



CROSS-CULTURAL CONFLICTS IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S THE NAMESAKE

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Women Writers in English have acquired considerable name and fame today. They depict the position of independent existence of women throwing light on the causes for their dominance and delineation. They have not only portrayed women in patriarchal society, but their responses to the upcoming challenges. Women have been treated as subalterns, always being kept at the subordinate position in all scenarios. Today, Indian English fiction is dominated by the second generation novelists. Newer voices are being heard, especially in fiction, which seems to be ready for expansion in several directions. Arundhati Roy, V.S.Naipaul, Vikram Seth, Jhumpa Lahiri, Kiran Desai and Shashi Tharoor novelists of the era, have liberated Indian English Literature from the colonial yoke and marginalized position of exotica writing. Out of the said novelists Jhumpa Lahiri was one of the successful writers whose voice is a valuable contribution to Indian Literature. He is the kenspeckle of Indian writing in English. The immigrant experience, the question of identity and the expatriate experience continues to furnish terrific material for fiction and can be traced in the works of various South Asian women writers too. Lahiri sets the cynosure in expressing her concern for the moral and psychological truth related to the immigrant's discontentment. It has outstanding literary qualities which make her writings supple, elegant, economical, ironic and compassionate, marvellously capturing the nuances and minutely observed details.

Jhumpa Lahiri *vourvoulias* [real name Nilanjana Sudeshna] was born in London, in July 1967, the daughter of Bengali Indian immigrants budged to America after 1965. Lahiri is a Bengali-American author who always lives in the shadow of two cultures. Brought up in a traditional Indo - American family, she shares her parents' sadness of loss and displacement in an exile life. Her writings are concerned about issues like identity, alienation, isolation and nostalgia. Lahiri's debut short story collection *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, and her first novel, *The Namesake* (2003), was adapted into popular film in the US of the same name. The latest book *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008) is her second collection of short stories. She got married in 2001 with a journalist name Alberto *Vourvoulias* Bush. She lives with her husband in Brooklyn, New York and her two children named Octavi and Noor. Lahiri is also a member of the President's Committee on the Arts and Humanities, appointed by U.S. President Barack Obama.

Her debut novel *The Namesake* (2003) is Lahiri's second work in which she deals with the theme of isolation and the problem of assimilation and adaptation in another country. The novel is autobiographical in portraying repercussions of what the children of the immigrants have to experience when they are destined to be born in a country which is not the homeland of their parents. The cultural, spatial and psychosocial dislocations, alienation, identity-crisis, nostalgia have been the recurrent issues explored by Lahiri in this novel. But these themes were made familiar in her debut short story collection, *The Interpreter of Maladies* to her readers. The novel is a story of two generations – Ashoke Ganguly and Ashima on the one hand and their children Gogol and Sonia on the other, and their life period of thirty years. Both the generations face different problems because of cultural difference in their alienated world – the first generation being directly related to his or her homeland and the second generation forming an image of culture (an imaginary homeland) based on the information transmitted by the first generation.

The Namesake, on the one hand, focuses on Calcutta and on the other it is about Cambridge and New York. The narrative begins in August 1968. When the novel opens Ashima and Ashoke, the migrant couple from West Bengal, India are seen in their apartment in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Ashima does not feel comfortable on his alien land. It commences with a nostalgic mood, Ashima, the wife of Ashoke, the protagonist, in her advanced stage of pregnancy, is eating puffed rice with lots of spices and lemon, an Indian concoction sold in Calcutta's sidewalk for pennies, the taste being not the same brings her the memories of her home land. Ashoke, an MIT engineer, has migrated to Boston to obliterate the memories of a train accident he met with, thus it is a self-imposed migration. In spite of his well-settled life there, his return to India to marry a Bengali girl asserts his desire to retain his separate identity and solidarity to homeland.

Ashima, for all her efforts to settle in a new way of life, felt home sick in that alien country. She felt uprooted and lived in a world of nostalgia. She spent hours in the apartment napping and sulking, rereading her parents' letters and the same five Bengali novels again and again. For Ashima, "Being a foreigner is a sort of life-long pregnancy" (TN 49). The dichotomy between public and private life is almost tormenting to these women immigrants who have to suffer double dependence. They have to reconstruct their gender identity and to locate themselves in the host culture. Ashima gave birth to a boy child in a country where she is related to no one. The baby was named Gogol, after the name of the Russian writer Nikolai Gogol who is associated with the memories of the train accident. It is clearly pictured that throughout the novel, Gogol fails to establish his identity either as American or as Indian.



As Gogol grew, Ashoke and Ashima's circle of Bengali acquaintances also increased. The very fact is that all belong to one country, is reason for them to relate and form their own ethnic group and community. This Diasporic community preserves their separate identity by observing their tradition. The first generation diasporas' [Ashoke and Ashima] adjustment and changes are expedient. They accommodate and adjust to create space and identity in a foreign country. In case of the second generation diaspora, Gogol and Sonia, their identity and problem are rather different, for they have a sense of pride and affinity to India, but it is America they are born and educated and in the same America they want to be accepted on their own terms.

Gogol's friendship with a young girl Ruth is disapproved by Ashoke and Ashima. Cultural displacement involves the loss of language, family ties and support. Salman Rushdie, in his novel, *Imaginary Homeland* talks about the turbulence and turmoil, a migrant goes through when he says, "A full migrant suffers, traditionally, a triple disruption. He loses his place, he enters into alien language, and he finds himself surrounded by beings whose social behaviour and codes are unlike and even offensive to his own" (Rushdie 56). Identity for the youngsters is much more complicated, at the two levels, of private life and of public life. Ashoke and Ashima wanted Gogol to pursue engineering. Contrary to this, the second generation youngsters wanted to choose and adopt a career and a profession of their own liking. Gogol becomes an architect and Sonia, the daughter of Ashoke and Ashima becomes a Para lawyer. They feel attracted and have an appreciation for the host culture.

At the end of the novel, the diasporic crisis of dual identity faced first by his mother, Ashima, then in a more intensified manner, by him finally gets resolved when Gogol realizes that his identity is embellished by both cultures. Coming out of his turmoil Gogol is able to stand on his feet and is no longer ashamed of himself or the way he has lived his life till then. Even Ashima's decision to live six months in India and six months in America with Gogol and Sonia makes her realize that she belongs nowhere and at the same time everywhere. "True to the meaning of her name, she is without border, without home of her own, a resident everywhere and nowhere, and so with Gogol who is an alien both in India and America" (TN 276). Nostalgia in this novel has the double vision of yearning backward and looking forward. The characters feel homesick for their homeland with a purpose of seizing the present life and having a better future. Lahiri yearns for personal identity for herself as well as her imaginary characters in this novel. Homi Bhabha in *The Location of Culture* points out that "The interstitial passage between fixed identifications open up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains differences without an assumed or imposed hierarchy" (Bhabha 4). The mixed food which Ashima eats is the reflection of her hybrid identity.

Jhumpa Lahiri herself born in a family of immigrants and having experienced the emotional conflicts in her life, sketches her characters in a very realistic manner. Lahiri addresses the issue of identity and displacement which many struggle with due to their multicultural upbringing and environment. "The question of identity especially for those who are culturally displaced is a difficult one" (Prasad 192). She stated on one of her interviews. Summing up her own immigrant experience, Lahiri voices quest for identity this novel *The Namesake*. It is to accept the fact that all expatriation involves anxiety and belonging to two ethnic groups which force a kind of struggle with something, other people do not have to struggle with. That growth is painful, but that is an inextricable part of the immigrant experience. Expatriation is the recognition of hyphenated fluid identity, an acknowledgement of alternate realities. Lahiri through this novel strongly advocates the message that one has to adjust oneself if one is born and brought up in an 'alien' land. The question of identity will not rise if the man treats the 'alien' or 'foreign' land as his motherland!

Works Cited

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