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DILEMMA OF IDENTITY & NOSTALGIA FOR HOMETLAND: EXPERIENCING THE DIASPORIC JOURNEY IN JHUMPA LAHIRI’S THE NAMESAKE

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Abstract

Jhumpa Lahiri is one of the celebrated writers of Indian diaspora with a remarkable contribution in the literary field through an array of her publications like *Interpreter of Maladies*, *The Lowland*, *The Namesake*, *Unaccustomed Earth* etc. Her works constitute an integral space in Indian diasporic writings. A subgenre of Indian writings in English, this category of work focuses on the idea of exile, and how migration has led to the creation of a large body of works revolving around immigrant lives and experiences. Lahiri’s fictional works are based on the experiences of the immigrants in an alien country, pains of dislocation and efforts of relocation, cultural dissonance and adjustment towards acculturation in the mainstream society. Her characters, first and second-generation Indian immigrants, are caught between different cultures, different nations, and multiple identities. Being an Indian-American Jhumpa Lahiri has experienced on her own the sensibilities and feelings of a second-generation immigrant. This paper intends to highlight the nostalgic feelings for home and dilemma of identity experienced by the immigrants in their diasporic journey.

Keywords: Diaspora, Assimilation, Acculturation, Immigrant, Alienation, Identity Crisis, Dilemma

Introduction

"Our identity is at once plural and partial. Sometimes we feel we straddle two cultures; at other times, that we fall between two stools" – Salman Rushdie (*Imaginary Homelands*)

Pulitzer Prize winner Jhumpa Lahiri occupies a prominent place in the literary field as a diasporic Indian American writer for her remarkable contribution to the diasporic literature with a bunch of her publications like *Interpreter of Maladies*, *The Namesake*, *Unaccustomed Earth* all of which marvellously capture the immigrants’ experience in their transplanted state. Lahiri, herself being a diaspora, well apprehends the diasporic sensibility, as she opines in an interview:

When I first started writing, I was not conscious that my subject was the Indian-American experience. What drew me to my craft was the desire to force the two worlds I occupied to mingle on the page as I was not brave enough or mature enough to allow in life. (www.chipublib.org)

Rooted in India, Lahiri was born in London and brought up in Rhode Island in USA and consequently she has the personal experience of belonging to nowhere, as she admits: I wasn’t a part of things. We visited (India) often but we didn’t have a home. We were clutching at a world that was never fully ours with encouragement. (www.bookbrowse.com) Binda Sah’s observation regarding Jhumpa Lahiri’s immigrant status is quite justified: “Growing with ties to all the three countries, Lahiri has lived with a sense of homelessness and an inability to belong to any of these countries” (152). The sense of homelessness and an inability to match with any cultural landscape only bolster the feeling of cultural dilemma and identity crisis among the immigrants. In this context, Jhumpa Lahiri herself told Barbara Kantrowitz: “I’ve often felt that I am somehow illegitimate in both cultures. A true Indian doesn’t accept me as an Indian and a true American doesn’t accept me as an American” (61). All these have been reflected in the writings of Lahiri as an expatriate writer who projects “the Indian immigrants of Bengali origins as economic refugees, self-chosen exiles and transnational hybrids who form a new generation of Indian Americans in a codified Homogeneous American national culture” (Nayak 134). Her debut novel *The Namesake* reflects a deeper insight into the immigrants’ lives, highlights their cultural alienation and dilemma of identity, and captures in vivid detail their nostalgic feelings for homeland.

Nostalgia for Homeland

Diasporic journey is all about, as Pramod Nayar says, “a negotiation with a retreating history, past, traditions and customs” and looking forward to “a future, seeking new vistas, new chances” (188). The enthusiasm of migrating out of homeland, the determination to maintain identities and the intention to extend solidarity with the local and the



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transnational encompass the diasporic experience. In the present era of transnational migration, the flow of the people among the different countries, convergence of the heterogeneous cultures, creolization of languages and hybridization of identities have broken the concept of fixity or absolute territoriality. The intersection between the deterritorialization and reterritorialization creates the 'third space' or liminality where the 'cutting edge of translation and negotiation' occurs. Therefore, the concepts of homeland and identity in this age of global migration form a complex framework. According to critics like Homi K. Bhabha, Avtar Brah and Stuart Hall, the floating nature of home and fluid identity have replaced the age-old concepts of fixed home and identity. The idea of 'home' evokes the spatial politics of home, the sense of self, its displacement, intimacy, exclusion and inclusion. The flow of the people across different countries breaks the concept of true home. The notion of home not only construes the sense of self, but also ties with the human emotion, feelings, sentiments, proximity and intimacy. Beyond the spatial territory, 'home' is associated with emotional territory. Hence the feeling of nostalgia and journey down the memory lane are integrally associated with the lives and experiences of the immigrants.

In *The Namesake* Lahiri has explored with utmost dexterity and originality, the emotional attachments and psychological feelings of the first-generation immigrants, Ashima and Ashoke and the second-generation immigrants, Gogol, Sonia and Moushumi. The novel wonderfully demonstrates how the idea of homeland, being far away from home, haunts the immigrants and creates an atmosphere of nostalgia and loneliness. In this age of transmigration, 'home' signifies its impermanence, displacement, and dispossession. The idea of home is more conveyed as a sense of being between the two places instead of rooted one. For instance, Ashima's sense of being at home is connected with her original homeland, i.e. India but Gogol, Sonia and Moushumi are supposed to be attached with the USA, their birth place. Unlike Ashima who cannot find peace with her migrated status, Gogol, Moushumi and Sonia should find themselves in a comfort zone. Although, the question arises how far they are able to create the true home?

According to Indira Nityanandam, "in the alien land with constant cultural collisions, caused by cultural transplants and leading to cultural alienation, these protagonists find it difficult to adjust to cope, and to come to terms with the reality around them. Moreover, they are always mourning for the homeland left behind" (35). In an unknown city of Massachusetts, Ashima's pang for abandoning the home country is emphasized through imagining the picture of the family in Calcutta. An intense feeling of nostalgia seems to mitigate the pang and anguish of Ashima. When she is about to give birth Gogol, her Indian ethnicity reminds her of the conventional social rituals and customs of her own Bengali culture: "...women go home to their parents to give birth, away from husbands and in-laws and household cares..." (4). Ashima's anxiety over giving birth and rearing up the child in the alien land is poignantly revealed: "... it was happening so far from home, unmonitored and unobserved by those she loved, had made it more miraculous still" (6). Regarding this situational crisis of real homeland in abroad, it will be worthy to quote Gupta and Ferguson: "... Remembered places have often served as symbolic anchors of community for dispersed people. This has long been true of immigrants, who use memory of place to construct imaginatively their new lived world" (10-11). Similarly, Ashima's recollection of the lullaby from the Bengali songs, remembrance of 'dida I'm coming' for 'good bye' are intimately associated with the Bengali social conventions and these things are hardly forgotten by the first-generation immigrants like Ashima. Like immigrant of other communication Ashima and Ashoke too make their circle of Bengali acquaintance. They all become friends only for the reason that "they all come from Calcutta" (38). Robert Cohen rightly remarks "a member's adherence to a diasporic community is demonstrated by an acceptance of an inescapable link with their past migration history". These Bengali families celebrate these different customs and ceremonies like, marriages, death, childbirth, festivals etc together. They celebrate these as per Bengali customs, wearing their best traditional attire, thus trying to preserves their culture in a new land. The immigrants also face political displacement "they argue riotously over the films of Ritwik Ghatak verses those of Satyajit Ray..., for hours they argue about the politics of America, a country in which none of them is eligible to vote" (38).

According to Dubey, "the immigrant experience is complicated as a sensitive immigrant finds himself or herself perpetually at a transit station fraught with memories of the original home which are struggling with the realities of the new world". In *The Namesake* we find Ashima's painful recollection of the past and imagination of her family life in Kolkata are encapsulated within the tapestry of the isolated life in the USA. Her nostalgic feelings capture the very particular moment in her home at Calcutta where "a servant is pouring after-dinner tea ... arranging Marie biscuits on a tray" (5). In this foreign soil Ashima misses her mother tongue Bengali very much as language ties one with one's original



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homeland. The American English seems less important to Ashima than the Bengali language in which she is accustomed to in Calcutta. The picture of Ashima eagerly grasping 'a tattered copy of desh magazine' in the foreign hospital indicates her temporary relief in the far-off country. The solitary feeling of Ashima in America seems to encapsulate the present and the future as well. Ashima's extra concern over rearing up her child without her family surrounding in this strange city, impels her to think how lonely and deprived she is from family:

Without a single grandparent or parent or uncle or aunt at her side, the baby's birth, like most everything else in America, feels somehow haphazard, on half true. As she stokes and suckles and studies her son, she can't help but pity him. She has never known of a person entering the world so alone, so deprived. (25)

Ashima's preservation of the varied Bengali rituals in the new land epitomizes the bond with native India. The celebration of Gogol's annaprasan (rice ceremony) as per the Bengali convention provides Ashima a temporary relief in this foreign atmosphere. On the other hand, to perform this ritual, absence of the family members overshadows Ashima which denotes her longing to create the Bengali atmosphere in the new unknown country. The following extract clearly brings to light Ashima's status as an immigrant as well as the pathos of a homesick Ashima:

Though no longer pregnant... 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. It is an ongoing responsibility, a parenthesis in what had once been ordinary life, only to discover that the 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 the strangers, the same combination of pity and respect. (60)

Dilemma of Identity

Diaspora focuses on "recognizing the impossibility of recreating or returning to the past and the futility of the excessive obsession with origins" (147). Ashima suffers severely for her inability to recreate India. So, she expresses her great reluctance about her life in America and pressurizes Ashoke again and again to go back to India. She tells Ashoke after Gogol's birth, "I'm saying I don't want to raise Gogol alone in the country. It's not right. I want to go back" (33). But gradually, she realizes the reality about her life in America. This realization of impossibility of returning to India fills her with the tension of a diaspora. She discovers ambivalent thoughts in her concerning her past and present life. Hence, she reshuffles herself in terms of her daily activities. She knows how to go to the market alone for buying everything necessary and she "begins to pride herself on doing it alone" (34). She maintains a routine for seven days of the week for taking care of Gogol, cooking for them, taking Gogol out, or waiting for Ashoke at Harvard Yard with homemade samosas and a fresh thermos of tea. She inevitably becomes busy with her usual American life. But the pangs of diaspora haunt her when she revisits her past which eventually create a deep crisis in her.

Ashima's dilemma of identity as a diaspora can be characterized by her "continual movement between home and abroad" (6). The movement leads her to the creation and recreation of the past continuously. For this, she

...dumps the letters onto her bed and goes through them, devoting an entire day to her parents' words, allowing herself a good cry. She revisits their affection and concern, conveyed weekly, faithfully, across continent- all the bits of news that had had nothing to do with her life in Cambridge but which had sustained her in those days nevertheless. (160)

She neither gives up her past life, nor embraces the present one. She hovers between these two worlds like the letter, sent by her grandmother with her son's name which was lost. Gradually with the passage of time that Ashima spent in America transformed and moulded her identity from a dependent woman to an independent one. Her life took a significant turn when Ashok died of heart attack. This incident left a traumatizing effect on her life as she felt an acute sense of separation and horrible loneliness in her world which seems completely shattered in a moment. Lahiri, while commenting on Ashima's inability to adopt herself with American life, says, "At forty-eight she has come to experience the solitude that her husband and son and daughter already know, and which they claim not to mind. "It's not such a big deal," her children tell her. "Everyone should live on their own at some point." But Ashima feels too old to learn such a skill" (160). Consequently, Ashima joins a part-time job at a library which consumes her time and brings some fresh air in her lonely



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life. There is another radical shift in the life of Ashima for now she has to handle everything alone in order to adjust to the new circumstances. Previously Ashok was the centre of her life and now Ashok gone, Ashima feels reluctant to leave the country where she spent her days with Ashok and where he died, “for the first time in her life, Ashima had no desire to escape to Calcutta, not now. She refuses to be so far from the place where her husband made his life, the country in which he had died” (183). Although Ashok’s ashes have been submerged into the Ganges, but it is in this house Ashima feels his presence. She found her new home in this once unknown territory and now she considers America an important part and parcel of her life. She eventually has learned to live her life in a new way— alone, sad, unhappy but not unnerved. With the demise of Ashoke, Ashima feels lonely all on a sudden and permanently alone but she gradually copes with her situation. She feels overwhelmed “by the thought of the move she is about to make, to the city that was once home and is now way foreign. For thirty-three years she missed her life in India. Now she will miss her job . . . throwing parties, living with her daughter . . . miss the country in which she had grown to know and love her husband (278-279). Later on, Ashima takes an important decision to divide her time equally between India, her homeland in past and America, her present home. Although, she is the same Ashima who drapes traditional Indian sari and makes bun like a Bengali woman but her self-esteem and independent status now change her attitude towards life. She rushes back to her roots and makes a crucial decision to live her remaining life according to her choice. Her decision to shuttle and spend her time and life between India and America actually indicates her acceptance of cultures of both the countries. Ashima realizes that life is a journey with a purpose, and learning new things, adjusting between cultures and adapting new rules and customs is a part and parcel of life. Life taught Ashima a lesson to find her best self and to shape her social persona in the changing world. Though Ashima finds it initially a little difficult to adapt to the life of the host country, she and her family lead a sophisticated life which makes their stay more comfortable. She slowly adapts to the new ways of life. For instance, as the novel begins Ashima prepares her favourite Indian food and towards the end of the novel she learnt to prepare Christmas cake. Ashima started her journey as a silent observer but her shyness and introvert nature changed in due course of time. Her diasporic journey to America gave her a new identity and her life became multidimensional. A meek Ashima appears victorious at the end as she shows her invincible strength of mind and adaptability. The character of Ashima throws light on the psychology of immigrants who become the victim of identity crisis; neither they shrug off their root culture and identity nor they wholeheartedly accept their new identity as diasporic community and assimilate in the host culture. Ashima travelled between two cultures, adjusts and adapts in a new culture and moves toward an identity that transcends culture. Reflecting on the theme of identity crisis among the characters in the novel *The Namesake*, noted critic Jagdish Batra emphatically says:

The Namesake is about this perpetual dilemma faced by immigrants as they struggle to maintain their identities while trying to shake them off at the same time. The first generation’s story was about adaptation and learning acculturing and also discovering new things about themselves. The second generation finds itself presented with two conflicting realities and cultures and sets of expectations – one of the host countries through the socio-cultural surroundings and the other of the home country through their parents. (Batra, 50)

Conclusion

Jhumpa Lahiri magnificently portrays the problems engendered by migration and diasporic journey such as displacement, fragmentation, nostalgia, loneliness, identity crisis and cultural dilemma in her novel *The Namesake*. With her dexterous narrative power and artistic finesse, Lahiri throws light on the dilemma of cultural spaces lying across the continents, specifically the predicament of the Indians settled in America. Lahiri’s personal experiences as an immigrant and her connections with Kolkata enhance the authenticity of the novel and make it more enjoyable. It will be appropriate to conclude with Lahiri’s own observation regarding her personal experience being a diaspora: “I think that, in part, it’s a reflection of what I observed my parents experiencing and their friends, their circle of fellow Indian immigrant friends. It’s also, in part, drawn from my own experiences . . . I’ve inherited a sense of that loss from my parents because it was so palpable all the time while I was growing up, the sense of what my parents had sacrificed in moving to the United States” (interview to Elizabeth Farnsworth).



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