



DISINTEGRATION OF WOMANHOOD IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S NAMESAKE: A BRIEF ANALYSIS

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Abstract

This paper aims at identifying the aspects of Indian diaspora with reference to women in the work of Jhumpa Lahiri by exploring the Indian diasporic women's suffering's like double marginalization, ideological pressures, gender inequality, sacrifice, tolerance, acceptance, displacement, sufferings, migration, adaptation, transformation with particular reference to her novel Namesake and projects Lahiri as a second-generation immigrant giving a perfect voice to portray the feeling of Indian immigrants for Lahiri, herself the child of immigration and multiculturalism, she portrays the characters both in the light of native and alien culture. It beautifully examines Lahiri's artistic skill in exploring the ideas of cultural and personal isolation and identities through vivid portrayal of female characters.

Key Words: Culture, Diaspora, Identity, Generation-Gap, Womanhood, Migration, Adaptation.

Literature views reality, it is considered to be the art of life. Indian literature in English is a result of the commercial, cultural and literary encounter between India and Britain. Indian literature stands firmly with everlasting impression among the readers because of its creativity and the experience of the writers. Indian literature in today's world reached a particular position because of the contribution of writers from both regional as well as national. Later on, literature became a combination of Indian literature and Indian literature written in English. Indian English literature is a work by Indian writers who write in English, but their native and co-native languages might be different. Indian writing in English is a product of historical encounter between two cultures – Indian and western. In the early days Indian writing in English was considered as non-fictional work such as biographies and political essays. Later in 1973, Sake Dean Mohamed wrote the first book called The Travels of Dean Mohamed.

This brings some changes and in the late 1800s, there arose famous Indian authors who wrote mostly in their mother tongue, they for a change started to write using English. In 1900s Tagore translated his work to English from Bengali. As years passed on, there emerged a new generation of Indian authors, whose works in English, hit the bookshelves because of their writing style and simple diction. It started in 1935 from R.K.Narayan's work Swami and Friends, and the chain linked to Mulk Raj Anand's Untouchable and this paved way to the new generation of Indian writer Raja Rao's Kanthapura in 1938. R.K.Narayan, MulkRaj Anand and Raja Rao were considered as precious gems of Indian Writing in English. Their writings were different from other Indian writers; their stories were based on the contemporary man on the street. Readers can feel the Indianess in their work and they also connect the situation portrayed in the novel, to the things happening around them.

Indian writing in English is divided into different periods. The first period began in the mid of ninth century and last till 1930. This period is related to the development of genre, negotiation with the western concept of romance and of historical writing about India's freedom. Second period began in the 1930's and ends during 1950's R.K.Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao bloomed as writers during this period. The third period threw light upon younger generation writers.

Kamala Markandya, Bhabani Bhattacharya, Nayantare Sahgal, Ruskin Bond, Anita Desai, Arun Joshi and Manohar Malgonkar are the writers during the period 1950's and 1970's. The fourth period began with Rushdie's Midnight's Children, during this period the writers began to use irony, satire, fantasy, and change of language. The writers during this period were Amitav Gash, Upamanya Chatterjee, Vikram Seth, Shashi Deshpande and Shashi Tharoor.



At one point of time women writers played a dominant role in Indian English fiction. The emergence of women writers paved way to feminism in India. They feel that they got an opportunity to express their Indianness in their work through English language. Most of the novels written by Indian women writers depict the psychological suffering of the frustrated homemakers. They believe in the fact that, they are no longer puppets in the hands of man. There are many women writers who showed their values in the field of literature both qualitatively and quantitatively.

During the time of Post – Independence period, there emerged a group of women writers in English who were well educated and bold enough to convey the message to the society through their works. They understood the meaning of male domination. This period bring some change in the attitude, outlook, themes and imagery in the fiction.

The novel before independence was mainly interested in social, political and historical concerns, whereas the novels of post independent India seemed to be interested in contemporary issues projecting a kind of shift from social, political concerns to the inner life of human being. Modern novels dealt with man's alienation from his self, his society and humanity. C.Paul Verghese's comments thus:

“Most of the novelists in their eagerness to find new themes ‘renounced the larger world in favour of the inner man’ and continued ‘a search for the essence of human living’. It is this trend that continued in the seventies and it also shaped the novels of the eighties”.

Some of the significant women writers in the Post-Independence era are Kamala Markandya, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Shobha De, Arundhati Roy, Kiran Desai, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Bharati Mukherjee, Jhumpa Lahiri, Manju Kapur, whose works are marked by their use of language and contemporary Indian society.

Many women writers were based in USA and Britain. Some like Ruth Pawar Jhabrala and Anita Desai are late immigrants, while others like Jhumpa Lahiri belongs to second generation. Some other writers recreate their work through the lens of nostalgia. Chitra Banerjee and Bharathi Mukherjee are the oldest and the most prolific writers. Among all other writers, Lahiri created difference in her works through her life. Most of the first generation writers of India are born and brought up in India. But in the case of Lahiri, her connection with India is through her parents and grandparents. She looks at India with a different point of view. Lahiri is Indian by ancestry, British by birth, American by immigration. She targets the Western audience by portraying Indian American life. She also admits that, “ I learnt to observe things as an outsider and yet I knew that as different Calcutta is from Rhode Island, I belonged there in some fundamental way, in the way, I didn't seem to belong in the U.S.” (The Times of India)

Jhumpa Lahiri is an American author of Bengali descent. When she was three years old her family moved to America. Lahiri is a second generation diasporic Indian American writer. She was born in London on 11th July 1967, and later she was brought up in South Kingston, Rhode Island in USA. Lahiri is a child of three countries – having Indian roots, but born in London and later raised in Rhode Island, shuttling periodically between Boston and Calcutta. Lahiri studied at Barnard College in New York focusing on English literature and then she pursued her education at Boston University, who glister like a star by earning multiple degrees such as M.A in English, M.F.A in creativity writing, M.A in Comparative literature, and Ph.D in Renaissance studies.

As Lahiri is torn between different world and culture, her writings and characters reflect about it. Lahiri's writing has an autobiographical tone reflecting upon her own experience, her family and her Bengali community people. She feels solace in writing about the struggles, anxieties and biases. Lahiri through her work depicts about immigrant parents who struggle to keep their children acquainted with Indian culture and tradition. In the words of Jagdish Batra, “Jhumpa Lahiri has carved out a niche for herself among the contemporary popular novelists. She belongs to the second generation of immigrants to America and therefore, she can very well comprehend the plight of younger generation that feels sandwiched between the aspirations of parents cast in the traditional Indian mould and the influence of the western peer groups as also of the wider American milieu” (P9). In an interview given to Rachel Hore, Jhumpa Lahiri admits: “I write about people whose very existence has been shaped by unsettlement”



(Quoted in Batra 9). She shot to fame with her first collection of short stories titled *Interpreter of Maladies* which won her the Pulitzer Prize 2000 for fiction.

As a remarkable author she was appreciated for her literary creations. Almost all her work, deal with Diasporic experience. Herself being an immigrant was entitled to do so. Her works are mostly based on first and second generation Indian Diasporic writers. Lahiri, has no real experience in India, She gathered some knowledge about India only through her visit to India. It can be vividly understood from the following statement:

Lahiri projects the Indian immigrants of Bengali origins as economic refugees, self chosen exiles and transnational hybrids who form a new generation of Indian Americans in a Homogeneous American national culture (Nayak134)

Her works are genuine, sincere, thought provoking and always seem to carry a deep moral message. Jhumpa Lahiri's feminist approach is different from other diasporic writers. Most of her women characters are from diasporic communities facing cultural dilemma in the host land. The cultural dilemma faced by the women's helps her to write a realistic portrait of a contemporary woman. The female protagonists in her novels are in constant search for meaning and value of their life. Lahiri traces a woman's journey from self-sacrifice to self-realization, from self-denial to self –assertion and from self-negation to self-affirmation. Vijay Mishra, in his work *The Literature of Indian Diaspora: Theorizing the Diasporic Imaginary* defines Daispora as:

“All Diasporas are unhappy, but every diaspora is unhappy in its own way. Diaspora refer to people who do not feel comfortable with their non-hyphenated identities as indicated on their passport...They are precariously lodged within an episteme of real or imagined displacements, self-imposed sense of exile; they are haunted by specters, by ghosts arising from within that encourage irredentist or separatist movements.” (P1).

Lahiri portrays the psyche of the middle class Indian women who feel oppressed and stressed in the alien land. Lahiri feels that women must be true to her own self to realize herself. Women play the role of daughter, wife, mother and she lead her life in such a familial framework, to give life to individuality and identity she must change herself.

Lahiri depicts that woman shifting from one culture to another culture caught up between double marginalization, patriarchal dominance, ideological pressures, gender inequality, gender discrimination, sacrifice, tolerance, acceptance, forgiveness, passive suffering, displacement, adaptation, transformation, cultural resilience and diasporic consumption. All this can be noted in Lahiri's novel *The Namesake*.

The Namesake is about the generational difference of diasporic community. She also discuss about the second generation diaspora problem, after their assimilation in the host culture, their conflicts and confusions, adjustments, adaptations and assimilation in the new country. Though the central character of the novel is Gogol Ganguli, the women characters like Ashima, Moushumi and Maxine are the shades and key aspects of Indian diasporic women. Ashima represents the effect of double marginalization patriarchal dominance, gender inequality and discrimination. Moushumi plays an unconventional role. She represents strong womanhood caring nothing the pressures – patriarchal, ideological, social and psychic. She forces herself to be free from family.

Ashima is the immigrant woman of the first generation whereas Moushumi and Maxine belong to the second generation. They try to create a separate identity which has to be understood on the basis of their psychological assessment. They felt India as their alien land, where as the first generation considered Americans as their alien land. Lahiri presents the psyche of women torn between two cultures.

Ashima is considered as the strongest character of the story. She is the only character in the entire novel who stands and remains as the epitome of courage, strength, serenity and adaptable of the situation. Ashima starts her life in Kolkata and she follows all the traditional values of her family in India. She is very obedient daughter of her parents. In India marriage is considered not between the two hearts but it is all about dowry, marriage becomes as a



market. Ashima as a young and educated Bengali girl is presented in the marriage market by her parents. She marries the person whom her parents show her. She shifts from her native land to alien land with her husband.

Ashima feels alienated when she came to America with her husband; she longs to be with her family. Though she migrates from India to America she sticks to her own tradition and culture. When Ashima feels like missing her parents, she reads the letters of her parents. She has no friends of her own in the alien land. In Calcutta she had company of her siblings, parents, cousins, grandparents, aunts and uncles.

For Ashima, she considered India as a geographical place with its specific culture is the place to which she connects her emotionally, because it stands for her childhood and her parents, whom she misses dearly when she came to America. Thus, she wants to preserve Indian traditions in her new American home. Preserving Indian traditions, Ashima serves traditional Bengali dishes or throwing parties for other Bengali expatriates in America.

Ashima by watching movies and she had lot of dreams of living in the foreign country with lot of expectation, but all her expectations dissolved. When she dwells in a foreign world all her expectations disappears. As a typical Indian women she never complaints and she adjust herself in the alien land by living her dreams according to the condition. All her feelings and emotions fade away because of her family responsibility.

There one thing to be noted is Ashima after moving to America there marks a significant change in her life, which is not only the moving itself, but also her turning from young woman who was dependent on her parents to a married woman with responsibilities. All the year she spent in America transformed her and shaped her identity to accept the fact that both America and India stood for parts of her life. She feels that nothing would be different if she had stayed in India also, she stays at home, wears saree, cooks traditional Bengali dishes and preserves Bengali tradition at home. In the beginning, she does not seem to be too fond of living in America; in comparison to Ashoke, she seems to be more sensitive toward the discontinuities between India and America.

Lahiri portrays the nostalgic experience of Ashima, she always thinks of her parents and her house in Calcutta. When Ashima is pregnant, she longs to be with her family, to share the experience of childbirth with her mother and father. As days pass on Ashima escapes from the troublesome America by attending get together on different occasions like the rice ceremony and naming ceremony of Bengali families. She also participated in Bengali festivals like Navratras and Poojas by Bengalis.

“Ashoke and Ashima created their own circle of immigrants Bengalis and they all came from Calcutta and for this reason only they are friends. The husbands are teachers, researchers, doctors, engineers. The wives homesick and bewildered turn to Ashima for recipes and advice” (The Namesake 22)

Ashima, who respects and follows the rules and roles of being a Bengali wife, as an immigrant woman in American society, she takes care of her husband and children. As a first generation immigrants Ashima train their children in Bengali language literature and history at home and through special Bengali Classes and expose them to their own family lineage, religious custom, rites, beliefs food tastes, habit and mannerisms. They also groom them to cope with the way of life in America. Lahiri depicts that the immigrants in their enthusiasm to stick to their own cultural belief and customs, gradually take in the cultural ways of the host country to. Ashima teaches Gogol

“to memorize a four line children poem by Tagore, names of deities at the same time when she goes to sleep in the same time when she goes to sleep in the afternoon she switches the television to channel -2 and tells Gogol to watch ‘sesame street’ and the electronic company in order to keep up with the English he uses at nursery school” (The Namesake 54)

As an Indian woman Ashima’s character is totally different from that of women in foreign land. She considered family as her whole world. Her expectation and emotions are related to family. Ashima never ever complains her situation or disappointment, but she suffers deep in her mind. ‘But, she has complained of none of this. She has kept her disappointment to herself, not wanting, to offend Ashoke, or worry her parents’ (p30).



Ashima tries to change herself and adapt to the culture of alien country, but she doesn't change her dressing style and she follows her Indian tradition, she tries to become bold and take up a job in library and make friends. At the age of forty eight when her husband goes out of Boston for nine months, she lives in solitude. When her husband dies, she has lost her only support in her life for the last fifteen years;

Ashima feels lonely suddenly, horribly, permanently alone and briefly, turned away from the mirror, she sobs for her husband, she feels overwhelmed by the thought of the move she is about to make, to the city that was once home and is now in its own way foreign(The Namesake 278)

At one point of time, Ashima planned to move to India but now she thinks of Calcutta as foreign land. She is no longer completely Bengali, but she hasn't become an American either.

The second-generation immigrants, presented in the novel are in contrast to the familial traditions of the first generation. The first generation strongly disapproves of the American life style, in return the second generation immigrant discard the Indian cultural values. Maxine and Moushumi are completely opposite to Indian culture and tradition.

Maxine Ratliff, a young white woman from a wealthy family, who after having lived with a boyfriend in Boston for some time, moved back to her parents house in New York city, where she grew up. Maxine's life style is different from that of a Bengali girl. Maxine enjoyed full freedom. She spends her money very lavishly. Maxine and Gogol started their dating. She even involved in pre-marital sex relationship with Gogol. She has no restriction in her life. She invites Gogol to live with her in the home of her parents. She was very friendly with her parents. Her family follows American culture and tradition. Gogol at point describes as:

“Continually amazed by how much Maxine emulates her parents, how much she respects their tastes and their ways. At the dinner table she argues with them about books and paintings and people they know in common the way one might argue with a friend. There is none of the exasperation he feels with his own parents. No sense of obligation. Unlike his parents, they pressure her to do nothing, and yet she lives faithfully, happily, at their side.”(The Namesake 104)

When she visited Gogol's house, she was shocked to see an orthodox family. She was shocked by Ashima's dressing. She even called his mother using her name. 'It's so nice to finally meet you, Ahima,' Maxine says, leaning over and giving his mother a kiss as well. (P 146)

Moushumi, Indian woman but as she is a second generation immigrant she follow American lifestyle. Though she is an Indian woman, she is more inclined into adopting American culture. She considers herself as an American. She is bold, frank and confident. She makes her own decisions in her life. She chooses the college and profession of her own. Moushumi's decisions are made by herself without taking advice from her parents.

Moushumi suffers from lack of belonging and her quest for belonging urges her to find her roots in the third language and culture of France. Moushumi marries Gogol but at point of time she becomes restless in her marriage life. She had an affair with Dimitri, an old acquaintance and later she divorced Gogol. She feels that she can live independently as she regards herself as an American woman, not a Bengali. Though she has a traditional Bengali and Indian side, she beliefs herself to be an independent American.

“French was a way of escape into a neutral third space. She felt no sense of obligation, no sense of responsibility apart from the one she owed to herself. It was easier to turn her back on the two countries that could claim her in favour of one that had no claim whatsoever.”(PP148-149)

In case of Moushumi, she makes continual efforts to imbibe the host culture and she is not identified as fully American because of the colour of her skin. The colour of her skin becomes a major impediment in the course of formation of American identity. She is like American born confused Desi, because of her sense of alienation for either culture (American and Indian)



Lahiri writes about the situation of women and their success and failure in the fast changing socio-cultural milieu of diaspora. Through her protagonist, she highlights that the women are the victims of gender discrimination as a girl child, wife and mother from male as well as from their female counterpart. They are trapped between the world of tradition and modernity.

Jhumpa Lahiri writes about the situation of women and their success and failure in the fast changing socio-cultural milieu of Diasporas. Through portrayal of women characters, she highlights the fact in such a way that the women are the victims of gender discrimination as girl child, wife and mother from male as well as from their female counterpart. They are trapped between tradition and modernity. She presents a social and the tradition bound world consists of the modern world. Women have been tutored right from the day they had the glimpses of this world, to follow unquestioningly and relentlessly the ideal of the patriarchal set-up of the family. The woman has been asked to put up all sorts of repressions and suppressions in the name of family honour and for the good name of the children. Women's sexuality, her experience of pain, pleasure, love or sorrow, desire or respect were matters which were routinely ignored. Jhumpa Lahiri highlights their inferior position and the subsequent degradation in a culturally dominated society. To conclude, it may be said that Lahiri's first and only novel *The Namesake* too, like her *Interpreter of Maladies*, explores the themes of immigrant experience, the clash of cultures and the trauma faced by the culturally displaced Indians settled in foreign countries. S.Prasannarajan in his review calls this novel "an enlarged variation of the same existential trauma of the culturally displaced that animates her debut *Interpreter of Maladies* (qtd. Ray266)

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