

Search For Selfhood in Jhumpa Lahiri's The Namesake

Shrutika Chandranahu

Research Scholar

Dr. Savitri Tripathi

Abstract:

This paper focuses on the first generation and second-generation immigrant Indian Diaspora in reference to 'The Namesake' novel written by Jhumpa Lahiri. In this novel, Lahiri has delved into the psychic condition of the first-generation immigrants, Ashima and Ashoke and the second generations immigrants Gogol, Sonia and Moushumi. Jhumpa Lahiri was born in London and grew up in America; her parents were immigrants from India. The Namesake portrays Jhumpa Lahiri's diasporic experiences as a second-generation immigrant in the book. The Namesake was published in 2003. It is the story of the Ganguly family with parents who emigrated to the United States of America from Calcutta, their children Gogol and Sonia were raised in the U.S.

This novel portrays the identity crisis, inner psyche, alienation, clash of cultures, loneliness, search for selfhood, adjustment issues and diasporic sense that immigrants loose not only of their native land but also of their character. On one hand the characters in the novel try to maintain their identities and on the other hand they are adhered with their roots of Indian culture thereby inculcating the values of their home country. Relocating to an entirely new country challenges the family of rootlessness which they were going to face later. The search for self-identity is seen in the character as Akash and Ashima migrates to U.S. and their children Gogol and Sonia were born and raised in the U.S. Ashima tries to be one among the Americans and starts considering America as her home. Gogol – Nikhil was also fascinated by his peer group and society around him by the country doesn't accept him due to the skin and culture difference. When Gogol goes to college, he changes his name from Gogol to Nikhil so that his name doesn't reflect his bindings of his family. This shows that he tries to hide his own identity and find a new recognition in the place.

Keywords: Self-hood, Identity crisis, Diaspora, Rootlessness, Cultural Identity.

Jhumpa Lahiri's work and first novel, The Namesake portrays the picture of middle-class Bengali immigrants in America. The strive to follow Indian culture and inculcating American culture and in between keeping family tradition alive and an instinct for individual freedom and being called an 'outsider' and 'other' in their subconscious mind is highlighted in The Namesake. Characters in the novel are those who have migrated to foreign land with social and political restrictions. Though the novel is comprised of cultural transformations.

Diasporic writings unfolds the experiences of displacement and search for selfhood. It can be seen in the terms of dislocation and relocation. Due to which immigrants develops a feeling of loss. Here, the loss is the loss of tradition, cultural roots, belongingness etc. And the dispersed community faces dual loss. One is the loss of its native culture as he/she cannot get mingled with the new world. They shuffle in between these two cultures. The second loss is of the self-identity whereby losing own consciousness for belongingness and the sense of alienation takes place. Religion acts a marker of identity.

The novel unfolds the story of Ganguli family that echoes feeling of displacement and alienation, the second-generation immigrants, family relationship in diasporic dilemma, assimilation in new culture are all aspects of diasporic dilemma, assimilation of new culture are all the aspects of diasporic sensibility of Bengali immigrants presented in the novel. Loneliness, alienation and sense of displacement are some of the problems of the immigrants. As a part of diasporic community, immigrants feel nostalgic, displaced, isolated and alienated because of the absence of the native culture and language in foreign countries.

In the novel *The Namesake* the Bengali Indian couple Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli experiences with many extents. As the husband joins the work he is busy meeting his companions in his workplace and learning the new environment around him. It's the wife who undergoes disturbance and changes more than the husband as she is restricted only to the kitchen and the bedroom during her early stay in the US. When she is pregnant and is expecting her baby, she is hospitalized as there was no one to stay by her side, on the other hand, if she would have been in India, there would be many relatives to stand by her side. Staying in hospital, she recalls how her family relatives came to bid her off while they were boarding the aircraft for the United States. Now there is just Dr. Ashley (obstetrician) to examine her. The doctor, however tells her that everything is normal, but Ashima does not feel normal. Ever since she has arrived in the states nothing feels normal to Ashima. She is feeling the pain all by herself and she is anxious about motherhood in foreign land. Lying on bed, she thinks how her body is capable of bringing out a new life into the world just like her mother and grandmother have done. She is concerned that this is taking place far from her home in absence of those she loved.

The account of her hospitalization during her pregnancy, her labor pain highlights her emotional connectedness with India and sense of loneliness in an alien land. However, Ashoke does not experience the sense of loneliness and alienation as is experienced on Ashima's part. He never tries to know how sad Ashima is, that she goes into depression and keeps herself engaged in household chores.

The newborn baby becomes the center of Ashima's life and most of the time she's busy with the child. In this novel Ashima plays conventional role of Indian mother and wife. Ashima feels lonely after the death of Ashoke and decides to travel back to India.

Eventually Ashima learns to live lonely even in such atmosphere with confidence and courage. When her husband gets a research allowance and moves to Ohio from Massachusetts, Ashima chooses to stay back in Massachusetts, as she says that Ashoke would be busy all day at the lab and that she has nothing for her to do in Ohio.

The feeling of alienation and displacement aggravates when the immigrants find it impossible to share their joy and grief with relatives staying in their home country. Due to strong family bonds, they feel absence of each other. When one of the parent expatriates passes away he/she is unable to go back to India or to be with the family members, a feeling of guilt surrounds the immigrant. Thus, when Gogol departs Cleveland for Boston with his father ashes, his state of mind is described as;

'He knows now the guilt that his parents carried inside, at being able to do nothing when their parents had died in India, of arriving weeks, sometimes months later, when there was nothing to do. (Lahiri 2003: 179)

Jhumpa Lahiri portrays immigrant sense of alienation, search for selfhood and loneliness. Away from home, all members of Ganguli leads a lonely life. Ashoke is busy from morning till evening at the university. Ashima has to find ways to keep herself busy in order to avoid loneliness. Therefore, she spends time in her son's school library, where later she gets employment. When Ashoke moves out to Cleveland for work, she gets time for herself and makes Christmas card on her own. Gogol moves away from family, but he too suffers from loneliness and is unable to regain any female partner for love. At the end of the novel, we find Gogol alone and her mother travels alone. After Ashoke departs, Ashima loneliness engulfs her and the house stands cold. Gogol and Sonia live in their apartment and eventually she has to go back alone. Everything changing into flux does not comfort her.

Ashoke's death gives Ashima an opportunity to think about the predicament of the expatriates who left everything behind for their dream land. Lahiri raises a question about the reason for immigration as she asked whether to make a better life or to die in foreign land. At first, Ashima does not wish to go to India but wants to stay back where her husband took his last breath. This shows the emotions and family bonds in the life of Indians.

Although Ashima dresses in sarees and makes bun out of her long hair, she is not the same Ashima who had once left Calcutta. Her American passport, driving license, social security card everything has changed but nothing can reveal the journey so far and the changes that she has undergone. She tried her best to cultivate a sense of balance between India and America in her children.

Gogol also suffers from the sense of alienation and diasporic situation. When he goes on a school trip and misses the graves of his ancestors in a cemetery. He understands that his body would never reside in any land nor would there be any stone indicating his name, as in India after death bodies are cremated. Ashima was shocked when she founds that her son was taken to the graveyard as Indians tends to keep away their children from things related to death. Gogol had many broken relationships and an unsuccessful marriage. Due to different cultural background Gogol and his parents suffers from sense of psychological and sociological displacement. This diasporic sensibility is not just for Indians but Americans too suffers from sense of alienation and displacement when they go to another country. As Gogol feels alien in American culture, Moushumi's ex-fiancé Graham also feels alienated. When he visits Calcutta to meet her relatives. He finds the Bengali culture of customs awkward and dislikes the lack of freedom to drink openly and expresses his love for Moushumi in front of her family members. He's unable to adjust and therefore breaks up before wedding. After the death of his father Gogol is more remorseful and he shaves his head and follows all his traditions. Maxine also suffers from alienation when she visits India for Gogol's father funeral and the cultural gap brought differences between the two.

Conclusion:

Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* deals with the theme of diasporic sensibilities of a Bengali family living in U.S. The work emphasizes on the dislocation on the part of Gogol as his name heightens his identity crisis in his foreign land. This also emphasizes Ashima's journey from nostalgic alien to transnational citizen. It also focuses on diasporic sensibility of Ashoke, Gogol, Sonia and Moushumi. After the death of his father, Gogol feels alone and misses his father presence. Sudden demise of his father shatters him and thereby he follows Indian culture and perform his father's last rites in Indian rituals. Gogol's married life too does not work well and it ends up in divorce. As his wife Moushumi had an affair with a scholar. With such painful experiences, he decides to go back to his mother and take care of her. At this phase of his life, he understood the importance of Indian culture, tradition and love for his mother land. Being broken after his unsuccessful marriage, his father's sudden demise, seeing mother as a widow makes him feel lonely in the new world. Gogol's journey under the name of Nikhil changes his identity and recognition but later he realizes that shuffling between the two culture he has to maintain two identities as the location changes. An immigrant's culture is such deep rooted in person's psychology and of the society around them which results in hybrid identity.

Works cited:

Lahiri, Jhumpa. *The Namesake*, New Delhi: Harper Collins Publishers, 2004.