Re-defining ‘Identity’: A Critique of Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Namesake*

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**Abstract**: In the era of globalization when the geographical boundaries are being razed down, the movement of population from one country to another for greener pastures has become a common phenomenon. And this renders the affected people displaced on account of their removal from their roots and cultural moorings, and they stand exposed to entirely an alien culture. This process of dislocation from their roots and their endeavor to be a part of the adopted culture make the immigrants go through a journey of psychological dilemmas and emotional disturbances in coming to terms with their status as an individual as well as unit. Jhumpa Lahiri herself being an immigrant very pointedly discusses the conflicts and anxieties faced by the dislocated expatriates in the US in her novel *The Namesake* where she tries to locate the individuals trapped between the pulls of the opposite cultures—‘home’ and adopted—and narrates the inward battles faced by them. The present paper is an attempt to discuss the problems faced by the culturally dislocated people of diaspora and their efforts to arrive at homogeneity with regard to their cultural adaptability and construction of a new identity in the ‘melting pot’ world.

**Key words**: expatriate, dislocation, immigrant, culture, identity, assimilation

I. Introduction

The issues related to the existence of human beings, their place and identity in individual capacity as well as their being part of the larger unit—family or society—have been explored, discussed, and analyzed by the artists and the writers from time to time. It is but natural for any writer to be influenced by the social milieu of his time, and this makes him to respond to the questions popping around him, and the displacement of a large number of people from their native place, resulting in their endless emotional and psychological turmoil is one of them. The migration of population from one place to another has always been in vogue since time immemorial, but for varied reasons—for safety and security during war or riots, for livelihood or political asylum or for career prospects. This migration of people from one place to another does not amount to their physical movement or dislocation only; rather the affected population carries with it. consciously or unconsciously, its own cultural distinctiveness comprising customs, race, caste, religion, geography, language, myths, beliefs or prejudices, food preferences and habits, rituals, festivals and what not, and all these remain rooted in one’s subconsciousness on account of the grooming or growth of a human being in a particular set-up of society or clan, and this comes to be known as one’s ‘identity’. This voluntary or forced displacement or dislocation has become the focal point of discussion world-over since the time the world has come to be known or perceived as a global village. The writers like Salman Rushdie, Anita Desai, Arundhati Rai, Rohinton Mistry, V S Naipaul and Jhumpa Lahiri who themselves feel an affinity with displaced people on account of similarity in their experiences in their life, repeatedly deal with the issue of immigrants’ belongingness and identity in a foreign land.

The whole world over the recent times has witnessed an impetus in the migration of people from the third world—poor developing countries of Asia and Africa—to the first world—developed and rich countries of Europe and America, the land of abundance. Every year, large multitudes of people reach this enlightened land in search of greater opportunities for career making or quality-life, and the writers, some of them being a part of this displaced group have painstakingly recorded the predicament faced by these immigrants in their works and Jhumpa Lahiri’s literary canvas is filled with the longings and pulls of the migrated people. In her novel *The Namesake* Lahiri deals with the issues of dislocation and re-location of human beings, clash and reconciliation of cultures and finally the question of identity faced by the expatriates far removed from their native land, and that’s why the book is considered a discourse about the ‘immigrants’ experience and the clash of cultures in the US.” (Rajgopalan).

II. Discussion

Jhumpa Lahiri captures the feelings of lonely, alienated, emotionally dried-up individuals, dragging their feet in two different cultural, geographical territories, and tries to locate them, both physically and psychologically, in a
fast changing world where all barriers—racial, cultural, national—appear crumbling, giving a new definition to the concept of ‘home’ and ‘identity’. As a true representative of the melting pot generation, Jhumpa Lahiri’s own spatial as well as timeline journey puts her in a situation which allows her to record what passes through the consciousness of the migrants—their psychological, inward battles and harrowing experiences in coping up with the not-so-receptive native culture, and finally their agreeing to a truce so far as the hostilities between the two divergent cultures is concerned. Like many other writers of diaspora, Lahiri herself had to face the questions related to her parental lineage, her birth, her cultural roots and identity, and home and this helps her in understanding the psyche of the displaced people, and the result is The Namesake. The novelist was born in England of Indian parents, pursued her education in the US, and marries her Spanish-American boyfriend and adopts the new place as her ‘home’. The novel covers the two generations— the first generation that leaves Calcutta in Bengal in India and arrives in the US, like many other millions of people in search for better life prospects and the second which is born and brought up on the soil of their American Dream. While the former feels the pangs of separation from their cultural roots, the latter does not feel any such sort of bonding with the past of their parents and look forward to the land of dreams as their own.

Lahiri’s concern remains with the dislocation and location, cultural/generational divide and assimilation, nothingness and identity of an expatriate Bengali family. Ashima joins her husband in Cambridge, Massachusetts, US after her marriage with Ashoke, who harbouring the dream of being a part of the American Success-Myth, is pursuing her doctoral degree, and later joins there as a faculty member. While Ashoke easily adapts to the ways of his dreamland, Ashima faces discomfort at the foreign soil, the land which somehow later on becomes her second or adopted ‘home’. Because of her own ingrained sense of propriety, she gets stifled in her new sojourn and develops antagonism towards the openness prevailing in America. The sense of loneliness grips her; the mood of nostalgia sets in as she starts re-visiting her past in Bengal. That’s why, Ashima “keeps her ears trained, between the hours of twelve and two, for the sound of the postman’s footsteps on the porch, followed by the soft click of the slot in the door.” (Lahiri, 36)

Jhumpa describes how the issue of ‘exile and identity’ becomes main cause of restlessness and disturbance in the ties among the family members of the expatriates on the one hand and with the social, cultural milieu of the alien land on the other; even the word ‘alien’ appeals differently to the first and the second generation. The Bengali couple Ashoke and Ashima has to confront the question of belongingness in the US. While Ashoke appears to have adapted himself to the ways of the Western culture, Ashima a traditional Indian woman finds it difficult in coming to terms with the American culture. In the late sixties while going through labour pains, the memories of her ‘home’ haunt her; she reminisces about her home in Calcutta and family members which would have been around her had she been in India. While in hospital she is overwhelmed with the feeling of homesickness due to loss of physical and emotional touch with her own place and people. She recalls the ‘clock time’ in India and the activities her family members might have been engrossed in at that point of time when she finds herself “unmonitored and unobserved by those she loved…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 sparse.” (6) She cannot reconcile to the cultural, social mores of the migrated country and gets anxious over the naming process of their child. As the parents have to get the name of their child registered before leaving the hospital, and the letter containing the name of the child from his grandparents has not come so far, a tradition in India where the grandparents name the child in the family, the feeling of detachment starts sitting in Ashima’s mind. Her preference for the Bengali food, rituals, her efforts in making Gogol understand the Bengali stories, her disapproval of Gogol’s preference for American life style—all this shows Ashima’s disapproval for the Western culture. The sense of nostalgia grips her completely and this further compounds her loneliness and makes her feel more about her displacement: “For being a foreigner, 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 once been ordinary life, only to discover the previous life has been vanished, replaced by something more complicated and demanding.” (49)

The parent-children divide becomes very much visible with the life-journey of the Gangulies; Ashoke and Ashima constitute the first generation while Nikhil Gogol, Sonia and Moushumi the second, and the difference with regard to their roots as well as American style is perceptible from their responses and preferences on more than one occasion. Ashoke and Ashima feel more attracted towards their roots, the place of their birth, their own home, and don’t approve of the western life style for their children. Ashima is unable to connect herself with the new culture, unable to identify herself with foreign soil, and expresses her frustration: “Hurry up and finish your [Ashoke’s] degree…I don’t want to raise Gogol alone in this country. It’s not right. I want to go back.” (33) The ingrained value system has its stamp on everything they do or think about—be it their beliefs or decisions related to the marriage of their children, the naming of their kids or their reservation about the liberal ways of Gogol, their desire to remain clung to their root or their resistance to the openness of the West, their kids’ love for space and privacy. But at the same time, they try to shun their rigidity in adopting the ways of the new culture and gradually become accustomed to them, and imbibe some traits of the new culture, and try to identify with the birth place of their kids, without breaking off from their roots. This characteristic of imbibing the
diverse cultural strings into one-self, argues Rushdie, invites attention of the diasporic writers where the
delineation of the predicament of the immigrants becomes their obsession: “…our identity is at once plural and
partial…sometimes we feel that we straddle two cultures… it is a fertile territory to occupy for the writers,”
(Rushdie, 15) and Lahiri explores this arena extensively in her works.
The children representing the second generation do not feel any bondage with their roots or ancestry; they don’t
look beyond their present or the place of their birth. Gogol and Sonia are more at home in the American ways;
they have become completely westernized in their outlook as well as in their life-styles. The independence-
loving junior Gangulies have scant respect for the customs followed by their parents. Even a visit to their roots,
nay the roots of their parents, unsettle them; they find India and ‘Indianness’ oppressive. They love space, a
characteristic of independent life where the questions related to moral impropriety are not asked. Gogol’s seeing
of many girls in his life before his marriage to the girl of Indian origin, his liking for the parents of her girlfriend
Maxine, Sonia’s marriage with a half Chinese-half Jewish boy, speak of their flirting with the new cultural
ethos. They never feel at ease with what their parents, and later Ashima alone expect them from.
The concept of ‘home’ is perceived differently by the members of the Ganguli family. For Ashok and Ashima,
India remains the ‘home’ whereas America a temporary refuse; on the other hand, Gogol and Sonia view
America as their ‘homeland’, a place they belong to while India for them is a foreign soil. That’s why, Ashima
after the death of her husband prefers spending greater part of the year in India just to keep herself attached to
her origin, and expects same from her children. But Gogol and Sonia never feel at home in India, because they
cannot adjust themselves to the Indian ways—constantly moving from place to place and surrounded by family
members or relatives, lack of privacy and space. For Ashoke and Ashima, their coming to India is a
homecoming, an effort to recharge themselves emotionally; for their children, their journey means a visit to a
strange land with which they cannot connect emotionally or culturally.
The first generation functions as a link between the two divergent cultures and this helps in diluting animosity
within, and paves the way for pluralistic existence or homogeneity. The dislocation felt by the parents and the
children is entirely on account of their exposure to the type of culture during their birth and grooming. Initially,
it is the older generation which tries to make peace with the situation ostensibly for the sake of children;
Ashima’s celebration of Christmas, her longing to get her Kids well versed in English, her approval though
reluctantly of Gogol’s relationships with the English girls before his marriage with Moushumi and Sonia’s
relationship with a half-Jewish, half-Chinese boy—all these speak of her alignment with the American culture
and acceptance of it. Gogol reminisces: “It was for him [Gogol], for Sonia that his parents had gone to the
trouble of learning these customs.” (286) The immigrants’ longing for getting hold of both the cultures—native
and adopted—underlines the modern day characteristic of pluralism or trans-nationalism and forming of new
identity which can be attributed to the people of diaspora. The traces of human being’s deep-seated attachment
with their roots and their culture get manifested in their discussion time and again; similarly their concern about
the political situation as well as their cultural recognition in far-off land find place their mind and discourse.: “They
argue riotously over the films of Ritwik Ghatak verses those of Satyajit Roy…, for hours they argue
about the politics of America, a country in which none of them is eligible to vote.” (38)
Further, Gogol’s abhorrence with his name till he comes to know about the real story behind his getting this
name and his decision to get himself renamed as ‘Nikhil Gogol Ganguli’ instead of getting him away from his
cultural roots as per his wishes, rather brings him close to his ancestral roots, because ‘Nikhil’ in itself contains
the Indian identity, though Gogol is unaware of the fact. Interestingly, his effort to assert himself with his own
identity ultimately bestows on him the very identity he despises. Jhumpa through this act of Gogol wants to
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show that no one can be divested of his roots, and here she appears speaking about her own life journey. This
becomes true when Ashok reveals how he came to be known as Gogol after the name of the Russian writer
whose book helped in saving the life of Gogol’s father in a train accident in Calcutta. A feeling of guilt sets in
Gogol’s mind and his attitude towards the roots of his parents or rather his own ancestry undergoes a change; he
becomes more inclined towards his parental lineage and the cultural background of his parents. The novelist
further points out that the youths’ attraction or love for the customs of their birth-place proves a mirage, because
they have to re-invent the connection with the land of their parents when they are asked about their origin and
associated with their ethnicity, with a tinge of racism, as Pamela’s comments to Gogol suggest: “…you’re an
Indian…I’d think the climate wouldn’t affect you given your heritage,” (156) though Gogol wants to
disassociate himself with his past, and snaps back: “ I am from Boston.” (156) This re-adjustment or
transformation indicates towards what Homi Bhabha advocates “hybrid culture” (Bhabha, 1) for the modern day
placed disposition that has to remain entangled in conflicts and confrontations with the adopted cultural
mores. For Ashima, her children become the connecting link with the two cultures, and somehow make her shun
her reservations towards the country of her children’s birth. She belongs to where her kids belong and this
belonging to both the cultures—East and Wes—a “cultural pluralism” (Min Song, 347) in the eyes of Min Song,
becomes the talking point of the novel.
The narrative running through different generations and different cultures provides a way for assimilation or
being a part of the multicultural, multi-identity world. The development and technological advancements in the
first world have opened new vista of jobs and opportunities and has made man a globe trotter; the lure of money and better life facilities make him reach the places of plenty, and for this he is ready to make certain comprises though not completely. All the immigrants have to face the situation which may be inimical to them culturally, socially but not economically. The novel also exemplifies the test of human beings’ will of adaptability as well as their inclination to get assimilated to the ways of the adopted culture, because a culture never remains static; it is always in a continuous state, and assimilates what comes its way, evolving and metamorphosing into a new distinctiveness, though not the final one. Edward Said while defining culture says: “Culture is a concept that includes a refining and elevating element, each society’s reservoir of the best that has been known and thought, as Mathew Arnold put it in the 1860’s. Arnold believed that culture palliates, if it does not altogether neutralizes, the ravage of a modern, aggressive, mercantile and brutalizing urban experience…In time culture comes to be associated, often aggressively, with the nation or the nation or the state, this differentiates ‘us from them’ almost always with some degree of identity, and a rather combative one at that…” (Said, xii)

III. Conclusion

The Namesake suggests that amid all sorts of discordance arising out of the dislocation of the people, leading to the inevitable juxtaposition as well as the clash of the two different classes of cultures, become the cause of a new sort of ‘hybrid’ culture, and this assimilation and integration can become instrumental in locating the displaced people and easing out their torment as well as their dilemma as who they are and where they belong to. Though it is very difficult for an individual but the necessity of the time—his career prospects or the quench of the emotional thirst—offers attractive bait for the affected expatriates; they have to maintain a fine balance between the two—past as well as present—and this process finally metamorphosing into a new culture or identity which always remain in a state of flux: “Identities are never total and complete in themselves, like orderly pathways built from crazy paving.” (John McLeod, 219) Man’s dislocation from his roots has always been a continuous process; he can be located culturally in transience, and this continuous process of transformation which has been defined as “Being to Becoming” (Hall, 70) aptly characterises the today’s diaspora world. Being dislocated becomes located and finally metamorphoses into a new culture, and acceptance of this reality can bring truce so far as discordance or the hostility between the two cultures is concerned. Lahiri’s own life-journey is a testament to the modern day concepts of ‘multiculturalism’ and ‘multi-identities’ of an individual where the boundaries of the globe have shrinking with every passing moment and the whole human race is trying to find a space for itself.

Works cited