

Cross-Cultural Emergence in Diasporic Literature With Reference To Jhumpa Lahiri's the Namesake

^[1]Salma Khanam Barbhuiya
^[1]M.A., Aligarh Muslim University

Abstract: - The paper critically analyzes Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* in context of cultural conflict emerging because of diaspora. The novel focuses on many differences and assimilations between the first and second-generation diasporic identity. Diasporic literature is an umbrella term which includes works written by immigrant writers. Diasporic literature deals with alienation, displacement, rootlessness, nostalgia, quest for identity. It also focuses on disintegration of cultures or cross-cultural emergence. Jhumpa Lahiri is one of the famous Indian American authors whose works are full of descriptions of immigrant experiences. She portrays the migrant's experiences and their attachment to homeland along with their desire to belong to the new land for better opportunities. This paper aims to discuss and question the sense of displacement in the lives of the characters in *The Namesake* and especially its main character Gogol Ganguli. Question of identity always rises for those who are culturally displaced and it is a major theme in *The Namesake*. Cultural factors are very important in the quest for the identity and self, especially for immigrants. People living in diasporic condition always face cultural clashes and confusions. Diaspora is all about creating new identities in a new cultural space. This paper explores various diasporic aspects especially cross-cultural emergence in the novel *The Namesake*.

Keywords: Culture, diaspora, identity, alienation, immigrant, homeland.

INTRODUCTION

The word "Diaspora" has been derived from the Greek 'diaspeirein' from dia means 'across' and speirein means 'scatter'. It has been used to describe the status of Jews during the Babylonian captivity in the sixth century B.C. Historically, the word diaspora was used to refer to the involuntary mass dispersion of a population from its indigenous territories, in particular the dispersion of Jews. The Oxford English Dictionary (1989) defines Diaspora as anybody of people living outside their traditional homeland. The term diaspora refers to those people or ethnic population who are either forced or induced to leave their traditional homelands, the dispersal of such people, and the resulting developments in their culture. The people having arrived in a new environmental and cultural situation, they try to negotiate two cultures: one which they possess and the other the new one. The diasporic culture is essentially mixed and a unification of the two cultures.

Diaspora is defined by Stuart Hall, as one "defined not by essence or purity, but by recognition of heterogeneity and diversity, by a conception of identity which leaves with and through despite difference." Diasporic literature deals with the uprooted people who are in a quest for identity after being culturally displaced. Terry Eagleton in *The Idea of Culture*, remarks that the word 'culture' contains a tension between making and being made. Jhumpa Lahiri comments, "The

question of identity is always a difficult one, but especially, for those who are culturally displaced, as immigrants are who grow up in two worlds simultaneously". It deals with the immigrant's loss and nostalgia. As Rushdie once remarked, in *Imaginary Homelands* that they are obliged to deal in broken mirrors, some of the fragments of which have been lost. An immigrant, even though westernized always faces identity crisis, where his native culture unconsciously clashes with alien culture.

Diasporic writers are always haunted by memories which are coloured by imagination and nostalgia. The issue of 'Displacement' or 'Dislocation' is very important in diaspora that is used not only to express the physical movement of an individual from one place to the other but it also shows how with the movement a person carries the culture of his native land. Dislocation leads to cross-cultural emergence that have always affected the lives of immigrants and there is constantly the possibility of rejection, confusion and tension when people from different cultures intermingle.

The contribution of the Indian Diaspora to Indian English writing is not new. Writers like Shiva Naipaul, V. S. Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, Anita Desai, Kiran Desai, Jhumpa Lahiri are important contributors in this field. Naipaul's characters like Mohun Biswas from *A House for Mr. Biswas* or Ganesh Ramsumair from the *Mystic Masseur* are not governed by actual displacement but by an inherited memory of dislocation. For them, their native land is not a geographical space but a creation of the imagination. Their

predicament can be explained in Rushdie's words as he remarks; "-- the past is a country, from which we have all emigrated, that its loss is part of our common humanity."(Rushdie, 1991:87)

Anita Desai's *Bye Bye Blackbird* and Kamala Markandaya's *The Nowhere Man* reveal how racial prejudice against Indians in the UK of 1960's isolates the characters and deepen their sense of displacement. Bharati Mukherjee's novels like *Wife* and *Jasmine* depict Indian legal and illegal immigrants in the US immigrants before globalization. Salman Rushdie approaches the metaphor of migration by adopting the technique of magic realism. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni in her novel *The Mistress of Spices* depicts Tilo, the protagonist, as an exotic character to reveal the migrant's anguish. Amitav Ghosh's novel *The Shadow Lines* shows the extent of rootlessness encountered by character born and brought up on a foreign land. Amit Chaudhari, in his novel *Afternoon Raag*, portrays the lives of Indian students in Oxford.

The second generation diasporic Indian writers like Meera Syal, Shashi Tharoor, Hari Kunzru, Sunetra Gupta, Jhumpa Lahiri, etc. have faithfully demonstrated the lives of both first and second generation immigrants in the US. Indian diasporic literature has raised different issues and aspects of immigrants' lives. The fictional narratives like Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* (1990), Meera Syal's *Anita and Me* (1996), Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* (2003), Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices* (1996) have shown the Indians living in England, America and where they have immigrated either to advance their financial condition or to seek jobs due to unemployment at homelands or for better education of their children or better professional opportunities. Their life is full of hard work, tensions and anxieties because of various existential problems.

Literary works of these writers have also depicted the issue of generation gap of the Indian Diaspora where the first generation parents expect from their children to live by the value system of Indian culture which they force on them at home through food, dress, customs, rituals, language, beliefs, etc. but the children encountering different cultural surroundings outside, find the latter have fascination, sandwiched between the two cultures and confused like Gogol in *The Namesake*.

The dilemmas of the second generation diaspora very appropriately analyzed by Jaywanti Dimiri as, "Expatriate experience is problematic for the second generation immigrants of the third world for specific reasons. Born and brought up on foreign soil expatriation for this neo- class of immigrants hangs the background as an imaginary reality, free from the stigma of nostalgia and the popular symptoms of angst, loneliness existential rootlessness or homelessness,

their predicament is in many ways worse than that of their predecessors. Despite their assimilation and acculturation they cannot escape from being victimized and ostracized" (Dimiri, 2000:28-33)

The second generation diasporic writers are often referred as 'American Born Confused Desi'(ABCD). As they are born and brought up in American, they are closer to American culture but at the same time their bonds with Indian culture is arbitrated by their parents.

Jhumpa Lahiri is a contemporary American writer of Indian origin. She represents the second generation diasporic 'desis' whose relationship with America as well as India is thoroughly different from that of the first generation. She portrays the situation of second generation expatriates who confidently asserts their ethnic identity in multiculturalists' situation. Her works are characterized by the use of plain language and deal mainly with the Indian immigrants to America who are caught up between the two cultural influences and are finding various means to settle themselves in the new land. Jhumpa Lahiri portrays her own life and experiences in her debut novel *The Namesake* (2003). Even though she was brought up in America, She became very close to her Bengali heritage from an early age. Growing up with ties to all the three countries created in her a sense of homelessness and an inability to feel accepted. In this context, Jhumpa Lahiri herself told, "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" (Barbara,61).This multicultural lifestyle plays a central role in many of her stories which depicts the alienation and loneliness of immigrants caught between two drastically different worlds.

The recurrent theme in Lahiri's writing is the experience of migrating to America from India. She portrays thorough her characters cross-cultural emergence. In an interview Lahiri says: "I'm lucky 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". She presents the dilemma of immigration and the nostalgia. The clash of cultures and the twisted ties between generations is evident in her novels.

Identity crisis is a dominant factor in the life of the immigrants. The novel "The Namesake" revolves around the life of an Indian immigrant couple Ashima and Ashok Ganguli who have come to create a new life for opportunities for themselves in the University of Suburbs in Boston. The novel opens with Ashima Ganguli trying to make a spicy Indian snack from African ingredients - Rice Krispies & Planters peanuts - but "as usual, there's something missing". Ashima, who is pregnant when taken to the hospital for delivery does not find anything customary in America - a

country, where she is designed to spend her rest of life and even in labours she is petrified to elevate a child in country where "Life seems so tentative and spare".

In Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* almost all the characters faces problems regarding their own identity, firstly Ashima who moved from India (Calcutta) to America after her marriage with Ashoke is seen stucked between her new identity and her inherited identity. New to America, Ashima struggles through her language and cultural barriers. She tries to adjust with her new found environment, her Indian identity is now just a namesake identity. She begins to realize that to adapt to the new environment she must overcome the notion of a traditional Indian customs. Ashima thus starts to speak better English and make friends with her neighbors. The main protagonist of the novel Gogol faces a confused identity. He is born and brought up in America itself and is thus torn between the two cultures, Indian and American.

Ambika Sharma's in her article, "*Dilemma of Cultural Identity and Belongingness in Jhumpa Lahiri's The Namesake*" presents that the immigrants wants to connect themselves to that new inhabitant place where they migrated but their connection to native language, culture, food and traditions stimulate an emotional and distressing burden resulting in a problem of individuality and clash of culture and barriers of communication. She also talks about the character, "Ashima in the United States faces the plight of language and cultural barriers as well the fear during the delivery of her first child. In addition to their miseries Ashoke and Ashima were forced to name their baby from the hospital itself before leaving, thus making a compromise with their customs. Due to the strange set of circumstances, the couple names their first-born „Gogol' in remembrance of a Russian author Nikolai Gogol, whose book saved Ashoke's life years ago in an unfortunate train accident communication." (Sharma 43)

The effects of displacement brought a feeling of alienation to her. Everything was new to her after immigration. Lahiri tries to compare her pregnancy with the effects of alienation. Ashima was very nostalgic. After immigrating to America she starts to feel isolated and lonely. With her husband not around, she is mostly all alone and this leads her to reminisce about the good old days at home in India. She misses her parents and relatives. Ashima was feeling isolated because of the new environment, she had nowhere to go and even the part time job which she felt was too old to learn any skills. She was pregnant and alone. While during the delivery of her child, Ashima was wishing about how the Bengali relatives would be surrounding her during her delivery time. In America she feels nothing 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 misses her favorite Indian 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 of the novel the issues of culture and identity are presented. Ashima does not use 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."

However, Ashoke after the name of his favorite famous Russian author names his son as 'Gogol'. This is the same Russian writer whose book saved him in the rail accident. In that accident many people died, but Ashoke survives and only his back breaks. The Bengali children are given two names according to their culture, a pet name for family use, the other used by the rest of people. So, Gogol's public name becomes 'Nikhil'. Ashima approves this name given after the same Russian favorite writer Nikolai Gogol. The America regulations compel the Indian immigrants to make the adjustments with their original culture. The letter symbolically represents the hanging and blank identity for the immigrants.

The immigrants are culturally displaced as they grow up in two worlds simultaneously. Jhumpa Lahiri 's *The Namesake* has multiplicity of identities. Ashima and Ashoke always try to hold on to their Indian-Bengali selves. However, their children Gogol and Sonia do not follow the same path. Gogol while having his affairs with Ruth and Maxine thinks that by forgetting his distinct cultural identity, he will be able to merge with the mainstream. As a result, he starts living on the surface. Later on, overpowered by his father's death, he attempts to follow the life of his parents and get married to Moushumi, a Bengali girl. The failure of this ideal marriage arranged by his mother makes him realize the futility of both styles of life attempted by him –the former of total rejection and the latter of total acceptance. It is only after going through both these experiences that Gogol begins his self-discovery.

Up to Ashoke's death and till Ashima's return to India, their corner of the foreign land was always India. This is not so with Gogol and Sonia. Having been brought up in America, they are more at ease in their day to day life than their parents are. They behave and speak like Americans, and "salesmen ... prefer to direct their conversation to Gogol, as though his parents were either incompetent or deaf" (Ibid : 68).

Lahiri present multiplicity of identity in the novel when Gogol feels discomfort with his name and it increases as he grows older. As Gogol prepares to step into the outside world, he becomes more uncomfortable about his name "... his name, an entity shapeless and weightless, manages nevertheless to distress him physically like the scratchy tag of a shirt he has been forced permanently to wear." (Ibid: 76)

As Nikhil, he attempts to live life like any other American teenager. He gets involved with Ruth and then with Maxine. But deep within, he knows that it is not the world to which he belongs. Gogol wants it to be his world too, but try as hard as he might, he cannot believe in it himself, "... for some reason, it is dependence, not adulthood, he feels. He feels free of expectation, of responsibility, in willing exile from his life." (Ibid : 142).

Following the death of his father, Gogol tries to come in terms with the loss as well as with the feeling of guilt he experiences for having neglected his parents. Gogol's marriage to Moushumi is probably motivated by a desire to set things right, a desire to live the part of his life that he had tried to negate and suppress for so long. However, the marriage does not last long and Gogol finds himself all alone. When Gogol finds out the book of short stories that Ashoke had given him on his fourteenth birthday opens up the way for Gogol to resolve the crisis in his life. It is by Nikolai Gogol and includes the short story "*The Overcoat*" which saved Ashoke's life. Although he had received the book long back, Gogol had not read it. It is only after he has tried and failed in all his attempts to reconcile with the world that he starts reading the book. The novel closes with Gogol reading the book, and is symbolic of the course he will follow in later life. Just as "*The Overcoat*" gave his father a new lease of life, it gives Gogol an answer to the dichotomy of his existence.

The Namesake is an important depiction of diasporic consciousness. It marks a coming to terms with the plurality that the second generation diaspora faces. *The Namesake* is a monument of cultural multiplex. Lahiri, through her experience of different cultural identities comes to know the basic properties of different cultures. Second generation immigrants are caught between two worlds – one unacceptable, the other unaccepting, they ultimately become outsiders to themselves. This is the unique predicament of the second-generation diaspora. They find their roots only after going cultural imbalance.

CONCLUSION:

Cultural clash is an important element in diaspora. Immigrants face a dilemma whether to follow the inherited cultures or how to cope up with the new cultures. They get hold up between the two cultures and this creates a source of

diasporic feeling. In the novel we see a great deal of differences between the American and Indian cultures, hence the characters are often a victim of cultural clash. The American culture has more modernized set of values, whereas on the contrary the Indian culture flows to more conservative values. The Ganguli family tends to celebrate Christmas on the pretext that they are in America and should follow certain cultures it represents. Also the sort of lifestyle the two children of the Gangulis, Gogol and Sonia adapts is more of a westernized culture. Their accent, dressing and behavior signifies the changes brought about by the American culture in them. The character like Gogol is in a confused state of mind because of this cultural clash. He is found to be in between the two cultures which make his life delusional. The cultural clash is more of a problem for the second generation immigrants than those of the first generation immigrants.

Meenu Kumari in her article, *A Diasporic Dilemma: Cultural Variance in Jhumpa Lahiri's Interpreter of Maladies* examines the cultural difference in the space of diaspora. She also describes how the characters are displaced from their ethnic roots and that the characters in a new land struggle to settle down in a land where they feel strange to them. The characters are prone to this subject of diasporic consciousness; it is the distance from their roots which makes them vulnerable to the ever ongoing pressure in their new land. (Kumari 127)

The Namesake spans two generations of the same Indian American family. By the end of the novel there seems a transformation in the lives of the second generation immigrants. It shows how their present lives are determined by their shared past. It also focuses on the constant conflict between the old world and the new world. In *The Namesake* Gogol tries to assimilate in both the cultures, following the wish of his parents. Jhumpa Lahiri faithfully portrays in her work human conditions by interpreting the life of a dislocated individual. In conclusion it can be said that Lahiri very beautifully portrayed cross-cultural emergence through the characters of her novel. The novel analyses old mindset of the first generation and second generation immigrants and the conflicts that arise out of these. While the themes of nostalgia, culture shock and unsettling are addressed through the characters Ashima and Ashoke, the themes of identity crisis and culture stereotyping are addressed through the experiences of Gogol.

WORK CITED:

1. Batra, Jagdish. *Jhumpa Lahiri's The Namesake: A Critical Study*. New Delhi: Prestige
2. Books, 2010. Print.
3. Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture* London:

- Routledge, 1994.pp 77
4. Dimiri, Jaywanti. Second generation Feminist Discourse on Expatriation A study of Ravinder Randhua's A Wicked old Woman and Atima Shrivastava's Transmission. Literary Voice, Book Series .5 Feb 2000, pp- 28-33.
 5. Hall, Stuart. "Cultural Identity and Diaspora." Contemporary Post-Colonial Theory ed. PadminiMongia. New Delhi: Oxford UP (1997): 222-237. Print.
 6. Kumari, Meenu: "A Diasporic Dilemma: Cultural Variance in Jhumpa Lahiri's Interpreter of Maladies," International Journal of English, language, literature and Humanities. 3. V Feb
 7. Sharma, Ambika. "Dilemma of Cultural Identity and Belongingness in Jhumpa Lahiri's The Namesake." INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE, LITERATURE AND TRANSLATION STUDIES (IJELR).2.1 (2015): 42-45. Print. (2014): 121-128. Print
 8. Lahiri, Jhumpa, (2003), The Namesake (Novel), Houghton Mifflin (Boston MA) Newsweek: Aug 25,2003,Barbara Kantrowitz, 'Who Says There's No Sound Act?'. <http://www.youtube.com/watch> (in conversation with Mira Nair about The Namesake) Hinduism,<http://about.com/library/weekly/...../bl-1humpainterview.htm> (Interview releases by Houghton Mifflin Company).