

# A Critical Study of Diaspora in Anita Rau Badami's *The Hero's Walk* and Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*

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**Abstract:** International migration has emerged as a global challenge for the 21st century. Due to liberalization policy of the developed countries a large number of people migrate from the developing countries, including India, to the developed countries. At present, internet, affordable air-travel and reasonable overseas communication facilities allow people living outside their country of origin to maintain strong relationship with the homeland. Indian literature in English, particularly, writings of Indian diaspora, has become one of the important means to know about the societies of these developing countries vis-à-vis that of the developed countries, and to study various issues of immigrants. Alienation, identity problems, homelessness, memory, and issues related to race and gender, etc. emerge as major concerns of diaspora. The paper explores the various issues of diaspora in Anita Rau Badami's *The Hero's Walk* (2002) and Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* (2003). Anita Rau Badami was born in India and settled in Canada. Her fiction portrays Indian society through life in a small fictitious town Toturpuram situated near Madras. The novel depicts Indian and Canadian society, climate of Toturpuram, casteism, celebration of festivals, patriarchal set up, political condition, beliefs in astrology, Indian rituals and the issue of settlement of a foreigner in Indian tradition. Jhumpa Lahiri is one of the famous Indian American authors whose work portrays the Bengali immigrants' experience and their attachment to the homeland. She also brings to the fore their urge to develop a sense of belongingness towards the host land for the betterment of the economic and social life. With the help of above-mentioned texts, the paper also emphasizes that diaspora is all about the creation of new identities, spaces for growth in a land of opportunities, resolution of conflicts and assimilation in a new culture. Thus, cosmopolitanism and internationalism is the reality which is to be accepted for creating a new world order which relies on shared vision and acceptance of certain core values.

**Index Terms-** Metaphors, Diasporic elements, *The Hero's Walk*, *The Namesake*.

## I. Introduction

Diaspora has been a fascinating area in the world of literature for providing innovative literary outputs in recent years. People who have settled over the distant territories of the world for various reasons have always found themselves in ambivalent conditions and faced problems in the process of settling down. Neither they want to get away from the feeling of settled assurance of home nor can they allow their roots being blown over into fragments on a foreign land. The diaspora writers have tried to represent these feelings in diverse ways through diverse genres all over the world. Due to advancement in communication technologies and deliberate migration of people from their native place, Diaspora has not been a new phenomenon now just as exile or expatriate in this globalized world. Diaspora writings identify the existence of displaced groups of people who try to have a collective sense.

Indian literature in English, particularly, writings of Indian diaspora, has become one of the important means to know about the societies of these developing countries vis-à-vis that of the developed countries, and to study various issues of immigrants. Alienation, identity problems, homelessness, memory, and issues related to culture, race and gender, etc. emerge as major concerns of diaspora. Emmanuel S. Nelson writes in the "Writers of the Indian Diaspora: A Bio-Bibliographical Critical Sourcebook" that writers of the Indian Diaspora share a Diaspora consciousness generated by a complex network of historical connections, spiritual affinities, and unifying racial memories, and that this shared sensibility is manifested in the cultural productions of the Indian Diaspora communities around the world. The element of homesickness, longing and a, "Quest for Identity" or "Roots" mark the Diaspora fiction. As Terry Eagleton writes in, *The Idea of Culture* (2000) that the very word

‘culture’ contains a tension between making and being made most Diaspora writers concentrate on generational differences in exploring how new and old Diasporas relate to their land of origin and the host culture. Their major concerns in works are split nature of individual identities. The rootlessness, coupled with the indifferent attitude of host culture adds to sense of alienation. Indians of almost all Diasporas have brought to record the manner in which they have adapted to new environment. They have focused on their experiences -both identification with new world and alienation from their old homeland.

## II. Anita Rau Badami’s *The Hero’s Walk* and Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Namesake*

Anita Rau Badami’s *The Hero’s Walk* (2002) and Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Namesake* (2003) deal with various issues of diaspora. Anita Rau Badami was born in India and settled in Canada. Her fiction portrays Indian society through life in a small fictitious town Toturpuram situated near Madras. She explains that “ *The Hero’s Walk* It is a novel about so many things: loss, disappointments, choices and the importance of coming to terms with yourself and the circumstances of your life without losing the dignity embedded in all of us” (“The Hero’s Walk”). The novel is about a Brahmin family of Sripathi Rao. He is a middle class press reporter struggling to fulfill his family obligations. He is fifty seven years old and has five members in his family-his widow mother Ammaya, unmarried sister Putti, wife Nirmala, son Arun and daughter Maya who goes to Canada for higher studies. After getting placed in a company she marries a Canadian man named Alan. After nine years of their marriage, Alan and Maya met with an accident leaving behind their eight years old daughter Nandana as an orphan. Sripathi, being the legal guardian of Nandana, travels to Vancouver to bring Nandana to her mother’s native land. The novel depicts Indian and Canadian society, climate of Toturpuram, casteism, patriarchal set up, political condition, beliefs in astrology, Indian rituals, the issue of settlement of a foreigner in Indian tradition and shift in individual values, expectations and lifestyles. Its plot is constructed with the present mingling with the past events brought forth through the memory of the characters. Badami has made use of a novel technique by which she describes incidents in India and Canada separately within a chapter.

On the other hand, Jhumpa Lahiri, one of the famous Indian American authors, portrays the predicament of two generations of the Bengali immigrants’ experience and their attachment to the homeland. She also brings to the fore their urge to develop a sense of belongingness towards the host land for the betterment of the economic and social life. As compared to other diasporic writers, Lahiri has reflected improved conditions of diasporic immigrants even more. Her characters are no longer in contrast to other Americans and they live in “the milieu in which brown skin matters exponentially less than a degree from Brown” (Waldman, 2008). It is therefore their parents’ culture and the era both shaped their literary concerns. *The Namesake* portrays the life of Ganguly family settled in America and the family includes Ashoke Ganguli, her wife Ashima and their son Gogol and daughter Sonia but the main focus of the novel is the life of Gogol Ganguli. The novel opens with Ashima giving birth to her son in American hospital. The story, then, depicts Ashok’s life – his escape from horrible train accident and his arranged marriage to Ashima. The title of the novel reflects the struggle Gogol Ganguli undergoes to identify with his unusual name. At the same time it also represents the experience of a very specific community which has no name.

## III. Metaphors: ‘Walk’ and ‘Name’

Anita Rau Badami in one of her interviews conducted by Eliza McCarthy talked about her choice of title of the novel remembering the intention behind the use of the word walk. She says,

When I was young, I noticed that the hero in dance-dramas always came in with this strutting gait. When the demons came on they used the same kind of walk, except that there were some embellishments....The clown in the piece would stumble and fall and trip, so it seemed to me a fine metaphor to use for the way each of us lives his or her life...I don't think anybody in this world is absolutely good or bad or stupid. Each one of us combines all those qualities in our daily lives, I think (Rau Badami, n.p.).

Lahiri’s first novel *The Namesake* (2003) deals with the life of an Indian Immigrant family over the period 1968 to 2000. The novel shows convincingly the importance of name. The name is considered the first line of identity, suggesting something of nature,

something of character of the person. Gogol Ganguli is named after the great Russian writer Nikolai Gogol by his father. The same applies to Jhumpa Lahiri too as her first name, Jhumpa was actually her pet name. Her good name was Nilanjana Swadeshana, which would be quite an offbeat name even by Indian standards Jumpa meant the Jangling sound of bells. Therefore, she used her nick name as good name. In an Interview, she talks about her fascination for this dual-name system:

I can't speak for all Bengalis. But all the Bengalis I know personally, especially those living in India, have two names, one public, one private, It's always fascinated me.

Jhumpa Lahiri always had a suspicion about the meaning of her name but in *The Namesake*, however, the name of the protagonist signifies the identity problem that he faces as he is exposed to two different cultures-American and Indian.

#### IV. Elements of Diaspora

##### (i) Search for Identity and Feeling of Alienation

*The Hero's Walk* portrays the 'intra-national diaspora' which perfectly defines the mental agony of Sripathi, Arun, Nandana and at times the non-physical Maya. The novel thematizes the diasporic identity which is not necessarily bound to the 'transnational border crossings' thereby suggesting ways in which the effects of environmental degradation and alterations in global economic policies have provided us with certain given notions of national and cultural identity to which we seem to attach ourselves. They seem to transform the 'micro spaces of social life' (Harting, n.p.). Rau Badami has used Arun, Sripathi and Nandana to inhibit such granted and accepted kind of approach to diaspora studies and diaspora writing. Sripathi's problem begins the day Maya, his daughter whom he had considered to be the reason for his social and financial standing, rejects her groom for the love of Alan. Maya has a haunting presence who could have been ideally the permanent diasporic character and her decision to reject the Brahmin match and getting married to a Canadian was simply a way to make the rest of the world awestruck and by this act of hers she 'had dared everyone' (Rau Badami, 46). As a proud father Sripathi always felt that Maya was the 'perfectly formed creature' (Rau Badami, 95) he had brought her up the way she was destined 'to reach for the skies, nothing less' (Rau Badami, 96)

In *The Namesake*, Ashima and Ashoke Ganguly both try to create a small Bengal embracing their culture in America far from the native place and struggle for establishing an identity in the land of opportunities. They try to build an atmosphere of home for children and themselves far from their real home. This sense of alienation from the western culture and the host land creates a feeling of rootlessness among their children. They are neither able to feel attachment to the place where they are born and bred nor to the place to which their parents belong to. Parents try their utmost to create Bengali for Gogol and Sonia by arranging get-togethers of Bengali families, but both- Gogol and Sonia grew in hybrid culture- Bengali and American, suspiciously respond to their parents' efforts to create a homeland in America. Mishra observes the lives of the immigrant parents in the novel as an attempt to "preserve their 'home cultures', and on the other hand they (parents) also try and groom their children for the American way of life" (Mishra, 2006). In *The Namesake*, Gogol is depicted as the representative of community without a name and at the same time, he himself is misnamed as Gogol. Since Gogol was born after his father survived in a horrifying train accident and at that time he was reading a book of short stories by Russian writer Nikoloi Gogol, his father gave him the name- Gogol as a pet name as a gesture of his rebirth. He struggles with his name and feels alienated when he realizes that no one in India or America bears this name. He changes his name and enters Yale as Nikhil. He can now relate himself with American environment and lives his life in American style. While experiencing identity confusion from a change of names, Gogol is still not able to define his identity.

##### (ii) Nostalgia, Memory and their Role in the Present

In *The Hero's Walk*, after reaching Canada Maya writes long letters describing culture, food, and pattern of education in America to her mother who feels sympathetic for Maya. After sometime, Maya meets Alan and falls in love with him and expresses her willingness to marry Alan. But her proposal is not approved by his father her relatives in India as she was already engaged to Prakash in India. She gets married to Alan in court without blessings of her relatives and her father cut off his relation with her. It is only after birth of her daughter Nandana, she requests her father to be the legal guardian of her daughter as there is no one in the

family line of Alan. Her calling her mother up every week and writing letters her continuously show that she has a feeling of attachment to her motherland even after migrating the land. For Nadana, Vancouver is her birth place and has never visited her mother's birth place before. That is why she feels strange in Indian culture and recalls the happy moments spent with her parents.

In *The Namesake*, Ashima Ganguli reaches Boston after her arranged marriage. She feels isolated and lonely while moving to deliver her first child without being with relatives in a hospital at Massachusetts. As a normal Indian woman, she wishes to be surrounded by her relatives and to get emotional support at least at the time of her first delivery. In America, she does not feel normal. "She is terrified to raise a child in a country where she is related to no one, where she knows so little, where life seems so tentative and spare." (Lahiri, 06) She longs to have Bengali food during her pregnancy. She nostalgically tries to compensate for it on her own: "Ashima has been consuming this concoction throughout her pregnancy, a humble approximation of the snack sold for pennies on Calcutta sidewalks and on railway platforms throughout India, spilling from newspaper cones." (Lahiri, 01) At the beginning, the novel depicts the issues of culture and identity. Ashima is not habitual of using her husband Ashoke's name openly. According to the Bengali-Indian culture: "It's not the type of thing Bengali wives do....a husband's name is something intimate and therefore unspoken, cleverly patched over." (Lahiri, 02)

### (iii) Attitude of the Diaspora Group towards the Host land and Homeland

After the death of Maya and Alan, their daughter comes to India with her legal guardian Sripathi. When she was in Canada, she had heard about the poverty in India and lifestyle in India. In *The Hero's Walk*, India becomes hostland for Nadana who is second generation immigrant and has never seen her ancestral land. Being an orphan, she is compelled to come here and to stay with her maternal grandfather. Nandana was seven years old when she learnt through the conversation between her parents that her grandfather had not approved the marriage of her parents. Since that time she had started disliking Sripathi and continued to do so when Sripathi reached Vancouver to bring her to India. Nandana gets along with with her maternal uncle Arun and even tries to adjust with her grandmother Nirmala. But she does not even smile or speak a word in presence of Sripathi. Her hostility disappears at the end of the novel as she consoles Sripathi on the death of Ammayya saying she has also lost her mother. Thus, in this novel the homeland and host land are different for the mother-Maya and the daughter- Nandana. Maya voluntarily migrates to Canada and her attitude towards the host land is positive whereas migration in Nandana's case is a form of compulsion and the host land remains strange and a place of discomfort for her throughout the novel. This feeling is reflected in her disliking and anger.

Likewise, in *The Namesake*, Ashima, Gogol's mother migrates to the USA with her husband Ashoke, she has no idea of or dream of going to a place called Boston so far off from her parents' home in Bengal. She agrees for the marriage just because her husband will be there with her. Ashima often feels upset and suffers from homesickness while sitting in their three room apartment which is too hot in summer and too cold in the winter, she feels spatially and emotionally dislocated from the comfortable 'home' of her father full of so many loving ones and she longs to go back. Ashima feels that living in a foreign land is like a lifelong suffering. She tries to uphold her cultural ideology of Bengali Indian as at home and with friends they speak in Bengali and eat only Bengali dishes with their hands. They find many Bengali friends and try to create their own community there by organizing get-togethers,

restoring their traditions by preparing Indian food and inviting Brahmin for rituals. As Wieviorka states, when a Diaspora community is 'constantly rejected or interiorized while only wanting to be included, either socially or culturally, or when this group or this individual is racially discriminated, and demonized under the argument of a supposed cultural different' then the individual or the group feels alienated and this eventually 'leads to a self-definition and behaviors based on this culture and, eventually, racial distinction'.

## V. Conclusion

*The Hero's Walk* and *The Namesake* deal with the question of identity which becomes crucial when a person is culturally displaced and he is not able to co-relate with any of the two worlds. *The Hero's Walk* is a diasporic writing in a different sense as

it depicts the formation of diasporic identities as an interdependent process of self-discovery and social reconnection on a local rather than on a global level. Sripathi and Arun emerge as diasporic characters because they just witness the way in which their lives get transformed by the effects of global development. As Ganguly writes, “through the figure of Sripathi, *The Hero's Walk* suggests that being diasporic is not a cultural given but “a mode of operating within a cultural and historical canvas of understanding and misunderstandings about the emergence of this particular diasporic subject.”(Ganguly,13). Portraying the lives of both first and second generations Indian migrants in the USA *The Namesake* explores the existential problems of alienation, adjustment, and rootedness. Alienation is a part of the experience of the Indian Diaspora and even if people are well-settled and living comfortably in any part of the world. The second generation Diaspora does find their roots but only after they undergo cultural imbalance. Lahiri shows that Diaspora is all about the creation of new identities, spaces for growth in a land of opportunities, resolution of conflicts and assimilation in a new culture. All immigrants try to uphold their cultural beliefs and customs and gradually adapt themselves to the cultural ways of the host land. Thus, cosmopolitanism and internationalism is the reality which is to be accepted for creating a new world order which relies on shared vision and acceptance of certain core values.

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