



Multiculturalism in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*

Pooja

Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of English, Gurukul Kangari Vishwavidyalaya, Haridwar, Uttarakhand, India

Abstract

Jhumpa Lahiri, one of the great diasporic writers, tries to explore the inner nuances of her characters. She is not an expatriate Indian like Bharati Mukharjee, who is separated from India long ago and who belongs to the second generation. Her diasporic penetration in to the psyche of her protagonists lay bare the melancholic and uprooted psychology of her characters. Her novel shows the elements of displacement, dislocation, homesickness alienation and search for identity. In her debut novel, *The Namesake*, Lahiri tries to capture the experience and culture of thirty years struggle of the Ganguli family for their integration and assimilation into an alien culture. Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* describes the struggles and hardships of a Bengali couple, Ashoke and Ashima, who immigrate to the United States to have a life outside of everything they are accustomed to. The story begins when Ashoke and Ashima leave Calcutta, India and settle in central Square, Cambridge and Massachusetts. The novel portrays realistically the experiences of the family afflicted with a filling of cultural alienation. The term diaspora is both literal and metaphorical both referring to the physical displacements as well as the shaping of different sensibility. The novel is a kaleidoscope of the different shades of individual relationships, the conflicts and confusions of the characters, emotional pains and afflictions as Lahiri portrays the theme of cultural dilemmas and the dislocation of the immigrants. The dislocation and its significance can be seen first from the point of view of the parents, Ashoke and Ashima, and secondly from the point of view of their children Gogol and his sister Sonia who are second-generation Indian-Americans. In the novel, Lahiri assimilates cultures of her native land and of the adopted land, makes a cultural commitment to transcend her individual consciousness, and finally achieves universality.

Keywords: Alienation, isolation, homesickness, rootlessness, hybridity, and an exploration of immigrant experiences and cultural dissonance

Introduction

Diaspora, both literal and metaphorical, refers to the physical displacement as well as the shaping of different sensibility. On the other hand, expatriation is a post-colonial fact and whether it is an individual or a group moving to another country, the diaspora continues. The term 'Diaspora' has multiple layers of meaning in academic circles today. From the original meaning of large-scale migration of people due to religious persecution, it has now come to refer to any movement of people from one land to another. In fact, often it is used as a synonym for migration or immigration and the diaspora is equaled to an expatriate. Indian Diaspora can probably be traced from ancient times when Buddhist monks traveled to remote corners of Asia. In 19th and 20th India again witnessed the mass movement when Indians, in large numbers, went to industrially advanced countries in search of job opportunities as skilled, unskilled, professional and semi-professionals laborers. This migration formed the basis of the foundation of the term diaspora used today. However, Indian, living in a host country, continued to live in a 'sandwich world'.

Born in London and living in the United States, Jhumpa Lahiri is not an expatriate Indian like Bharati Mukharjee as she is separated from India by generation and yet her first novel *The Namesake*, (2003) is about Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli and their family. From the incident of Ashoke moving away from India, Lahiri paints the picture of the life of an expatriate. In this connection, Ashoke rightly remarks, "Leafless trees with ice-covered branches Ashoke and Ashima who learn to live in the land where they were not

born, and by accident that Dog Wine and excrement embedded in the snow-banks" (30). They call this country their own where not a soul on the street is hardly flattering description of the land. The novel portrays realistic experiences of a family, which is sometimes afflicted with a feeling of cultural alienation. The absence of the motherland becomes a constant presence, as it always seems to colour the perceptions of the expatriate.

Refusing to give-up her cultural-roots, she still hopes for assimilation and acculturation in new land. She does not split relationship with his homeland. Wiliam Safran observes, "they continue to relate personally or vicariously to the homeland in one way or another, and their ethno-communal consciousness and solidarity are importantly defined by the existence of such a relationship" (123). Most of the societies are multicultural societies today. The writer, who is living and writing in a multicultural society, is affected at multiple levels by both the cultures. Such writer constantly lives in a state of flux. The writer reflects, analyses, criticizes the particular environment and the world around him whether he belongs to that world or not. On the other hand, the expatriate writer lacks a shared memory and he/she writes about his/her experience of one country. It cannot be denied that there are some writers who do not want to claim them diaspora and want to become an intrinsic part of the land of residence or adoption, probably because the image of a minority is often suspected. The writer may feel no crisis of identity or alienation or depression or frustration especially if he/she is a second generation expatriate. Sometimes, the relations between

original inhabitants and the Diaspora writers become complicated. In this connection, Hugh Tinker rightly remarks:

.....do the Asians, Indians, create their own difficulties by their Own way of life and by remaining separate from the host society: or do their troubles arise from excess of chauvinism or racism in the country of their adoption? Do they offend because they are, visibly, both pariahs and exploiters in alien societies? Or are they scapegoats, singled out for victimization because their adopted country needs an alibi for poor performance in the national sphere...? (30)

As a University Professor Ashoke, in *The Namesake* (2003), is accepted into the academic community, but at home, he continues to be the typical Indian male, fastidious about his clothing and food. Ashoke minutely observes:

He is fastidious about his clothing; their first argument had been over a sweater she'd shrunk in the washing machine. As soon as he comes home from the university the first thing he does in hang up his shirt and trousers, donning a pair of draw-string pajamas and a pullover if it is cold. On Sundays he spends an hour occupied with his tins of shoe polish and his three pairs of shoes, two black and one brown (10).

There are two phase of the life of Indians wherein one live as Indian and second live as one guest in the novel remarked "as true Americans"(63). With the passage of time, "the people they have grown up with will never see this life, of this they are certain. They will never breathe the air of a damp New England morning, see smoke rising from a neighbor's chimney, and shiver in a car waiting for the glass to defrost and the engine to warm" (64). The process of acculturation, which is was very important to diasporic writers like Bharati Mukherjee, is seen in the adoption of customs in order to adopt to their new surroundings.

They learn to roast turkeys albeit garlic and, to rubbed with wrap woolen scarves around snowmen, to colour boiled eggs cumin and pink at Easter and hide them around the house. For the sake of Gogol and Sonia they celebrate, with progressively increasing fan fare, the birth of Christ, and even the children look forward to more than the worship of Durga and Saraswati cayenne, at Thanksgiving to nail a wreath their to door in December violet(64).

Nayantara Shehgal suggests in many of her novels, especially in *The Day in Shadow* (1971), That multicultural experiences could lead to a fragmentation, almost akin to schizophrenia. Ashima and Ashoke try hard to hold on their Indian-ness of their culture that they cannot let go. She remarks:

They make a point driving into Cambridge with the children when the Apu Trilogy plays at the Orson Welles, or when there is a Kathakali dance performance or sitar recital at memorial hall. When Gogol is in the third grade, they send him to Bengali language and culture lessons every other Saturday, held in the home of one of their friends (65).

Personal names and appearances distinguish the borders of the native and non-native. Yet, the expatriate attempt to tide over all this by constantly shedding cultural traditions, food habits, tastes etc with the local tastes. He says, ".....in the supermarket they let Gogol fill the cart with items that he and Sonia, but not they, consume: individually wrapped slices of cheese, mayonnaise, tuna fish, and hotdogs" (65). Gogol grows-up with a name not meant to be his official one but even his unofficial name Ganguli is unacceptable for him. He feels a special affinity with names. He rolls up

his rubbings from the cemetery on a school trip and brings them home. Being different from the others, which is the eternal plight of an expatriate, is realized very well by Gogol on the trip:

For reasons he cannot explain or necessarily understand, these ancient Puritan Spirits, these very first immigrants to America, these bearers of unthinkable, obsolete names, have spoken to him, so much to that in spite of his mother's disgust he refuses to throw the rubbings away. He rolls them up, takes them upstairs', and puts them in this room, behind his chest of drawers, where he knows his mother will never bother to look, and where they will remain, ignored but protected, gathering dust for years to come (71).

To an expatriate, visiting the home-land of one's birth is like a pilgrimage. He/she looks forward to go on this journey and he/she dreams about that. Yasmini Gooneratne, a Shrilankian expatriate in Australia, in her novel *A Change of Skies*, (1991) describes her annual visit to the homeland. The attitude of the people at home is that "Experts make scenes, expats complain.....Experts make foods of themselves....."(16). Similarly, when Sonia and Gogol too in *The Namesake* (2003) visit India with their parents, the fact of not belonging strikes them again. Each experience seems to be a new one and strikes them as strange, "In the days that follow, they adjust once again to sleeping under a mosquito net, bathing by pouring tin cups of water over their heads"(82). The feeling of being homeless strikes the second generation expatriate in a different way. When Gogol's father tells him that they will be staying in Calcutta for eight months creates a miserable condition. Such a long stay seems to Gogol as bad as moving there permanently-a possibility that most second-generation expatriates never consider. As they around the country, visiting Delhi etc, they have a variety of experiences, some of which are not very comfortable and they fall sick: "it is the air, the rice, the wind, their relatives casually remark; they were not made to survive in a poor country....."(86).

In portraying these conditions, Lahiri's exposes a new-colonial stance where West looks towards East as a land of dirt and filth, and of disease and a lack of hygiene with jaundiced eye. Ashoke and Ashima fly more easily between the two continents and they considers their home as the land of their birth.Jhumpa Lahiri rightly remarks:

Gogol and Sonia know these people, but they do not feel close to them as their parents do. Within minutes, before their eyes Ashoke and Ashima slip into bolder, less complicated version of themselves, their voices louder. Their smiles wider, revealing confidence Gogol and Sonia never seen on Pemberton Road. I am scared, Goggle's Sonia whispers to her brother in English, seeking him hand and refusing to let go..... (81).

The novel constantly focuses on the contrasting experiences of the two generations of expatriates-Ashoke and Ashima. They are not inclined towards being Americanized while Gogol and Sonia constantly face the need to belong to a place where they stay. They develop their tastes and ideas keeping in view of the society in which they live. Gogol, troubled by the unusualness of his name, is relieved when he changes his name to Nikhil. He begins to feel that he is reborn. Being and becoming are two interchangeable states for both of them and each experience this difference in their homeland. Imagination and memory often act as the bridge, which links the two countries and cultures. Ashima faces the greatest difficulty in becoming a part of this culture. And

hence, in the end, she decides to shuttle between the two worlds-six months in India and six in the United. Ashima rightly remarks:

Ashima feels lonely suddenly, horribly, permanently alone, and briefly, turned away from the mirror, she sobs for her husband. She feels overwhelmed by the thought of the thought of the move she is about to make, to the city that was once home and is now in its own way foreign. She feels both impatience and indifference for all the days she still must live....for thirty three years she missed her life in India. Now she will miss her job at the library, the Women with whom she has worked. She will miss the country in which she had grown to know and love her husband. Though his ashes have been scattered into the Ganges, it is here, in this house and in this town, that he will continue to dwell in her mind..... (278-279).

Lahiri's art of Characterization demonstrates reserved and controlled tone that she maintains in her short-stories too. She prefers lifelike characters, who take shape gradually by revealing about their nature, thought etc. Characters have been vividly portrayed, well rounded and grow with the course of narrative. This sustains the interest of the readers. Lahiri's style of developing a character is very systematic. First, she provides the physical description of the characters, and then the character's peculiarities are revealed gradually. In the novel, Ashima is one of the most evolved characters. She is homesick wife, who has migrated to Cambridge. Lahiri describes her in these words, "Ashima was five feet for inches, tall for a Bengali Woman, ninety- nine pounds. Her complexion was on the dark side of the fair, but she had been compared on more that one occasion to the actress Madhabi Mukharjee. Her nails were admirably long, her fingers like her father's artistically slim" (9). Ashima is shown nostalgic and a typical immigrant Bengali woman at initial stage. She finds it difficult to adjust and adopt herself in the American atmosphere. Her migration disturbs her, but in the course of time, she welcomes it. Perhaps, women have the ability to relate to two homes simultaneously. Ashima is such woman, who has preserved her culture and customs in a foreign land. Lahiri mentions Ashima's thoughts about diasporic experiences:

For being a foreigners, 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 one's 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 some curiosity from strangers, the same combination of pity and respect.....(49-50).

She takes extra care in upbringing of Gogol and Sonia by teaching them Bengali culture as well as American. She is an ideal mother, who takes care of her children without any expectation. In later part of novel, she becomes very friendly with her daughter Sonia. She also supports Gogol's marriage with Moushumi. Ashima's relationship with Ashoke is a blend of love and respect. Both of them are not much expressive about their affection, but through small gestures every day. On hearing of Ashoke's death, she becomes totally numb. Ashima is a dignified Character. After Ashoke's unexpected demise, she returns to India.

Lahiri deliberates her situation with these words: "True to the meaning for her name, she will be without borders, without a home of her own, a resident everywhere and nowhere" (276). Ashima's heart was in Kolkata, India, with her family. After staying in America for more than thirty years and even after securing a driving license and a social security card, which are privileges of an American citizen, Ashima doesn't find home in America. Lahiri, very effectively portrays the predicament of immigrant though her, "...for thirty-three years she missed her life in India. Now she will miss her job at the library, the Women with whom she's worked. She will miss throwing parties, she will miss living with her daughter...she will miss the opportunity to drive...she will miss the country in which she had grown to know and love her husband...."(279).

Ashoke is a Bengali professor at MIT. The feelings for his homeland and family are so intense that he could transform this affection into motivating force to survive in an alien country. In his teenage, he was very fond of reading and his most favorite writer was Russian Writer Nikolai Gogol. She, in a retrospective technique, takes the readers to the past of Ashoke. In 1961, when he was twenty-two, traveling on the Hawrah-Ranchi Express, met a fatal accident. He survived because of Gogol's short stories. He was reborn that night because of the help of Gogol's Short- Stories. The memory of being rescued haunts him throughout his life. After this accident, he becomes claustrophobic, he still holds his breath in elevators, feels pent-up in cars unless the windows are open on both the sides, on planes. He requests the bulkhead seat, and at times, he still presses his ribs to make sure that they are solid. He considers that accident and his being rescued miraculously as second life. However, Ashoke does not believe in God but he says: "He was born twice in India, and then a third time in America (21). Getting a job as a professor in America was his dream and despite of his physical disability and little support from others, he fulfills his dream.

In the end, it can be concluded that Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* (2003), beautifully carves out the nostalgia, acculturation and contra-acculturation of Indian immigrants. This novel shows Ashima and Gogol as cultural Survivors in America's multicultural milieu. They demonstrate the lives of hybridity and in-betweenness. It is difficult for them to maintain cultural insularity, and like millions of immigrant Indians they try to adjust in the culture available in America. Finally it is their contra acculturation and rooting for India that allows them peace and consolation in moments of catharsis. To the extent that contra postcolonial societies, Lahiri's Gogol is Indian Immigrant in America and Europe, who suffers from alienation, impatience and isolation, and searches for a spiritual consolation in contra acculturation in which no culture is sacred and every culture exists with its survival strategies. She writes about the uprooted people with an intimate knowledge of their conflicted hearts, using her lapidary eye for detail to conjure their daily lives with precision of extraordinary kind. Lahiri assimilates both the cultures of her native land and the land of her present living, makes a cultural commitment to transcend her individual consciousness, and thereby achieves universality.

References

1. Gooneraten, Yashmine. *A change of Skies*. New Delhi Penguin, 1991.
2. Kumar Amitav. *Gogol versus Ganguli*. Outlook Oct 23, 2005.
3. Lahiri Jhumpa. *The Namesake*. New Delhi Harper Collins, 2003.
4. Pratt Mary Louise. *Travel Writing and Transculturation*. London: Routledge, 1992.
5. Safran William. *Diaspora in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return*. New York: Oxford, 1991.
6. Tinker Hugh. *The Banyan Tree: Overseas Emigrants from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1977.