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From Alienation to Reconciliation:

Critical Negotiations of Cultural Identities in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*

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Abstract: Pertaining to globalization and resultant cultural hybridity, languages and cultures are transformed when they come in contact with each other. Dealing with a quest for the stable identity and a search for a certain sense of belongingness, Diasporic literature is preoccupied with elements of nostalgia, a constant sense of guilt and a state of homelessness. This paper aims at exploring such discords and dissonances in the characters settled abroad in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*. Narrating a tale of a Bengali couple settled in America, this novel deals with an invariable inbetweenness between two entirely conflicting cultures and a struggle of the characters through these linguistic and cultural barriers towards the attainment of their identity and self-realization. Along with the discords of these first generation emigrants, the novel also exposes the alienation, rebellion, displacement of the second generation emigrants born and brought up in the new land which their parents would never let them call their home. All such individuals, torn between two nations and two identities, and their conflicting loyalties are manifested in Lahiri's protagonist, Gogol Ganguli, who struggles with his name and identity throughout the novel. This paper exhibits the discord in the novel due to cultural disorientation and tangled ties between two generations and its eventual negotiation and resolution by the end.

Index Terms -Identity, Diaspora, Displacement, Negotiation, Cultural hybridity

Issues of cultural hybridity, discord and identity are central to the debates on diaspora over the past decade and have not only framed many theoretical debates in sociology, cultural studies and literary studies but also have been demonstrated in narrative forms in various novels by Indian writers living and writing from abroad. The word *Diaspora* has evolved into a buzzword that expresses the movement of the population from their original homeland and the resultant crisis at ideological level among them. Bill Ashcraft, Gareth Griffith and Helen Tiffin in *The Empire writes back* states that a major feature of postcolonial literature is the concern with placement and displacement. This immigrant experience and the identity issues linked to the experience of migration becomes an aspect of post-colonialism as well.

Such an invariable inbetweenness between two constant conflicting cultures and a struggle through the linguistic and cultural barriers underlines the storyline of *Jhumpa Lahiri's* maiden novel *The Namesake*. The novel takes the *Ganguli* family from their tradition-bound life in Calcutta to their fraught transformation into Americans. Telling the tale of a Bengali couple settled in America, the book deals with their inner conflicts, immigrant experience, cultural clashes and continual yearning for their homeland. Since, the Diaspora experience takes differently on different people, on one hand; there is *Ashoke*, who adapts far less warily than his wife, *Ashima*, who, on the other hand, resists all things American and pines for her family. "Without a single grandparent or parent or uncle or aunt at her side, the baby's birth, like most everything else in America, feels

somehow haphazard, only half true” (Lahiri 26). She can't forget her family in Bengal and “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” (Lahiri 46). Difficulties in adaption in a new place, a constant longing for returning home, a schizophrenic sense of double identities and a certain lack of sense of belongingness in the new place, remains the dominant diasporic experience. Lahiri has portrayed such clashing identities in her novel where Ashima and Ashoke become Monu and Mithu as soon as they enter their own country. "Within minutes, before their eyes Ashoke and Ashima slip into bolder, less complicated version of themselves, their voices louder, their smiles wider, revealing a confidence Gogol and Sonia never see on Pemberton Road.” (Lahiri 71)

Diaspora experiences include not only the crisis in those people who chose to migrate from their native place to a new strange world, but also the alienation, rebellion, displacement of second generation immigrant born and brought up in this new strange world which their parents would never let them call their home. The Indian culture and value system they cling to at homes, loses its bearings as soon they get out in the American society. The way Ashima and Ashoke could never feel at home with American life and culture, their children found it difficult to accommodate with the traditional lifestyle during their trips to India where “Every few weeks there is a different bed to sleep in, another family to live with, and a new schedule to learn”. (Lahiri 72). Lahiri's Gogol represents the cultural and identity crisis in such second generational immigrants and their constant attempt to find roots and placement. Named after a Russian writer Nikolai Gogol, the name and its identity becomes a major issue for Gogol and he struggles throughout the novel with his dual identity - American and Bengali. “ ‘It wasn't me’, it hadn't been Gogol who'd kissed Kim” (83), conflicted between not only two nations, but also between two names, he changes his name to get rid of all the connotations associated with the origin of his name. Nikolai Gogol was considered an eccentric man and Gogol does not want to be linked with Gogol, the author. However, it is till he does not know the true origin of his name. He marries Moushmi, another Bengali immigrant who has taken up her refuse in a third language and a third culture of France, escaping the discords and dynamics of Bengal and America. It is this sense of alienation and homelessness that brings the two together, which however, couldn't keep them together for long and their marriage failed. Throughout the novel, Gogol suffers the burden of his heritage, his odd name and the betrayal done by his wife. Strewn with conflicting loyalties, comic detours, and wrenching love affairs, Gogol stumbles because of the expectations bestowed upon him by his parents, and through such chaos and uprootedness, gradually and eventually comes to define him.

Not only dealing with the personal inner conflicts of first and second generation immigrants, Lahiri has delineated the larger cultural differences between the two sides of the globe in her novel. Though globalization has blurred the physical borders and distances within different countries, cultural and psychological differences still prevail. In Lahiri's book, on one side, we have Maxime's parents, open and comfortable about their intimacy, whereas this intimacy becomes utterly private and uncelebrated thing for the Bengali couple. Infact, Ashima like a typical Bengali wife has adopted her husband's surname but refuses to utter his first. From their food habits to the dresses they wear, these Bengalis form a different nation within American nation where Ashoke, “Desperately needs a cup of tea for himself...but the machine in the corridor dispenses only the coffee”

(Lahiri 15). In an attempt to do things the Bengali way, Ashima and Ashoke take their kids to Bengali cultural events, read them Bengali literature and take them on trips to Calcutta, and follows Bengali custom of giving two names to a child – *bhalonam* (formal name) and *daknam* (pet name). On one side, there is Bengali tradition where a baby is named by the oldest family member, the individual names are considered sacred and are not meant to be inherited or shared, whereas, in America, to name the baby after father, grandfather or mother, grandmother is a sign of respect and symbolizes heritage and lineage. Unlike close knitted Indian society, Ashima experiences “Americans, in spite of their public declarations of affections, in spite of their miniskirts and bikinis, in spite of their hand-holding on the streets and lying on the top of each other in Cambridge common, prefer their privacy”. (Lahiri 8). Even the concept of marriage is utterly different in two countries. On the one hand, we see the traditional arrangement of marriage between Ashima and Ashoke, whereas in America, decisions of marriage are taken after a series of courtship period.

Dealing with these nuances of two entirely different cultures, *The Namesake*, is quintessential diasporic novel, written with a great deal of sensitivity towards both Americans and Indians. Hopping between two different homes of Ganguli's, in Bengal and in America, *The Namesake*, depicts the struggle of immigrant Bengalis with a state of ‘homelessness’ that lingers on throughout the novel among all the characters living in America, in one way or the other. It is, thus, a cross-cultural, multigenerational story of a Hindu Bengali family dealing with the intricacies and complexities of the immigrant experience, foreignness, the clash of lifestyles, cultural disorientation, the conflicts of assimilation and the tangled ties between two generations and a portrayal of an Indian family torn between the pull of respecting its family traditions, and accepting the American way of life. The novel can be seen as a Domestic fiction about a particular family that has shifted to America to experience a new world full of ample opportunities. In fact, the family of Ashoke becomes a microcosm of an entire generation of India fascinated with the idea of settling abroad and yet willing to retain their “Indianness”.

Even by the end of the novel, Ashima's search for her ‘home’ and a feeling of not being able to completely belong anywhere remains intact. She decides to go back to Bengal after the death of her husband, “She feels lonely suddenly, permanently alone...she feels overwhelmed by the thought of the move she is about to make, to the city that was once home and in now in its own way..Foreign ...for thirty three years she missed her life in India. Now, she will miss her job at the library, the women with whom she worked. She will miss throwing parties...She will miss the country in which she had grown to know and love her husband.” (Lahiri 233) On the other hand, tracing the journey from being teased as "giggle", "gargle", to never having seen his name on keychains, from bearing up the burden of an unusual name to realizing its significance, the deeper connection of his father with the writer, Gogol finally comes to embrace his name. As the novel ends, Gogol managed to have some sort of a resolution, reconciliation with his Indian and American side and is able to live in peace. The novel marks his self-sorting and moving forward with the formation of a new identity and new space for negotiation. Lahiri's novel is a narrative of how the characters struggling with the identical and cultural discord cover a long journey till the attainment of their negotiated identity and self-realization. Proposing that multiculturalism should be embraced instead of being considered as a threat, the novel portrays the growth and consequently the resolution of conflicts to some extent. The novel subtly suggests the celebration of this interplay of identities, as art itself is nothing but a state of homelessness.

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