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Displacement of Characterization in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*

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Abstract

Jhumpa Lahiri's insight into the psychology of relationships, aging, maturity, and loss is remarkable. Her subject, in the novel as also in her stories, is the loneliness of dislocation. What makes her work stand out is, at least, partly due to the gentle and persuasive way in which the atmosphere of displacement is evoked. In the present novel, she talks about Gogol, a young man about the same age as the author, born like her to immigrant parents from West Bengal, who grows up into brilliant student and a successful architect even as he has to struggle to discover himself through successive ill-fated relationships and appreciate the worth of expectations of his parents.

Jhumpa Lahiri excels in the art of characterization with a balanced treatment of the external and inner details of her characters. An undercurrent of empathy runs through the narrative and this empathy is not limited to any particular type of individuals but is widely bestowed on all – young old, Indians, Americans alike. Besides being subtly drawn, her characters belong to our times and our world. They are not wooden dummies or caricatures; they pulsate with life. There are enough details to render them individualized. Hence, they are substantial and not shadowy. Such characters endear themselves to the readers and leave a lasting impression on their minds. Lahiri's eye for detail coupled with a compassionate heart provides magic touch to the novel.

Keywords: Displacement, Jhumpa Lahiri, The Namesake & Immigration

1. Introduction

The majority of the Indian writers were concerned in one way or the other issues regarding women. They were directly, idealistically or realistically depicting the place of women in the society and intending to bring about change therein. Yet their women characters seem to be under the dominating influence of their male writers. The female protagonist remains under the impact of their creator's emotions and ideas. This incited women to become writers and present the reality of the world. Indian literature written in English is smaller in volume compared to the output in several regional languages and spans a smaller range of time. It commenced with the spread of the English

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language and education in India. In the last two decades, there has been astonishing of Indian women writing in English, which needs abroad and in India.

In recent years, issues concerned with social reality have become the occupation of the novelist. It has made significant work because it includes all aspects of life. The response of the author is the best known in a novel. It is important to make the experience of the real and universal truth. Twentieth-century India before Independence was stirred politically. It is a definitive history that integrated cultural, political and socio-economic and philosophy for the free and United India. It was the rhetoric independence which manifested the Indian writing in English. The creative authors found English not pliable to India's plots and themes.

Indian women novelists in English clearly show that women have made their permanent mark in the field of English fictions. They are being conferred on not only national but international awards also. In most of their writings, they have tried their novels, the protagonists are mostly women characters desolated and isolated by an entirely hapless, hypocritical and insensitive male domination. Today whatever political, social, cultural and individual awareness have seen in women, they are mostly the result of these fiction writers who heralded new consciousness in the realm of traditional thinking. If the tireless efforts on the part of women for women's sake go on, the days are not far off when they become better than men, in all respects in each field. Even today the condition of Indian women in the remote villages is very amazing. They are still getting step-motherly treatment by the parent in both education and feeding. So the thing that most urgently needed today is a reciprocal and friendly relationship between both sexes – a relation which must be tinged with the colour of modernity and conventionally, antiquity and spirituality.

Today, from spices and textiles, to music and art, Indian is a visible and vibrant aspect of American life. Due in part to decades of successful immigration, Indian's presence in the U.S. is also recognition of the tremendous contributions made by Indian Americans to U.S. business, technology, education, and culture. The diasporic fiction tries to capture the sense of displacement of the diasporic. It provides immigrants' perception of the new homeland against the backdrop of his memory of the lost homeland. Loss and nostalgia are, therefore, key characteristics of diasporic writing. To start with, they are led into the field of experience not of Ashoke but of Ashima who arrives in America as his newly – wed wife. The first shock in store for her is the chilly weather. She is uninitiated into the ways of American society. By and by, she gets used to things here. After her husband gives her directions in this regard, she learns to go out independently to nearby departmental stores to do shopping.

The Phenomenal growth taking place presently in the field of Indian Writing in English, particularly in the genre of novel, is attributable mainly to the proposal taken by or diasporic writers. Salman Rushdie is generally credited with having blazed the trail with his *Midnight's Children* in 1981. Since then there have been many, at home and abroad, who have shown the might of their pen and won laurels. They include leading lights like Amitav Ghosh, Rohinton Mistry, Vikram Seth, Kiran Desai et al as also the not so-prominent ones like Indra Sinha, Ruchir Joshi, Manil, Suri and others. The last decade of the twentieth century is replete with many success stories. My approximate is that even after the turn of the century; more than a hundred novels of good quality have been published. This has quite naturally enriched the genre of Indian English novel.

Jhumpa Lahiri, who won the Pulitzer Prize in the year 2000 for her *Interpreter of Maladies*, is a brilliant novelist. Along with Salman Rushdie and Arundhati Roy, is looked upon as the harbinger of the new wave in Indian fiction. Her first novel *The Namesake* forms the basis of the present study. Lahiri has the first-hand experience to realistically portray the diasporic experience of the second generation of immigrants in America. At the same time, she has taken pains to imagine the experience of loss and nostalgia of the first generation immigrants also.

Jhumpa Lahiri has carved out a niche for herself among the contemporary popular novelist. She belongs to the second generation of immigrants to America and therefore, she can very well understand the plight of young generation that feels sandwiched between the aspirations of parents cast in the

conventional Indian mould and the manipulate of the western peer groups as also of the wider American milieu. "I write about people whose very existence has been shaped by unsettlement."

The Namesake can be principally viewed as a diasporic text to which the sub – themes of family ties, clash of values, cross – cultural relationships, love and loneliness etc. Contribute. At the deeper level, "The Namesake is a story of guilt and liberation; in this sense, it speaks to the universal struggle to extricate ourselves from the past – from family and commitment and the curse of history." It is a deeply moving and finely wrought family drama that takes up Jhumpa Lahiri's favourite subject of immigrant experience. Here is the Ganguli couple, the first generation Indian immigrants whose experiences in the U.S are eroded against those of their children, difficult further by the choice of name for their son, all of which leads to the clash of cultures and tangled ties between generations. Before delving deep into the thematic aspects further, let us consider over the meaning and origin of the term 'Diaspora.'

Jhumpa Lahiri knows the American landscape and the mindscape like the back of her land. She also knows well the community of emigrant Bengalis in the Boston area: their peculiarly lonely lives punctuated by periodic get-togethers of fellow expatriates; the customs and worldview through which they see their own everyday experience; and the struggle of their American children with their own questions of identity and belonging. Her work has primarily on first and second –generation Bengali immigrants, exploring themes of exile, isolation, and adaptation.

At the same time, one must not forget that her characters grow in a complex environment, as they are located in the twilight region of differences woven by two cultures. According to Homi Bhabha, "It is in the emergence of the interstices – the overlap and displacement of domains of difference – that inter subjective and collective experiences of nationness, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated." Thus, the selfhood at the individual and collective level is never final; it is open to negotiation, teamwork and contestation. At any given moment, this identity is being defined / refined.

When a new immigrant gets settled in a foreign land, she compares things in the host country with the ones in her home country. As Ashima is admitted to the hospital for delivery, time sits heavy on her heart, but no, it is *American time* now. "American seconds tick on top of her pulse point. For half a minute, a band of pain wraps around her stomach. . . She calculates the Indian time on her hands." (N 4). Ashima feels lonely even though there are three other pregnant women all Americans in the same room, separated by curtains. She is aware of the concern for privacy of Americans. "But she has gathered that Americans, in spite of their public declarations of affection, in spite of their miniskirts and bikinis, in spite of their miniskirts and bikinis, in spite of their hand – holding on the street and lying on top of each other on the Cambridge Common, prefer their privacy." (N 3)

She learns about the American lifestyle, like people do not take off shoes before entering house. Even trays of cat litter could be seen in the kitchen (N 51). Ashima is aghast to learn that Gogol was taken along with other class – mates to a graveyard and asked to trace on paper the names etched on gravestones (N 70). Besides, the attempt to fill up the void in life with material things is also noted by Lahiri, as Hallgren points out: "Absent proper kinship ties, she seems to be saying, this is how Americans feel most at home: among their things. Refined as it may be, consumerism has touched these characters to the core; they merit nothing better than such status descriptors."

If the Americans present an enigma to her, they too view her as "Jell – O ice cream" lady from India, for she would not have any other food. The Americans eat chickens with its skin, whereas Indians would prefer it skinless. Her flawed English is noticed by the nurse Patty when she says 'finger and toe' for fingers and toes' because in Bengali language, the plural form is not different from the singular. When it comes to naming the new born, the Gangulis want Ashima's grandmother to "do the honours." In India, the elders in the family are respected and seeking their guidance in such a matter is considered to be obligatory on the young people. But, "In India, parents take their time. It wasn't unusual for years to pass before the right name, the best possible name, was determined. Ashima and Ashoke can both cite examples of cousins who were not officially named until they were registered, at six or seven, in school."(N 25)

Mr. Wilcox, the complier of the hospital birth certificates, is at his wit's end in understanding the reason for the Gangulis not naming their child themselves. He wants to know the 'backup' name in case they do not like the name suggested by the grandmother. But "Ashima and Ashoke shake their heads. It has never occurred to either of them to question Ashima's grandmother's selection to disregard an elder's wishes in such a way." There is some nasty experience also in store for the immigrants. Prejudices exist among natives towards the emigrants and vice versa. Commenting on the American bias against the South Asian writers on the whole, Siddharth Shinghvi says, "Her work is often classified neatly as immigrant fiction, and she is feted for writing about upwardly mobile South Asians, almost as if such an entity were a quaint oddity unto itself. . . Perhaps such criticism inadvertently betrays the discrimination intrinsic to the American psyche, which identifies writers by colour or sexuality or gender, reducing writers, like tea leaves, to produce a wholly unpalatable brew, something to be ordered over the counter from one of its countless generic cafes."

Gogol feels sick when he has a look at it. Before long, he gets used to "cashiers in stores smirking at his parents' accent and of salesmen who prefer to direct their conversation go Gogol, as though his parents were either incompetent or deaf." (N 67) His father has, however, learnt to put up with this prejudiced behaviour of the Americans. Such maverick actions make the immigrants feel insecure and displaced and their inability to do anything in this regard makes them feel alienated from the mainstream society. Of course, the inter-cultural relations are not all dyed in negativity. The power that Indian parents, particularly those mothers wield over their children is an object of awe and respect for the Americans. Moushumi, as a teenager, felt duty – bound to call up her mother whenever she visited her friends without having previously informed her.

Similarly, the Indians also note the positive aspects of American life an episode is described in which Ashima's shopping bags are left behind in the train and are retrieved later when Ashoke phones up the Lost and Found Department of the company running the trains. They get back all the bags with the contents perfectly in place. This aspect of American life impresses Ashima no end and she talks about it to her friends over the next few days. "Only in America," the phrase which she relished repeating while referring to the return of her shopping bags on the subway train, also found another context – this time not so attractive one – but then things are not the same everywhere. If there is no lock on the door at New Hampshire, in New York, Ashoke's car gets broken into in just five minutes and their suitcase is stolen.

The Americans are not all formal. When Ashima returns from the hospital with her newborn baby, the landlord's family arrives and they celebrate their homecoming with champagne. They have also brought broccoli quiche and a basket of old baby clothes which their daughters had once worn. The Americans intentionally put in words to show them informal even if they cannot take it in the long run. So, before leaving, Judy advises Ashima to "holler" if she needs anything. (N 34) As Ashima goes about the market with her infant in the perambulator, she is accosted by many an American who smilingly congratulate her on being a mother and ask about the baby, its name, sex etc. (N 34) When the Montgomerys learn about the death of Ashima's father, they leave a vase of flowers at their door as a mark of condolence. (N 46) Over a period of time, inter – mixing of cultures is inevitable.

Ashoke learns to buy ready – made suits now, exchanges fountain pen for ball pen etc. "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, hot dogs. For Gogol's lunches they stand at the deli to buy cold cuts, and in the mornings Ashima makes sandwiches with bologna or roast beef. At his insistence, she concedes and makes him an American dinner once a week as a treat, Shake'n Bake Chicken or Hamburger Helper prepared with ground lamb" (N 65). Their food habits are changing and the Americanization process is led by the children. "For when Ashima and Ashoke close their eyes it never fails to unsettle them, that their children sound just like Americans, expertly conversing in a language that still at times confounds them, in accents they are accustomed not to trust" (N 65).

The Bengali community tries to educate their children. Ashima teaches Gogol Tagore's poem, names of deities and festivals etc. The Indian children are taught to call the family friend as 'uncle' or 'aunty.'

Being Bengalis, Gogol is groomed to call Maya Nandi as Maya Mashi. In the Bengali class arranged by the expatriate Bengali community, Gogol is taught to read and write the alphabet used by his ancestors. Being the son of Indian parents, Gogol is not supposed to take to American values. It is a matter of satisfaction for his parents that “Gogol does not date anyone in high school. He suffers quiet crushes which he admits to no one, on this girl or that girl with whom he is already friends. He does not attend dances or parties. . . His parents do not find it strange that their son doesn’t date, does not rent a tuxedo for his junior prom. They have never been on a date in their lives and therefore they see no reason to encourage Gogol, certainly not at his age.” (N 93).

Jhumpa Lahiri has presented relationships with varying degrees of acculturation of the second generation of Indian immigrants. The transformation cannot be viewed in terms of black and white, for they inhabit a liminal space of constant contestation and appropriation of the culture of the adopted country of their parents. In any process of acculturation, the possibility of change exists at all moments of life. So *The Namesake* gets hybrid characters rather than pure subjectivities. Even when Jhumpa Lahiri speaks of the difference, her representation of difference must not be hastily read as the reflection of given ethnic or cultural traits set in the fixed tablet of tradition.

The Namesake is a comparative study of different cultures of America and India. From the very beginning, the focus is on comparing the lifestyle, milieu, landscape, facilities, thinking, rituals etc. of the two countries. Most of the cross-cultural relationships involving the key protagonists – Gogol-Ruth, Gogol-Bridget, Gogol-Maxime, and Gogol-Moushmi have either not taken off the marital terrain or have, after experimenting with live-in relationship, been rocked midway.

Jhumpa Lahiri described not the experiences of migration, which vary from person to person depending upon the levels of education, age background and the point of entry. Acceptance or rejection by a host culture depends upon the value of the person, his use to the new society, his educational level and his social milieu. The same theme of migration with a different background of Gogol’s family creates an altogether different outlook. Jhumpa Lahiri successfully brings the researcher and reader closer to the migrant life through her novel.

Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Namesake* exposed the eternal quest for one’s true identity in the backdrop of the cross-cultural transactions. While Ashima portrait reveals through her experiences of long term difficulties anxiety to preserve an old culture in a new country. The failure of Gogol’s attempt to merge into a culture reveals the possibility of blending of two cultures through introspection and self-analysis. Gogol’s interest in reading Nikolai Gogol’s short stories an interest that he develops long after he has received the book. It is suggestive of his emergence from the state of self-alienation. A possible merging of two selves, namely the self of Gogol and that of Nikhil, is necessary for the process of self-analysis that Gogol undergoes to identify his real self.

Jhumpa Lahiri explored in several ways the difficulty of reconciling cross-cultural rituals around death and dying. The novel is a narrative about the assimilation of Indian Bengali family from Calcutta (present Kolkatta), the Ganguli’s into America from 1968 to 2000. The cultural dilemmas experienced by them and their America born children in different ways; the spatial, cultural and emotional dislocations suffered by them in their efforts to settle home in the new land. How different the experiences of Indian immigrants to the United States are from those of their American-born children, Jhumpa Lahiri says identity is always a difficult one for those who are culturally displaced, as immigrants are or those who grow up in two worlds simultaneously, as is the case for their children.

2. Conclusion

The Namesake thus exposes the eternal quest for one’s true identity in the backdrop of the cross – cultural transactions. While Ashima’s portrait reveals through her experiences of long – term difficulties an anxiety to preserve and old culture in a new country, the failure of Gogol’s attempt to merge into a

cultures through introspection and self – analysis. Gogol’s interest in reading Nikolai Gogol’s short stories, an interest that develop long after he has received the book, is suggestive of his emergence from the state of self alienation. A possible merging of two selves, namely the self of Gogol and that of Nikhil, is necessary from the process of self analysis that Gogol undergoes to identify his real self. Ultimately, Jhumpa Lahiri highlights human conditions that transcend all borders. *The Namesake* is a story of Ashoke, Ashima and Gogol’s life told in a very simple manner presenting a conflict that seems very mild on surface but had the capability to disturb an individual. Gogol’s search for identity ultimately ends with some sort of satisfaction to him and relieves him. *The Namesake* comes across as a nice blend of traditional, modern and postmodern approach that the writer takes up and successfully sums up.

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