



EXAMINING THE CULTURAL IDENTITY AND DIASPORA IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S NOVELS *THE LOWLAND & THE NAMESAKE*

Submitted by

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INTRODUCTION:

India has many languages, religions, races and cultures and is the country of diversity. This diversity gave the authors enormous freedom to deal with different topics. These Indian writers of the third generation were also involved in historical, cultural, philosophical and much more about humanity. The authors of the third generation concentrated their topics on sociological, diasporic, feminine, scientific and technological, exploratory writing and much more. The new English fiction exhibits confidence in addressing new topics, experiments and new techniques. Without preconceived notions of literary content, novelists come to their task. This encourages them to concentrate on a large and full length of work and to place epic dimensions on their themes.

LAHIRI'S WRITING STYLE:

Lahiri talks about displacements as well as deracination of the immigrants and their alienation for the foreign place and thinks that almost any American can connect to some level to a family background of having come across some ocean as it is with almost everyone once in life. Lahiri in her writing mostly talks about the cultural clash and the question of the identity of human being as a whole. Lahiri also tries her best to describe some proper native characters living in India through her own perspective which she feels for them and as readers, we can tell she did wonderful job in her literature and it shows that even though she was born and brought up in foreign land she is never rooted from her nativeness and still exist in her blood and that's is something very significant about Diaspora writing in literature.

Speaking about Diaspora, the core concept of Lahiri which has been seen mostly in all her works, Diaspora has been a favourite topic in the transnational world of literature for innovative literary outputs in recent

years. People who have flown and tried to settle over the distant territories of the world for various reasons have always found in dual conditions in the process of settling down. Lahiri talks about displacements as well as deracination of the immigrants and their alienation for the foreign place and thinks that almost any American can connect to some level to a family background of having come across some ocean as it is with almost everyone once in life.

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CULTURAL IDENTITY AND DIASPORA IN *THE LOWLAND* AND *THE NAMESAKE*:

This thesis focuses on the sense of cultural identity and diasporic primordial in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* and *The Lowland*. Jhumpa Lahiri as a child has crossed the borders from Indian England and then to America, It makes her both a migrant and Diaspora writer. These Novels Portrays the best kind of reference to Diaspora and Cultural Individuality which gives the prime role in this present era. As the titles indicate *The Namesake* and *The Lowland* are the novel of identity, the life of first and second generation immigrants. The struggle for the immigrant's identity and belongingness are well articulated by the writer through the characters.

In these novels, the issue of names and identity portrayed by Jhumpa Lahiri mirrored the life of the Indian Diaspora, who are Struggling for their Identity. They construct unhomely home in the foreign land. A diaspora is defined as a community of people who do not live in their country of origin, but maintain their heritage in a homeland. Inclusion of emigrants or people who have left their homelands to settle permanently in a different one, Is a major characteristics of a diaspora. The term Diaspora was thus integrated from Greek into English in the middle of 20th Century. The diasporic culture is essentially mixed and a unification of the two cultures. It is a voyage towards self-recognition, self-definition and self-realization. The Indian Diaspora writing contributes on a world wide scale, the cultures of different societies.

Diaspora literature thus builds information which results in solving many cultural and psychological problems. Diasporic Literature is a vast concept and an umbrella term that includes the literary works of authors outside their homeland but still deeply connected to their native culture and background. It depicts the sense of loss, alienation, displacement, existential crisis, rootlessness, nostalgia and quest for identity and also the struggle between the homeland and the host land. This thesis focuses on the psychological conflicts of diasporas. It discusses an immigrant's experience in a new land and the problem of assimilation. It talks about the unconscious thoughts and repressed desires. It highlights the identity crisis and the quest for identity. It firmly explores the notion of immigrants about the host land and its culture.

The immigrants are struggling to adopt and adjust in the new country in order to continue their original culture and identity. The first generation immigrants are following their tradition and ceremonies in the new land but the second generation will easily adopt the new culture as well as the host land. The second generation people are maintaining their original culture meanwhile start to assimilate the new one. This dual culture and identity is also known as “sandwich culture” because they are torn between two places and two cultures which often results in conflicts and mental dilemma. There are so many diasporic elements in this novel. The diasporic elements are Alienation, Rootlessness, Displacement, Nostalgia, Identity crisis, Sense of loss, Existential crisis and Assimilation. Indian diasporic Literature focuses on different issues and many aspects of immigrant’s lives.

Physical uprootedness creates within the concerned section of the population a sense of being marginalized and thereby leading a sense of 'otherness' within the geopolitical territory to which they have migrated. These immigrants encounter both physical and mental diasporas. Lahiri's novel has been a dazzling display of the conflicts and contradictions, longings and the anguish, expectations and the agony of the compulsive situations that demand compromise and flexibility. Facing the intersections of sex and race, her characters are portrayed with confessions, frustrations and painful loss of identity, as they feel cut off from their historical and cultural roots. Finding the new world hostile and in comprehensible, they falter and stumble initially but try to reconcile to the life situations accepting the transition as unavoidable destiny. In her novel, Lahiri has engaged herself to investigate the mental and psychological stresses, turmoil and complexities of their problems. She digs deep into the innermost recesses of the minds of the characters to explore the mental labyrinths as her protagonist feel deprived of their roots and strive to feel at home when homeless, to feel rooted in alien land when unrooted from their native land.

The first generation of diaspora arrivals in America struggled to adapt to American cultural ethos while facing feelings of nostalgia and rootlessness. Along with the first generation’s adaptive process the host country too underwent cultural change as it absorbed certain elements of immigrant cultures especially in the wake of globalization. The phenomenon of globalization led to a more openly accepted interplay between cultures, involving exchange of customs, trends, and life styles and so on. Jhumpa Lahiri is one of the second-generation immigrants in America. Lahiri defines her novels through an artistic integrity with a combination of creative and personal experiences. Her stories address sensitive dilemma in the lives of her female protagonists those are either Indian or Indian immigrants. Her works are an attempt to highlight the predicaments of heroines and their married life, miscarriage and disconnection between the first and second generation. Most of her female protagonists settled abroad are afflicted with the ‘sense of exile’ and alienation.

Lahiri deals with the diaspora society with multicultural forms of it. Her novels and her characters can be taken as an example of her cross-cultural experiences that forecast a stimulating diversity. Being herself, an immigrant Lahiri knows and feels better the significance of family and how it ties a man to his home land. She proves that American and Indian culture cannot go hand in hand. In Jhumpa Lahiri: Critical Perspectives, Nigamananda Das opines Jhumpa Lahiri’s first generation Indian Americans cherish their past and its memories and an indispensable and integral part of their roots and their beings, her second-generation Indian American reflect both proximities and distancing from it; they seem to perceive and adopt new angles at which to enter this

reality. More particularly... they look forward to the concerns and modes of their hybridization and cross-cultural fertilization in the increasingly multicultural space of USA, and not more absorption in the dominant culture.

Subsequently Lahiri entered a world which was aloof from the previous one and full of illusion. A world where parents had little awareness or control over the fundamental aspects of one's identity: school, books, music, and television, things that are to be seeped in. Hundreds of evidences are there which arouse nostalgic feelings and rootlessness among the Indian Americans parents. Immigrant offspring distinguish name and looks and their frequent visit to native place creates problems in adapting in new land. Many of her friends proudly called themselves Irish-American or Italian-American but they are several generations removed from the frequently humiliating process of immigration whereas Lahiri's ethnic roots were still tangled and green, they had not yet descended underground.

Lahiri survey the historical-political issues of the post-independence India minutely. As far as Lahiri is concerned, though her novels deal with the diasporic experiences of the ordinary Bengali immigrants in America, she herself belongs to the President's Committee on the Arts and Humanities, appointed by the American President Barack Obama. So, Lahiri seems to hold an ambivalent position as a writer. Though in her fiction, she seems to play the role of a knower of the diasporic experiences, she is perhaps not completely acquainted with the experiences of their lives.

Critics are of the opinion that *The Lowland* is not authentic about the Naxalite movement. For example, Nilanjana Chatterjee as well as Aijaz Ahmad, thinks that Lahiri chooses the realistic narrative mode - the purpose of which is to illustrate the absolute essentially of likelihood in the depiction of time. She succeeds as long as she is depicting the private life of Subhash, Udayan, Gauri, and Bela as a miniaturized family saga, but her realism seems to fail when she depicts the eventful years of the Naxalite movement and its forceful suppression by the then West Bengal government.

The theme of *The Lowland* is Indian-American diasporic experience. Questions could be raised about Lahiri's representation of the Bengali diaspora experiences in *The Lowland*. After reaching Rhodes Islands Subhash realizes that he had been waiting all his life to find Rhodes Islands. That it was here, in this minute but majestic corner of the world, that he could breathe. He starts sending a portion of his stipend "to help pay for the work on the house" and writes that "he was eager to see them (his parents)". But then, day after day, cut off from them, he starts ignoring them. Along with his psychological estrangement from his parents, Subhash's political attachment towards Bengal begins to die.

In *The Lowland*, Lahiri moves beyond primary diaspora themes like culture-shock, rootlessness, and nostalgia to more evolved second and third generation concerns such as parent-child bonding, cross-cultural marriage, dilution of culture, and generation gap. Though issues like generation gap are a universal phenomenon, in diasporas the gap gets enlarged because of vast changes in lifestyle, the conservative upbringing of the first generation, and the liberty given to children in the West. The phenomenon of immigration creates a wide chasm between the kind of families, first generations immigrants grew up in, in their homeland India, and those they create here in America. With no means by which the second generation in America can be taught the importance of relatives, filial responsibilities, and obedience to parents the first generation wages a losing struggle against the onslaught of American culture which insidiously pervades their families. In a society which puts individuality

and personal freedom above all else, the dichotomy between Indian value system and American attitudes creates a system of impossible choices for the second generation.

As its title suggests, at its core *The Namesake* tackles the question of forming one's own identity, and explores the power that a name can carry. Gogol's decision to change his name to Nikhil before leaving home for college demonstrates his desire to take control over his own identity. The name Gogol, which Nikhil finds so distasteful, is a direct result of the literal identity confusion at his birth, when the letter sent from India that contained his true name was lost in the mail. Gogol is also a name that holds deep meaning for Ashoke, since it was a book of short stories by Gogol, the Russian author, that saved his life during a fateful train crash but this meaning is not conveyed to Gogol's during his childhood. As the other theme outlines make clear, the main tension that drives Gogol's identity confusion is the divide between his family's Indian heritage and his own desire for an independent, modern American lifestyle.

CONCLUSION:

To sum up, one may say that Lahiri delineates the travails of the diaspora people and communities uprooted from their homeland with deft strokes. She illuminates the pain of exile, the ambiguities of post-colonialism, and the blinding desire for a better life. She has portrayed the craze and compulsions of diasporic journey of her protagonists who live the lives of dislocation – physical, psychological, emotional, cultural, and political. As a writer she knows that her task is to draw the attention of the readers to the existence of these issues rather than offer any shortcut solutions which, in any case, will vary from one situation to another, as also from one country to another. That is why she is content to raise and Problematicize the issues about home, homeland, diaspora and belongingness by treating them from multiple angles and thereby demonstrating how complex and baffling they really are. The diasporic stories are studies of individuals caught in between conflicts of traditions and cultural mores, trying to establish individual identities while experiencing a sense of alienation and isolation.

As ordinary as it all appears, there are times when it is beyond my imagination. You are still young, free,. Do yourself a favour. Before it's too late, without thinking too much about it first, pack a pillow and a blanket and see as much of the world as you can.

- Jhumpa Lahiri