't want to continue her married life with him. She now wants to be a life partner of Dimitri, with whom she had had a relationship even before she married Gogol. She applies for a divorce and flies back to New York. The second generation immigrants' attitude towards marriage and married life undergoes a drastic change under the influence of the Western culture (American culture).

In the post colonial discourse the question of identity always gets emphasis. This identity crisis arises chiefly from the feeling of being culturally displaced. The problem faced by Gogol is his name which is neither American nor Indian, but Russian, symbolizes the problem of identity crisis. The baby Gogol is named after a Russian writer, whose book Ashoke attaches much importance considering the role played in saving his life in a fatal train accident when he was on the way to Ranchi. But, unaware of the



mystery remained behind his naming, Gogol feels a kind of itching for his name. It is neither American nor Indian. He feels inferior. His inferior feeling intensifies when he learns that Nikolai Gogol was a frustrated man and spent his life away from home. He is desperate to do something to save himself from the embarrassment he is facing. As a child, he does not willingly respond to his official name to Nikhil (As his parents wanted) in school. So the principal of the school registers his name as Gogol. Later on, in 1986, when he entered Yale as a freshman that Gogol changed his name to "Nikhil". But this change of name fails to put an end to the problem and created a different kind of psychological problem for him. His father's revelation of the tragic train accident and his rescue makes Nikhil somehow depressed. He feels a sort of guilt for changing his name thereby disobeying his parents' wish and charges his father for not revealing the mystery behind choosing this name before. Towards the end of the story his reading of "The Short Stories of Nikolai Gogol" given to him by his father on his fourteenth birth, leaving party downstairs reveals his guilty-conscience.

In the end of the novel "The Namesake" we find Ashima preparing to go back to Calcutta. But she undergoes a drastic change in her attitude. She is not the same person as she was in the beginning of the story: "She feels overwhelmed by the thought of the move she is about to make, to the city that was once home and is now in its own way foreign. She feels both impatience and indifference for all the days she still must live, for something tells her she will not go quickly as her husband did. For thirty-three years she missed her life in India. Now she will miss her job at the library, the women with whom she's worked. She will miss throwing parties. She will miss living with her daughter, the surprising companionship they have formed, going into Cambridge together to see old movies at the Brattle.....She will miss the country in which she had grown to know and love her husband. Though his ashes have been scattered into the Ganges, it is here, in this house and in this town, that he will continue to dwell in her mind." (*The Namesake*, 278-279).

Towards the end of the story Lahiri portrays the imbalance feeling of Gogol. Now he feels comforted by the mystery behind choosing that

name for him. At 32, he feels proud for his name and its meaning, Nikhil Gogol Ganguly accepted his name and destiny. Now he feels burden of his hating himself for hating his name. He deeply ponders over his name, his identity, his namesake and realizes that one has to take the responsibility to carve his own path to explore the life in this world. He realizes his roots and feels belonging to his mother, sister and other people. He comes to the realization of the grim truth that it is not a way to diminish either Indian or American culture.

Jhumpa Lahiri's portrayal of cultural displacement and consequent identity crisis deserves acclaim.

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