

Analyzing the diasporic feelings in the major characters of *The Namesake*

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Abstract

The Namesake (2003) is touching novel by Pulitzer Prize Winner Jhumpa Lahiri (1967-). There are emotional aspects in this novel that touch the heart of every Indian. The novel very clearly shows the culture differences. It presents the diaspora emotions of the immigrants. They mostly suffer from nostalgia. They don't forget their mother land. They are forced to adjust in a different culture where many things i.e. language, food and cloths are different. But they have to compromise with the new culture. From the mixing of two cultures a new kind of hybrid culture always comes out. *The Namesake* is the story of the couple Ashima and Ashoke who leave their mother country in search of better opportunity. But they were not able to forget their mother land and accept the culture of foreign land which raises the toils and turbulences of diaspora.

Key words: *Namesake, Jhumpa Lahiri, diaspora, Ashima, Ashoke, culture differences, immigrants, Hybrid.*

Introduction

Jhumpa Lahiri herself suffered so much from the alienated feeling of her parents that her writings have true and genuine expressions. We can see very reflection of Diaspora related feelings and sentiments in her novel *The Namesake*. The term Diaspora is is generally related with Ancient Greek sense meaning scattering or dispersion. This term comes in use when the people of same community and group scatter all over the world for their purposes where they go they scatter their own culture also.

In the *Bible* this word Diaspora is used for the exile of the Jews from Israel by Babylonians. Now the meaning of this term becomes change it has vast meaning than before. Mostly people move from one country to other to improve their financial condition. Even sometimes illegal means are also adopted for this purpose. But those people who go through illegal means never feel safe in foreign country. We can see this fact in the latest speech of Donald Trump "Americans proudly welcomes millions of lawful immigrants who enrich our society and contribute to our nation, but all Americans are hurt by uncontrolled illegal migration (Trump).

Diasporic Reflection

The purpose of present research proposal is to highlight the diasporic reflection in *The Namesake* especially through the characters of Ashima and Ashoke. They feel alienated on foreign land and always

remember their mother land and relatives in India. This kind of feelings and attitude shows diaspora concept very clearly. They can understand the feelings of each but on the other hand their children Gogol and Sonia were not able to understand the feelings of their mother and father because they belong to different type of culture.

In the very opening of the novel we see that however Ashima lives in foreign land but she tries to maintain her Bengali culture. She was making Bengali recipes. She cannot accept the culture of foreign country completely. She mostly lost in the nostalgic memories. When Ashima becomes pregnant with her first child she remembers her all family members in Calcutta. However she lives in America physically but mentally she was not present there.

The time of her delivery comes near and she misses her family members in India. “She is terrified to raise a child in a country where she is related with no one, where she knows so little, where life seems to tentative and spare (*The Namesake* 6).” It shows the diasporic feeling of Ashima.

In an interview Jhumpa Lahiri very clearly shows the condition of immigrant families who never tries to enjoy their life and lost in the past memories of life. she says:

Not to say that my family, Gogol’s imaginary family or so many other immigrant families can’t enjoy their lives. But there’s always a sense of an abyss very close. Sometimes it’s harder to focus on the more pleasurable things in life. There is an element of survival in an immigrant family’s life, even if it’s a middle-class academic immigrant family or an engineer’s immigrant family.

Culture

Another example of Ashima’s efforts to maintain Indian culture is that she wants to give opportunity to choose the name for child to her grandmother which is tradition in their culture.

Whether it is the stories in the collection, *Interpreter of Maladies* or at the novel *The Namesake* they are the testament of Lahiri’s versatility as a writer. She has the ability to change cultural perspective as easily as a bilingual person’s ability to shift from language to language. She does not paint pretty pictures. Her canvas is made of details that made up the reality of everyday life. Most of her works are written from a perspective that is between cultures (Kaushik 67).

Ashima always do efforts that her children must know about Indian way of life and they must acquit with Indian culture. There is clear culture gap between Ashima and her children they are not able to relate with Indian culture as Ashima and Ashoke. In fact whole family hangs between two cultures knowingly or unknowingly. In order to get financial security and for the sake of the future of their children Ashima and Ashoke always ignore and tries to reconcile with their culture also. They know it very well they lost their way to go back to India. They imagine different kind of life before coming to foreign country. As mostly people live in dream land. Ashoke goes for study and settled there. As Ashima when met first time to Ashoke there are

different kinds of feelings rises in her heart as we Ashima tries her feet in Ashoke's shoe she never feels such kind of comfort before. There are innocent feelings in her heart. She was far away from the realities and facts of life. As the novel progress her feelings of alienation rises with the passage of time.

New Generation

Gogol, son of Ashima and Ashoke faces the problem of identity crisis so much because of his name problem. As first of all Ashoke gives him the name Gogol on the name of Russian writer because he was not able to get the name from Ashima's grandmother. Her grandmother died before giving name to him Ashima feels so much pain and regret for it because she wants to have name of her first child from her grandmother in order to fulfill the formalities of hospital Ashoke gives him the name Gogol.

Ashima did not like to accept foreign way of life. It is reason of her mental pain and she always feels hurt. On the other hand, Gogol feels afraid because of his name. He has to go to school now. Ashoke changes his name for this purpose. Here is generation gap and the difference of culture roots shows very clearly instead of caring of Gogol and his discomfort with this name they prefer to change his name. However principal of the school later identifies her discomfort and gives him the same name Gogol. "Don't worry his father says. "To me and your mother, you will never be anyone but Gogol" (*The Namesake* 57). Here Gogol faces the problem of identity crisis very clearly. He was not able to decide who he was actually? He feels bad when some of her friends make fun of his name but he was helpless to do something. Another incident in Gogol's life is that when he goes on a school trip. When they go in the graveyard every American student finds the grave of their ancestors but only Gogol is not able to find the graveyard of his ancestors.

Ashima is shocked to learn this trip because there is different kind of tradition in India. In India children are avoided by elders to go on that kind of place. With the fusion of two cultures a new kind of hybrid culture comes out. This hybrid culture example we can see when Ashima tries to make Charismas cards instead of making the pictures of angles she prefer to make elephant pictures on them then there are different kind of hybridity comes out of this culture mixing. As Brah Avtar explains very clearly

The word diaspora often invokes the imaginary of trauma of separation and dislocation and this is certainly a very important aspect of the migratory experience. But diaspora are also potentially the sites of hope and new beginnings. They are contested cultural and political terrains where individual and collective memories collide, reassemble and reconfigure (193).

As we see Gogol his parents tries to attract him towards Bengali culture on the other hand his outer atmosphere attract him American way of life. Ashima does not like the love affairs of Gogol even he lost his virginity before marriage. In fact Gogol represents the life of every Indian immigrant who born in America to Indian parents. Ashima when comes to America first she remembers the instructions given by her parents which are that not to wear skirts and don't cut your hair also. Again and again she reads the Bengali magazine which

she brought with her from India. According to the instruction of her parents and relatives she always wears sari and tie up her hair in bun.

As we see in *The Namesake* all the Bengali families come close to each other and let start celebrating their festivals and follow their traditions and rituals. They feel so much happy to do so. They celebrate the birthdays, functions and other ceremonies together. As we see the rice ceremony of Gogol Ashima and Ashoke invite all their Bengali friends on this ceremony. Ashima feels irritated when Sonia dresses herself according to American way of life. When Ashima tries to interrupt her life she does not like it. In fact both are right on their side. Ashima belongs to Bangladeshi family where there is different type of culture. On the other hand, Sonia, her daughter fed up in American culture. That's why she wants to adopt it completely. She did not feel uncomfortable in it.

There are other problems also which second generation was compels to bear. They cannot relate themselves with their parents' tradition. For example when Ashoke and Ashima get the news of death of their near and dear one they mourn so much which is normal for every human beings beyond this there are other things happens together. As Ashoke did not do his shaving for many days. They do not like to talk anybody. Only simple food is coking in the house. Gogol and Sonia feel irritated from these things. Here is different kind of alienation problem confronted by both of them. Both feel isolated but for different reasons which prove painful for both of them.

It is a matter of prestige for Ashima and Ashoke that Gogol has no love affair till high school. But after his high school education he tries to keep distance from his parents. He has love affairs with Maxine and Ruth. His involvement and love affairs with American girls prove that he wants to learn English way of life and takes pleasure in it. However his marriage decision with Moushumi proves destructive for him after sometimes he realizes that his marriage with Moushumi is only a hasty decision. On the other hand Moushumi feels frustrated with this marriage.

Namesake

After the death of his father Ashoke, Gogol realizes the value of his name how the name Gogol related with Russian author and Ashoke considered him as his savior when he is saved by co-incident in train accident. After the death of Ashoke there is a new kind of rising in Gogol's life he breaks up his relation with Maxine. Now he tries to take care of his family. Another important thing happens is that now he understands how to respect Indian mourning rituals? He can understand the tragedy of his parents only after his death. He cut his hair according to Bengali tradition and fulfills all other Bengali rituals also. Here again we can see the feelings of Ashoke however he is Bengali and wants to teach his son Bengali way of life but they cannot survive without adopting English culture and language. It does not depend on their choice it is compulsion for them if their children cannot adopt English language and culture they were not supposed to get better education there. All

these situations increase the tragedy of immigrants and sharpen their feeling of diaspora and restlessness. All these feelings of restlessness and alienation become somewhat pacified when they find a person on foreign of their own culture and background as we see the rice ceremony of Gogol. Ashima and Ashoke feel so much happy to call their Bengali friends. Another reason of their happiness is that the person of same culture can understand the value of culture when they come close to each other they feel a different kind of bond and attachment with each other.

Alienation

Ashima and Ashoke become lonely slowly because their friends and even relatives have died slowly. “Within the decade abroad, they are both orphaned; Ashoke’s parents both dead from cancer, Ashima’s mother from kidney disease (*The Namesake* 63)”. These kinds of feelings are so much poignant in their heart. After the birth of child she dedicates completely herself to the care of child. Gogol becomes the centre of her attraction. She plays the role of traditional Indian mother who take care her child from every angle. However many years have passed her stay in America but she did not reconcile completely with American culture as Salman Rushdie rightly says that “A full migrant suffers traditionally a triple disruption. He loses his place. He enters into an alien language, and he finds himself surrounded by beings whose behavior and codes are unlike and sometimes even offensive to his own” (429).

Ashima has no other choice to do compromise with situations and lives lonely when Ashoke leaves for his research work to Ohio from Massachusetts. In fact Ashima’s decision to stay without her husband is surprising. She represents the image of a bold Indian lady who can adjust herself according to atmosphere. It shows the sacrificing spirit of Ashima she always sacrifices her feelings for the sake of her family. She wants to grow Ashoke in life instead of worrying about her. But after the sudden death of Ashoke The dilemma of Ashima is rightly captured by Poornima in her following comment; “Lahiri has perceptively portrayed the process of transformation in the subjectivity of her female protagonists, who caught in flux of tradition and modernity, bearing the burden of the past and aspirations of future emerge as a new persona in the diasporic space” (Poornima, 84).

Conclusion

Above lines explain the mental condition of Ashima she felt so much lonely and isolated on the foreign land. All her conditions become changed completely. Her sufferings never end. It is tragedy of her life that she never gets mental satisfaction throughout her life. Only Ashoke can understand her feelings and understand her better but now she finds herself lonely in the whole world. Ashoke’s death in Ohio highlights the diasporic concepts in the novel. There is different kind of pain that rises in the heart of Ashima. Now going back to India is a kind of double immigration for her. Now she feels strange kind of attachment and affection with the country where she gives birth to her children and where she spends time with her husband. She learns to love her library job and colleagues. All things attract her strangely.

Here is completely a different kind of Ashima who leaves Calcutta to marry Ashoke. Here is a great transformation in her personality. There is again Indian touch in the novel where a woman always loves that place where she spends time with her husband and never gets ready easily to leave that place. At the end of the novel Ashima decides to spend six months in India and remaining six months in America. We can say to conclude that there are clear diasporic reflections in the novel. All the Bengali immigrants' lives have shown here that how they feel alienated on foreign land and hangs between two cultures in whole life. No doubt they get modern facilities and life style but they have to sacrifice their culture roots for this reason also.

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