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STRUGGLE AS DISPORA FOR CULTURAL IDENTITY BY ASHIMA GANGULI IN THE NOVAL "NAMESAKE"

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Abstract

This research paper looks into the sense of identity and belongingness of the characters of the Indian origin and immigrants in the USA in the novel written by Jhumpa Lahiri. The Namesake is the best example to classify Diaspora as the term and its role in the present era, the life of first- and second-generation immigrants are well depicted through the plot and characters by Lahiri. The fact is that Jhumpa Lahiri is the child of Indian immigrants when she migrates from England (where she was born) to America makes her both a migrant and Diaspora writer. She has written on the Indian Diaspora and narrated stories that reveal the inconsistency of the concept of identity and cultural difference in the space of Diaspora in her works. A story mostly interpreted as the description of cross-cultures and identity struggle therein what has usually been sidelined in case studies is the analysis of the names of the characters - The Namesakes of the several names in the novel. The Namesake, as a novel, journeys through several experiences of the characters present therein bringing out the several namesakes in the course of action. The Namesake is the best example to classify Diaspora as the term and its role in the present era, the life of first- and second-generation immigrants are well depicted through the plot and characters by Lahiri. The fact is that Jhumpa Lahiri is the child of Indian immigrants when she migrates from England (where she was born) to America makes her both a migrant and Diaspora writer. She has written on the Indian Diaspora and narrated stories that reveal the inconsistency of the concept of identity and cultural difference in the space of Diaspora in her works.

Keywords: Diaspora, Identity, Struggle, Belongingness, Immigrants, Cultural Difference.

Introduction

The Namesake seems to be confined within the boundaries of identity crisis and cross-cultural differences, The Namesake as novel always tend to find the namesake in the character of Gogol. But the thread of namesake also connects other characters in the novel that truly stand out as what the meaning of their name stands for. Talking of the namesakes of the names in the story I would specifically like to draw the attention to the character of Ashima - the wife of Prof. Ashok Ganguly, and later the mother of the protagonist Gogol/Nikhil and Sonia Ganguly. An amazing writer herself it is always been emphasized that Lahiri draws most of her characters from real life inspirations. But what outstands in this repetitive reflection of the complex urban yet rurally-nostalgic lifestyle is the refreshing narrating technique that weaves the thread of emotions towards the story. And amidst this complex lifestyle and the struggle of finding and establishing an identity all the characters in the story, more or less, go on a transformation through their life experiences. After all it is all about the cross-cultural experiences that the characters undertake stretching their wings from the east to west. But the character which evolves the most, justifying the meaning of her name, is undoubtedly Ashima.

The struggle for Cultural Identity by Ashima

It is very much appealing that Jhumpa Lahiri is the child of Indian immigrants when we think of literature on Indian Diaspora. She crosses borders when she migrates to England, her birth place, to the USA and becomes an American citizen. The recurrent theme in Lahiri's writing is the bitter-sweet experience of emigrant to America from India. Her characters are often caught in a cultural indeterminate state-excited about their new home. Lahiri belongs to the second generation of Indian Diaspora whose ongoing quest for identity never seems to an end. Her characters also speak the glory of common life. She says, "I know that my achievement is quite ordinary. I am not the only woman to seek his fortune far from home, and certainly I am not the first...As ordinary as it all appears, there are times when it is beyond my imagination". In "The Namesake" Lahiri experiences of growing up as a child of immigrants resemble that of her protagonist, Gogol Ganguly. In the novel, she reflects on the Indian Diaspora and creates a narrative that reveals the inconsistency of the concept of identity and cultural difference in the space of Diaspora. In an interview Lahiri has admitted that, "I am unlucky that I am between two worlds. I don't really know what a distinct South Asian identity means. I don't think about that when I write, I just try to bring a person to life". And that is exactly what she does through her characters. Names are symbols of identity in life. Names help people to communicate with each other, they play an important role for people to identify themselves. As identity becomes the core issue, the name becomes quite significant. Indian tradition follows various kinds of rituals and ceremonies of naming a born baby. Names play a very important role in life. In literature, dealing with clash of cultures, countries and races, names emerge as identity symbols. In Indian perception good names represent dignified and enlightened qualities. Pet names are sometimes meaningless and silly. The title „The Namesake reflects the struggle of Gogol Ganguly, who goes through to identify with unusual name. The novel represents the experience of a very specific community which has no name. The novel centers



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around the couple and community of Bengali origin in the USA migrated for various reasons. They are the first and their children second generation South Asian immigrants or South Asian Americans. Narrating the story of Ashok and Ashima Ganguly, Lahiri focused on the cultural dislocation of a family, immigrants from Calcutta who settle in Boston to study, work and raise a family. The novel moves quietly across its cultural arc from the birth of son to the death of a father. The great concern of novel is that Gogol, the representative of community without a name, is himself misnamed Gogol. He struggles with a name he is given by and a heritage either Indian or American he is not sure either. He wants to redefine himself as a born and brought of USA rather than to be identified from his parent's immigrant culture. In order to get self-definition, he abandons the name Gogol and tries to become someone else. The question if identity becomes crucial when a person is culturally displaced and he cannot co-relate with any of the two worlds in which he is living. While experiencing identity confusion from a change of names. Gogol is nonetheless able to define his identity. Since Gogol is born after his father survives in a horrifying train accident, his father sees the name Gogol as a pet name as gesture of his rebirth. However, Gogol does not understand how meaningful his name is when he is young. Gradually, he starts knowing the uncommon nature of his name which creates problems with his identity when he grows up. Gogol does not understand the emotional significance of the names. The name becomes a problem for Gogol, because he feels uncomfortable with the Russian name. It makes him to detach himself from his family members. Later on, Gogol decides to use his legal name, Nikhil, as an overcoat to escape from Indian culture. Although the name Nikhil brings him more confidence, Gogol is always present inside him. "Without people in the world to call him Gogol, no matter how long he himself lives, Gogol Ganguly will, Once and for all, vanish from lips of loved ones. And so, cease to exist. Yet his eventual demise provides no sense of victory, no solace, it provides no solace at all" (289). All his efforts pay him back with confusion about who is truly. Ashima, Gogol's mother arrives in USA with her husband Ashok, who has no idea or dream of going to a place called Boston so far off from his parents. But she agrees for the marriage since he would be there. Ashima then feels upset and homesick and sulks alone in their three room's apartment which is too hot in summer and too cold in the winter. Ashima and Ashok Ganguly try to create a small Bengal clutching to their roots and culture in America, far from land of their birth and struggling for an identity in the land of opportunities and riches. They find many Bengali friends and try to create their own community there. They try to restore their tradition by preparing Indian food, inviting Brahmin for rituals and so on. This sense of alienation from the western culture and the land where they are born and they are always being told about. Gogol and Sonia arrange Bengali get-togethers, but they grew in hybrid culture, part Bengali, part American. Ashima tells Gogol about Durga Pooja, she also makes him memorize four lines children's poem by Tagore. But the same time she is conscious of her child being American student and makes him watch Sesame Street and the Electric Company in order to match with English he uses at school. So, Gogol is always sailing in two boats simultaneously, one with his parents at home speaking Bengali and living in Bengali style and other of American Indian.

Conclusion

The Namesake, thus, illustrates the lives of both first generation and second-generation Indian migrants in the USA. Alienation is the part of experience of the Indian Diaspora and even if people are at home in part of the world, it does not mean that they will not become victims of the sense of alienation. The novel also shows how the immigrants face culture dilemmas in the foreign system. Lahiri has tried to answer all these questions in her own style through the quest of identity of her characters. Diaspora is all about the creation of new identities, resolution of conflicts and a new culture. Ashima indeed goes through a drastic transformation in the novel. She had been feeding on others' experiences so far but by the end of the novel we actually see her acting upon her own experiences - those which her own life has taught her. The shift from being the naïve vulnerable young Bengali girl to now a self-dependent woman. Ashima truly overcomes all the limits of her life, thus, achieving the namesake of her name, A-shima, the limitless.

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