

CULTURAL DILEMMAS AND DISLOCATIONS OF IMMIGRANTS PORTRAYED BY JHUMPA LAHIRI IN THE NOVEL *THE NAMESAKE*

Nisha Kumari

Research Scholar

Department of English

L. N. M. University, Darbhanga,

Address - D/o Shyam Kishor Thakur,

Kilaghat Bajitpur, Post - Subhankarpur

P. S. – Town Thana, Darbhanga, Bihar.

ABSTRACT

Jhumpa Lahiri (b. 1967) is a major contemporary Indian-American award winning writer. Jhumpa Lahiri's splendid novel *The Namesake* has familiarity with the difficulties faced by immigrant Bengali community in Boston helped her in dealing with various issues related to identity, pain of assimilation, accommodation, nostalgia, loneliness and isolation and cross-cultured issues remarkably. As she has lived in America, so the story has American setting- New England and New York, but characters are placed in the Indian setting and India is highlighted in the memories of her characters. Jhumpa Lahiri's first novel *The Namesake*, like her Pulitzer Prize Winner Collection of short stories *Interpreter of Maladies* explores the theme of immigrant experience and the clash of cultures in the United State. The novel is a narrative about the assimilation of and Indian Bengali family from Calcutta, the Gangulis, into America over thirty years; the cultural dilemmas experienced by them and their America born children in different ways; the spatial, cultural and emotional dislocations suffered by them in their efforts to settle home in the new land. Though better critical interpretations of this recently published novel will follow in due course of time, a modest attempt is being made in this paper to analyse the cultural dilemmas and dislocations of immigrants portrayed by Lahiri in *The Namesake*.

KEYWORDS- Identity, Pain of assimilation, Nostalgia, loneliness and Cultural and emotional dislocations

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Like many professional Indians who in the waves of the early 60's went to the United States, as part of the brain drain. Ashoke Ganguli too leaves his homeland and comes to America in pursuit of higher studies to do research in the field of fiber optics with a prospect of settling down with security and respect. After two years stay in the U.S.A. he comes back to India, marries a nineteen year old Bengali girl from Calcutta named Ashima, who has no idea or dream of going to a place called Boston so far off from her parents, but agrees for the marriage since he would be there. After the legal formalities, she flies alone to be with her husband, 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.

Like Mrs. Sen in Lahiri's story 'Mrs. Sen's' and the wives of other Bengali friends, Ashima often feels upset and homesick and sulks alone in their three room apartment which is too hot in summer and too cold in the winter, far removed from the descriptions of houses in the English novels she has read. She feels spatially and emotionally dislocated from the comfortable home of her father full of so many loving ones and yearns to go back. Home is a "mythic place of desire"¹ in an immigrant's imagination, says Avtar Brah. Most of the time she remains lost in the memories of her home thinking of the activities going there by calculating the Indian time on her hands which is 'hen and a half hours ahead in Calcutta'. She spends her time rereading Bengali short stories, poems and articles from the Bengali magazines she has brought with her.

But the most terrifying experience for her is motherhood in a foreign land so far from home, unmonitored and unobserved by those she loved, without a single grandparent or parent or uncle or aunt at her side and 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. After the birth of her son Gogol, she wants to go back to Calcutta and raise her child there in the company of the caring and loving ones but decides to stay back for Ashoke's sake and brings

up the baby in the Bengali way. To put him to sleep, she sings him the Bengali songs her mother had sung to her. She keeps all her emotional hazards and disappointments to herself and not intending to worry her parents she presents in her letters a good picture of the domestic facilities and cleanliness here. The shift to this suburban area with no streetlights, no public transportation, and no stores for miles makes Ashima feel more drastic more distressed than the move from Calcutta to Cambridge had been. Feeling lonely and displaced in a foreign land, Ashima, though not pregnant now, begins to realize that

*"being a foreigner ... is a sort of life-long pregnancy-a perpetual wait, a constant burden, a continuous feeling out of sorts. It is and ongoing responsibility a parenthesis in what had once been ordinary life, only to discover that previous life has vanished, replaced by something more complicated and demanding. Like pregnancy, being a foreigner, Ashima believes, is something that elicits the same curiosity from strangers, the same combination of pity and respect."*²

While making efforts to preserve their home culture in their new homes, the first generation immigrants train their children in the Bengali language, literature and history at home and through special Bengali classes, and expose them to their own family lineage, religious customs, rites, beliefs, food tastes, habits and mannerisms. They also groom them to cope with the way of life in America. Ashima teaches Gogol:

*"to memorize a four-line children's poem by Tagore, and the names of the deities adorning the ten-headed Durga during pujo: Saraswati with her swan and Kartik with his peacock to her left, Lakshami with her owl and Ganesh with his mouse to her right. Every afternoon Ashima sleeps, but before nodding off she switches the television to Channel, and tells Gogol to watch Sesame Street and The Electric Company, in order to keep up with the English he uses at nursery school."*³

How these immigrants face cultural dilemmas in the foreign systems is shown through the problems faced by Ashoke and Ashima. They find it difficult to make understand their cultural practices of having two names-pet-name at home and good name (bhalo mane) for formal purposes which will be decided on the receipt of a letter from Ashima's grandmother, to hospital authorities on their son's birth and on his admission to the school. Hence on their daughter's birth they decide not to give her two names.

Lahiri shows that the immigrants in their enthusiasm to stick to their own cultural beliefs and customs gradually imbibe the cultural ways of the host country too. Their own children groomed to be bilingual and bicultural face cultural dilemmas and displacements more. Though force to sit in pujos and other religious ceremonies along with the children of other Bengali families, Gogol and Sonia, like them, relish American and continental food more than the syrupy Bengali dishes and enjoy the celebration of the Christmas, Thanks giving and Halloween more, as attractive gifts follow therein. In other matters too, like dating of their children, their courtship period during which young boys and girls stay together as Nikhil (Gogol) and Ruth do, and as Nikhil stays in the house of Maxine's parents, the hugging of Maxine Nikhil's parents, her calling Nikhil's mother by name, and pairing her fingers in Nikhil's hair showing her intimacy, though Nikhil's parents do not show their approval and Moushumi's parents too did not like her going out with any boy when she turned fourteen, but these first generation immigrants do not react openly to their children's going 'the American way' as they know that their children cannot be forced to live by 'the Bengali way'. So by and reconcile to their children's adaptation to the 'American common sense' that earlier pressure cannot bind together.

Lahiri like other writers writing of immigrant experiences also shows in this novel that the migrants and their children might adopt and assimilate the culture of the new country but they are not taken to be the part and parcel of the host country and their identity id related to the migrant history of their parents and grandparents. The Orientals continue to be looked down upon by the Occidentals. This is evident from a few situations in the novel the picture drawn by Gogol of his mother with a dot on her forehead glasses on his father's face and his new sibling standing in a row in front of their house is called 'the spitting image' by Mrs. Marton (an American neighbour) who is babysitting Gogol when his parents are away to the hospital at the American Departmental store his parents are not properly the salesmen prefer to direct their conversation to Gogol, as though his parents were either incompetent or deaf some miscreants in the American neighbourhood remove the letters from the name Ganguli on the mail box leaving it shortened to GANG, with the word Green scrawled in pencil following it. Gogol's ears burn at the sight, and he runs back into the house, sickened, certain of the insult his father will feel in Maxine's house during the celebration of his twenty seventh birthday, though he is born and brought up in America and is accustomed to American life, yet in a frowning tone he is made aware of his Indian heritage (which would be keeping him weak and sick) by Pamela-one of the American neighbours present there. Though Gogol makes a conscious effort to be different from his parents and he wants to live in a world free from the Bengali culture, adjectives and history (he also does not join the Indian association in America) but being a sensitive child he experiences the cultural dilemma and identity crisis on a number of occasions like Lilia in Lahire's story 'When Mr. Pirzada came to Dinner'. While staying with Maxine in her parents' home though 'From the beginning he feels effortlessly incorporated into their lives,' and makes constant comparisons in their way of life and of his parents, their eating menus, eating styles, throwing parties, openness and frankness in their sexual relations, their holidaying spirit and manner, appreciating the former yet soon he starts feeling that a line has been drawn between him and Maxine's family and becomes conscious of the fact that his immersion in Maxine's family is a betrayal to his own. The identity crisis, the feeling of in-betweenness and belonging 'nowhere' is experienced by him more intensely during his school trip to the cemetery where finding no grave of his ancestors he felt that being a Hindu/Bengali.

*"he himself will be burned not buried, that his body will occupy no plot of earth, that no stone in this country will bear his name beyond life."*⁴

While portraying in the theme of cultural dilemmas and dislocations of the migrants, Lahiri does not remain confined to the dislocations of migrants in foreign lands alone. Rather she projects dislocation as a permanent human condition. Man is dislocated in this world. He may have a home in the native nation, build a home in 'a new land' adapting to the cultures, but ultimately he has no home. He has to leave all the homes, as death takes him to the other world/home-where-nobody knows. The above analysis of the novel reveals that Lahiri in this novel *"brings alive the multiple selves constructed so painstakingly to make sense of the unknown world that is as much a land of opportunities as it is of conflict and confusion"*⁵. Lahiri's handling of the complexities of the immigrant experiences in their various nuances in a simple and lucid manner in her first novel undoubtedly establishes her as a mature immigrant fiction writer. Let us wait and see what comes next from mighty pen.

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