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Diaspora and Struggle for identity in Jhumpa Lahiri's "The Namesake"

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Abstract

In the 21st century the issues of Diaspora, Transnationalism, Hybridity cultural Mongrelization identity crisis continuously enrich the Diasporic literatures. The Diasporic elements are recurrent themes in the writings of Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, V.S Naipual, Bharti Mukherjee, Jhumpa Lahiri, Kiran Desai and many others. This paper looks into the predicament of name & sense of identity and belongingness of the characters of the Indian origin and immigrants in the USA. *The Namesake* is the novel written by Jhumpa Lahiri. She is a strong voice of Indian Diaspora in America. She takes up the issues of the impact of expatriation and immigration on the complexities of life as pitched against divergent ethnic, religious and cultural backgrounds. *The Namesake* (2003) is her debut novel and she handles these complexities of the immigrants experience in a lucid manner.

Key words: Origin, Diaspora, Identity, Transnational, Multiculturalism

1. INTRODUCTION

Jhumpa Lahiri a Contemporary American Writer of Indian origin was born in London on July 11, 1967 to Bengali Parents. Jhumpa Lahiri was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in April 10, 2000 for her debut collection *Interpreter of Maladies*. She is also the first person of South Asian Origin to win an individual prize. The collection of Short stories was translated into twenty nine languages and became best seller both in the United State and abroad. Lahiri has won many awards for her collection which includes Transatlantic award from the Henfield foundation in 1993 the O'Henry award for her short story in 1999, the new Yorker's Debut of the year award in 2000 and

the Addison Metcalf award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 2000. Lahiri also received a nomination for the LA times Book Prize as well as the Guggenheim Fellowship in 2002.

Jhumpa Lahiri expands her Pulitzer Prize winning short stories of Indian acquisition into her first novel *The Namesake*. The novel was published in 2003. It was originally a novella published in the New Yorker later it was expanded to a full length novel.

In her early age, she tasted the feelings of being dislocated and experienced the feeling of being uprooted, a situation in which one feels being torn into two rootless identities. When Lahiri was two years old, her parents who were Indian immigrants moved to the USA. One can easily claim that she experienced the duality and ambivalence of the immigrant life of Indians. She was an Indian at home but when she stepped out of the threshold of the family zone, she had to conceal her Indian identity. In fact, Jhumpa Lahiri's both short story books and her novel reflects her diasporic experiences as a postmodern migrant living in the USA. She has lived as an immigrant who looks forward to embracing her root requires a philosophical journey because of the immigrant experiences of powerlessness and meaninglessness that is alienation. In this regard Lahiri seems to have voyaged in such a journey as she utters: "No country is my motherland. I always find myself in exile in whichever country I travel to. That's why I was always tempted to write something about those living their lives in exile" (Oh, 157). The 'Those living their lives in exile' theme is stressed in her novel *The Namesake*

The word "*Diaspora*" had been derived from the Greek *Diasperio* which means to distribute. The Oxford English Dictionary (1989) defines Diaspora as anybody of people living outside their traditional homeland. The term Diaspora was thus integrated from Greek into English in the mid 20th Century and refers to anybody of people or ethnic population who are either forced or induced to leave their traditional homelands, the dispersal of such people and the resulting developments in their cultural situation they try to negotiate two cultures: one which they possess and the other the new one. The diasporic culture is essentially mixed and a unification of the two cultures. It is a voyage towards self-recognition, self – definition and self – realization. There is an element of inventiveness in Diaspora writings which paves the way for many losses. The Indian Diaspora writing contributes on a world wide scale, the cultures of different societies. Diaspora literature thus builds information which results in solving many cultural and psychological problems.

This novel focuses on the first-generation and second-generation immigrants' adherence to the old and new lands as can be found in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* (2003). In this novel, Lahiri has explored the psychic condition of the first generation immigrants, Ashima and Ashoke and the second generation immigrants, Gogol, Sonia and Moushumi. In the opening scene in which Ashima, a pregnant woman from Calcutta – India tries to cook an Indian meal that dissatisfies her. This very first scene reflects the total physical and psychological mood of migrants. Although she has the same ingredients to cook an Indian dish, she does not manage to prepare as she did in India. The feeling of displacement and alienation exist in all activities the characters carry out. She lives in a small and cold apartment and she is alone despite her pregnancy, which is an abnormal situation for the Indians. She is married to Ashoke Ganguli, who is an engineering student at the Massachusetts institute of Technology, their families arranged their marriage and she moved to the USA to live with her husband. She successfully bore a boy. The baby is named after Nikolai Gogol, famous Russian author. Ashoke choose Gogol as the pet name for the newborn baby. Because Bengali culture requires a baby to have two names, a pet name to be called by family and a good name to be called in the society. While Ganguli couples are about to leave the hospital they are asked to write a

legal name for the baby. They just write Gogol on the birth certificate as an official name for their boy with a hope that they will change later with good name. The reason of Ashoke's choosing Gogol as a pet name for his baby is that he is indebted to *The Overcoat* – a short story by Gogol- because in a train accident the book saved his life.

Later he grown up a young boy Gogol is obsessed with the matter of his name. his hatred for his name is explained thus: " But instead he takes a deep breath and tells the people in the courtroom what he has never admit to his parents. I hate the name Gogol. I've always hated it" (Lahiri 102) Gogol by now, he hates everything that matters pertaining to his name and he hates that his name is both absurd and obscure. The key reason why Gogol is not adhered with his name is that right from the birth he was born and brought up in American tradition more than the Indian traditions and cultures. *The Namesake* describes the cultural displacement at its depth. For instance Ashima is upset when Gogol tells him that he has rented a room three months and also she is upset because their children could not visit her quite often. Ashima suffers a lot: "Having been deprived of the company of her own parents upon moving to America, her children's independence their need to keep their distance from her. Is something she will never understand" (Macwan 122).

Diaspora is a voyage towards self-recognition, self-definition, and self-realization. There is an element of inventiveness in Diaspora writings which paves the way for many losses. The Indian Diaspora writing contributes on a world wide scale, the cultures of different societies. Diaspora literature thus builds information which result in solving many cultural and psychological problems. It helps to re-discover the unity and completeness of India. *The Namesake* works as a network to solidify the different parts of the states in India and also in relation with the other parts of the world like America. The Indian philosophy has its notion that the world is a family to an extent. Thus with reference to the context multiculturalism presents a mixture of various cultures setting up a world peace, harmony and universal communal. Lahiri's *The Namesake* is an example of the Modern-day immigrant ethnic family within a communal of international travelers. She accounts displacement and societal discomfort in a fresh manner. She balances the two cultures and creates inner chaos for many of her characters who struggle to balance the Western and Indian influence.

Through *Namesake*, Lahiri exposes the trauma and pains in migrating to a different country, she sends a clear message to people who are dreaming to settle in different countries for a better life. Lahiri notes that people without realizing the effects of migration tends to look upon only on the luxurious side, they forget that displacement demands a greater flexibility in terms of climate and culture. On the other hand the problem of name cannot be solved by the name on record. The problem faced by the individual regarding his/ her identity takes a process of reflections and discovery. When one is born in his motherland then the question of identity does not arise much, in fact not at all, since the individual has quite a familiar society around him. He is nurtured around by people life him, he is a son of a father who has a social status. He eventually is not concerned about his identity because he has the trust of being known by people in that society. However if he is born on a foreign land, the question of identity starts to round up, he feels life a total stranger on the new land. The difference in skin colour, language, cultures form a unique blend where he starts to search for his won identity. Being a second generation immigrant the crisis of identity perpetuate all through his life. The quest to find his own identity marks the diasporic consciousness in Gogol's life. Thus Diaspora creates a place for growth, resolution of conflicts and most importantly a new identity. Every Diaspora movement holds a historical significance, as it carries within itself the core of the nation's history.

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