

Memory and Binary Identities: Diasporic Consciousness in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*

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Abstract:

Migration happens due to varied reasons. It may occur for trade and commerce or it may be coerced, voluntarily or involuntarily migration. In the past, people from third world nations were taken on as indentured labourers to work in the foreign countries. They were forced to work there as slaves. It was an involuntarily migration that used to happen in those days. Nowadays people are voluntarily leaving their countries for the immense opportunities that any foreign nation offers them. The present paper will focus on immigrants' issues, different affiliations of first generation and second-generation immigrants, the role of memory in the lives of immigrants and changing dynamics of native and foreign identity. It will also focus on how the memories of the native land haunt immigrants living in different parts of the world. It will also show how the immigrants feel alienated when their identity become fragmented because of the indifferent attitudes of people in both of their homes. Through this paper, all these issues will be examined to study Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*.

Keywords: Memory, diaspora, native land, foreign land, immigrants.

Introduction:

The Banyan tree has thrust down roots in soil which is stony, sandy, marshy and has somehow drawn sustenance from diverse unpromising conditions. Yet the banyan tree itself has changed; its similarity to the original growth is still there, but it has changed in response to its different environment.

Man is on the move since the beginning of civilization. People migrated to other countries as nomads, hunters, traders, cultural carriers, soldiers and exiles. Consequently, these changes have shaped today's world politically, economically, socially and culturally. It reinterprets the concept of nation, home, identity, transnational immigration, border crossing, heterogeneous nationalities, multiple identities, dual citizenship and acculturation in more than one nation has assumed new meanings. Diasporas or the migration of people from one's homeland exists in different parts of the world.

Defining the term diaspora:

Etymologically speaking, the term 'Diaspora' is taken from the word 'diasperian'- 'dia' means across and 'sperian' means to sow or scatter seeds. The word 'diaspora' was originally used by the Greeks. The Hebrew definition for diaspora is 'galut' which means 'exile'. It can be seen as enforced exile, collective suffering, a strong sense of identity and longing for home. Diaspora has multiple connotations: cruelty, devastation, hostility, loss, exile and return. Before World War II, Diaspora stood for dispersal and migration of Jews to different countries after the Babylonian exile. It explains their yearning for home. But world war II led to the formation of State of Israel in 1948. So the Jewish longing for home took new political and symbolic overtones. Diaspora has been expanded to include scattering of people with common origin, background and beliefs who live and work in other countries and continue to maintain ties with the motherland or home (4). It explicates the movement and immigration of communities from one place to other due to varied reasons. The migration may be based on economic, social or political reasons. It can be also for trade, commerce, religion, labour, expatriates or refugees, exile (forced or voluntary). They migrate in search of better life but they all share some common diasporic experiences.

Generally, people migrate to foreign countries, however, migration can also be from village to cities. Migration on a large scale to cities is chiefly due to necessity and adverse conditions at villages. They move to cities for the purpose of employment and better wages. These migrations are voluntary as they leave their home for greener pastures. All these common experiences or differences are based on the conditions of migration and the time period which they intend to spend in chosen foreign country. Immigrants mostly suffer from the pain of being far away from home, the memories of their homeland and leaving everything behind agonize their mind (Pandey, *Indian* 119). In this context William Safran observes: "they continue to relate personally or vicariously, to the homeland in a way or another, and their ethnic-communal consciousness and solidarity are importantly defined by the existence of such a relationship" (3).

Migrants long to return home. Safran in his paper "Diasporas in Modern societies: Myths of Homeland and Return" contends that diasporic consciousness is an "intellectualization of an existential condition, a sad condition that is ameliorated by an imaginary homeland to which one hopes one will some day return" (119). The shift of home from homeland to foreign land and anxieties about homelessness and impossibility of going back are the major concerns of diasporic writers (120). These concerns remain with communities' attachment with one's homeland, but the attachment can be countered by desire for sense of belongingness to new home. Some of the Indian diasporic writers base their stories on India to understand their relationship with ancestral land. In their works, they explore the theme of 'Indianness' in their own way. They try to find how they are different from the practices and prejudices that are still prevalent in Indian society. The continuity of such conscious and unconscious

connection affects their perception regarding native home. Some disown their so-called “Indianness, some grudgingly, sometimes unwillingly, sometimes accept it apologetically, while others proudly support and appreciate it. The search for identity and part-identity goes on and finds expression in their concerns related to diaspora” (121).

Indian Diaspora:

India Diaspora has become an important field of study and research in the recent years. Indians wherever they are “never severed their umbilical cord from their homeland and have maintained a connection with their ancestral land in terms of culture and religion” (19). It refers to population living outside India especially those that have migrated to foreign land and in due time renounced their Indian citizenship to acquire a new one and now belong only to the country of their migration. They sometimes trace their origin from another land. Bhiku Parekh commenting on the nature of the Indian diaspora comments:

The diasporic Indian is like the banyan tree, the traditional symbol of the Indian way of life, he spreads out his roots in several soils, drawing nourishment from one when the rest dry up. Far from being homeless, he has several homes, and that is the only way he has increasingly come to feel at home in the world (19).

The first evidence of migration is in 5th century BC when the colonialists from western India settled in Ceylon, now, Sri Lanka. The emigration of Indians to other countries has long standing history. They migrated to different countries for different reasons and their experiences in these foreign countries range from trauma to felicitations and from nostalgia to amnesia. They adopt host land’s values and customs as well as separate themselves from one’s native home and values. The effect which they have made as well as influence that they have received in a multicultural society has either made a good reputation and brought honour to their nation or make them feel marginalized and given them a fractured psyche. The difference between host land and homeland is based on the conditions of migration and their period of stay aboard. Cultural preservation and economic integration are the common motifs which can be found in Indian diasporic people. When people move to a new place, they carry with them socio-cultural baggage which consists of social identity, a set of religious beliefs, inculcated norms and values that governs family and kinship ties, food habits and language. The community that moves to host land often finds it difficult to accept the foreign culture. In the process of managing things in a new land, they are introduced to new ways and values. It brings change in the value system of cultures that exists side by side and becomes the main reason behind acculturation and assimilation.

S.L. Sharma has identified three trends of adaptation of Indian immigrants, “assimilation, cultural preservation with economic integration, and ethnic polarization for the purpose of power civilizations” (39). The most common pattern among Indians living abroad is the cultural preservation with economic integration. The concept of sandwich culture on the basis of ‘Insulator’ and ‘Aperture’ model has been developed by Atal (37). According to him, efforts are made by outsiders to become insiders in order to merge with new identity and gain acceptance from host society. Such apertures are inter-marriage, adopting new food habits and language. Insulatory mechanism enables them to retain their mother tongue and offers provision of separate educational facilities for children by opening schools in the host country, continuation of food habits and taboos associated with eating and retention of dress patterns particularly that of womenfolk (40). When immigrants do not assimilate or amalgamate and adopt only some aspects of their new home, they develop double identity (Coughlin 39). It leads to the mutation of their culture and it becomes ‘Sandwich culture’. This attempt of preserving one’s own culture has given birth to ‘plural society’ which records diaspora as an experience of dislocation and relocation.

The Indian Diasporic literature includes works of all those writers who are living abroad and deal with Indian culture and various concerns of immigrants. It caters to the emotional turmoil, displacement, schism, uprootedness, longing for the native land, racial discrimination, cultural differences and dual identities. These writers can be classified into two categories: the first category includes writers born in India, who later migrated to other countries, carrying their culture and tradition abroad; the second category includes writers of Indian descent, born and raised in a foreign land. The earlier diasporic writers have a strong sense of belongingness for their native country, but the latter ones feel themselves rootless as their contact with their homeland and origin is limited. It is their parents who weave a matrix of experiences of their home land and through these translated relationships; they are connected to the land of their ancestors. They create an environment of Indian culture at home and try to inculcate Indian values in their children. Adesh Pal makes a clear distinction between the two:

The first generation has strong attachment with the country of their origin. From the second generation onwards ties with the homeland gradually get replaced by those with the adopted country. Food, clothes, language, religion, music, dance, myths, legends, customs of individual community etc. become the markers of identity. These are retained, discarded or adopted differently at different times and places (11).

Raja Rao, G.V.Desani, Salman Rushdie, V.S. Naipaul, Robinton Mistry, Amitav Ghosh, Hari Kunzru, Jhumpa Lahiri, Chitra Divakaruni Banerjee, Bharati Mukherjee and Meera Syal are the important diasporic writers who deal basically with the conditions of disconnection, wistfulness, isolation and cross-cultural issues. The novels of old generation deal mainly with Indian themes but they seldom talk about experience of an expatriate, while the second-generation writers depict the lives of both first- and second-generation immigrants living in foreign lands (Asthana 4).

Meaning of the word memory:

The memories of the native home play an important role in diasporic writing. The memories are evoked by the time they had spent in their native home. Longing for home and nostalgia overpowers a diasporic writer. They may change under the influence of new culture but these memories take the form of imagination and nostalgia. In the fictional world of diasporic writers, different

worlds and cultures negotiate with each other whether real or imaginary. The border line that separate immigrants from others is thin and faint; the two worlds mix and merge but they are not easily noticeable by them as the perspectives keep changing. These different worlds are a mixture of memory and desire of bygone times and the desire to go back. Many a times, there is a desire to return 'home' which remains a haunting experience in case of expatriates. Writers like Hari Kunzru see "India as a country where his relatives live and where he frequently comes for a holiday or to attend family functions" (47). Agha Shahid Ali argues that "he does not think that relocation has changed his thoughts and personality" (47). Vikram Seth like other diasporic writers looks back at native home that is left behind, a home which gets lost in the darkness of memories.

Discussion about the novel:

Jhumpa Lahiri was born as Nilajana Sudeshana in London. Her parents are of Indian origin. Later in 1969, her family moved to America where her father worked as a librarian in a university. She graduated in English literature from Barnard College and obtained M.A. in English and PhD in Renaissance studies from Boston University. She published her first short-story collection, *Interpreter of Maladies* in 1999 and won several awards including the Pulitzer Prize for her works in 2000. She also has won the New Yorker Prize for the Best Book in addition to the Pen/ Hemingway Award. She has published her stories in *The New Yorker*, *Agni* and *Story Quarterly*. *The Namesake*, her first novel was followed by her short-story collection *Unaccustomed Earth*. *The Namesake* was one of the national bestsellers and has been named best book of the year (2003) by the *USA Today*. Lahiri belongs to the second generation of Indian immigrants. She understands the problems of young generation of Indian immigrants who are sandwiched between two cultures. Their parents want them to retain their traditional values while the children feel fascinated towards western ways and culture. She explores the ideas of cultural identity through her writing. Her works are mostly based on Indian background and portrays the life of second-generation immigrants, "The conflicts which her characters face such as struggles with interpersonal relationships and stress of everyday existence are universal themes to which everyone can relate" (3).

The Namesake narrates the tortuous journey of Gogol Ganguli from childhood to early adulthood. He is an American born child of Indian immigrants whose name carries the stigma of Bengali practice of nomenclature restrained by American law. Through Gogol's dilemma, the writer points out paradoxes of identity construction for second-generation 'desis' who have confused familial and affinitive connections with their present and past. Both Gogol and his sister Sonia are born and raised in America and feel frustrated at being different from the people they know. During adolescence, Gogol strives to fit in with American society and wants to be a part of it. However, he faces rejection. Although he is a natural citizen of America, but Americans never treat him as their own.

For second generation immigrants, the question of distinctiveness remains a difficult concern. When Gogol attends a panel discussion about Indian novels written in English, the main concern of the discussion revolves around the identity problem of ABCD. Gogol is least interested in the panel discussion, "Technologically speaking, ABCD are unable to answer the question "where are you from?" the sociologist on the panel declares". Gogol has never heard the term ABCD. He eventually gathers that it stands for American-Born confused deshi. He realizes that the C could also stand for conflicted". Gogol is aware of the fact that 'deshi' is a generic term for Indians. He knows that his parents and their family friends refer to India as their 'desh'. He himself never thinks of India as his 'desh'.

Memory and nostalgia play an important role in the case of first-generation immigrants. They retain all the memories of natal home and wait anxiously for their frequent visits to homeland. Frequent visits home remains a common factor among every immigrant. Fisher points out, "this is particularly true among those Indians who hope to finally return to India. Constantly divided in a mental voyage between two countries, they seem to be caught in a state of enigma, a state of in-betweenness". The perceptions of first and second generation regarding native home is quite different from each other. The children never feel the same for original home as their parents feel for the homeland. Gogol's return from India to Boston symbolizes his escape from Indian values. He unwillingly accepts Bengali values and customs. However, after their father's death, Gogol and Sonia seem to obey the rituals of Indian religious ceremony, "It was a Bengali's son duty to shave his head in the wake of a parent's death". He fulfills all the ceremonies related to his father's last rites. It appears that he is beginning to accept the native values and cultural traditions.

Conclusion:

Each character in the novel undergoes a complete transformation. At the end of the novel, characters like Ashima, Gogol and others experience identity crisis. Immigrants try to manage in a new environment and desperately seek acceptance which they fail to get because of their ethnicity and native identity. They are devoid of any fixed identity and fail to decide which identity to choose or which to leave. They have to leave one identity to get acceptance. The feelings of estrangement and nostalgia overcome them as they are unable to accept alien land as home. Nostalgia and longing for the land serves a bridge for remaining in touch with one's ancestry and tradition. An immigrant may acquire a nationality of a foreign land but their heart and soul remain grounded in the soil of the native land, a place of origin and one's motherland. Values and customs are inseparable from one's identity and this novel is an affirmation of this fact. This novel also demonstrates the significance of memories and a sense of belongingness to one's native land in enabling one to remain connected to one's heritage and values.

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