

For the Sake of Name and Identity : Reading Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*

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Abstract

This research paper is based on the novel *The Namesake* written by Jhumpa Lahiri. The paper studies the issue of identity crisis in human life and raises the question of one's existence. It depicts how diaspora community faces many problems in the new country and lead a confused life. The paper highlights how one moves to another country for a better future but experience as a misfit in other society. It also shows how one goes through pain when tries to live life like others but not of his own. The desire to belong to other culture results in loss of identity. The clash of cultures further doubles as immigrant parents experience the sense of isolation and loneliness because they see their children going far away from them. The paper is about the continuity of individual struggle in foreign culture and moving on without stopping. The paper analyses the importance of acceptance in one's life. It also focuses on one's growth in new country by accepting the truth about one's new identity.

Keywords : Culture; Diaspora; Identity; Immigrant; Migration.

There can never be one destination, actually there are many, as travelling is an important part of human life, thus, it carries the importance of travelling and traveler. With the passage of time the problems related to travelling, staying for some time at new place and later on half-heartedly accepting but simultaneously thriving for the identity has filled the mind of human beings to ask about the question of one's existence. As Sartre points out in his work *Search for a Method* :

It is in the nature of an intellectual quest to be undefined.
To name it and define it is to wrap it up and tie the knot.
What is left? A finished, already outdated mode of culture,
something like a brand of soap, in other words, an idea.
(Sartre 33)

The quest for identity moves along with man. The sense as a misfit in the third world shows the sense of loss and insecurity. There are so many examples in literature where we can see the impression and home sickness of so many people and literature is a medium to give expression to such

ideas. This process brought a unique development in human history with the move of Postcolonial period. It is a period after the fall of great colonial empires and the era of transnationalism and globalization. Edward Said and Franz Fanon are the most influential critics who confronted the fictional tenet which was made by literary authorities in England. They launched the thought of presenting 'colonizer' and 'colonized' in terms of 'self' and 'other', or 'orientalist' and 'oriental'. Such theories emphasize on searching for one's identity.

Diaspora changed lives of people drastically in search of better life, a large number of people started migrating into the foreign countries. The problem of migration shows the onset of globalization of market economy and the desire of job opportunities in the west. America became the centre of attraction because of trade. Many Indians transferred there to be a part of imagined comfort and to fulfill 'American-Dream'. This period witnessed the contrast of already existing societies and the developing societies. Numerous issues rise because of this contrast which was not only philosophical but social also. The matter of identity is significant in this process because it shows the impact of different cultures on different societies. The sample however differs from country to country because of differences in history and the initial conditions which characterize their society and culture. Diaspora of migrant people contributed to multiculturalism on the one hand and the rise of cultural 'identity' and 'individuality' on the other.

Diaspora is just like the sprouting process of a seed. Like a seed Diaspora of migrants show how one flows and reaches at a destination and how he/she adjusts with the different environment and remains double sided just like a seed. The idea of identity and home disturbs them even if they probably germinate there. Actually Diaspora is more than migration and settling there; it is the nostalgia to go back home. As McLeod states in *Beginning Post-Colonialism*:

Conventional ideas of 'home' and 'belonging' depend on clearly defined, static notions of being 'in place' which can no longer be applicable to the world where the experience and legacy of migration are altering the ways in which individuals think of their relation to place, and how they might 'layclaim' lands that are difficult to think in terms of 'home' or 'belonging'. (McLeod 214)

Diaspora community faces many problems in new country but the major and most painful is 'identity crisis'. Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* primarily deals with the problem of 'being', the changing patterns of human relationships and rootlessness of characters who in order to become someone else lead a confused life.

Published in 2003 *The Namesake*, raises questions of identity and problem of existence. Gogol is doubly alienated for not only being the son of a diasporic couple (self-exiled), but also for having a strange name. Like his father he could not outshine in his career, nor could he established any intimate relationship. *The Namesake* captures the experiences, pain, psyche and inner turmoil of the characters.

Diaspora basically deals with the following features, which are remarkably highlighted by Lahiri in *The Namesake*, such as:

It is the migration from homelands but with memories of the past, Leaving home in search of work, Memory of homeland, Satisfaction by arrival to ones country, Strong consciousness about history, culture and heritage, Experience as a misfit in the other society. (Lahiri 120)

Lahiri expressed all these features by narrating the story of a family and she has covered love, sorrow, pain, emptiness, faith and life of all the Diaspora community. In Diaspora, we prepared to disown our own country, but also our selves in order to live like others. It is indeed our destiny as it were, caught as we are in the world of some concern other than our own genuine self. Diaspora is certainly a site for civilizing duality. Ashima Bhaduri, a student in a degree college in Calcutta married Ashoke Ganguli, experiences the clash of cultures in the United States. Ashoke migrated to United States in search of a "better life" but the migration was not just a move, it was a move with memories. Ashima as a house wife suffers more. She finds herself surrounded by strangers, but she recovered with the indulgence in her family. The arrival of the baby astonished her:

She'd been astonished by her body's ability to make life, exactly as her mother and grandmother and all her great grandmothers had done. (Lahiri 6)

Ashima carries the memory of homeland and she feels satisfied with the remembrance of India. The life style of people living in America makes her alienated and disturbed. Ashoke on the other hand does not share much, he carries the past silently however his heart always remains Indian. The train accident had shaken him. Ashoke felt inspired to leave India and went to America to restart his life. Ashoke's heart was in a foreign land, though his body was still in India. But he couldn't see himself apart from the sight of his Diaspora. All the memories of train accident were still fresh in his mind. He still thanked Gogol for saving his life. All the images haunt him whenever he sleeps. These images stand for his relation with India and show his unconsciousness attachment in the dream.

Diaspora itself is unreal at base in case of Ashoke because the choice to go to America is not made by him but by Ghosh. Even the book which he reads is not of his own choice, it was given by his grandfather. When he goes to select Ashima for marriage, there one can see that he doesn't show any interest which shows that Ashoke is mentally attached to America and that was all for him. Here with the character of Ashoke, Lahiri portrays the character of a person who is both influenced by the Indian culture as well as the American. As an Indian he is a bit shy and shows less interest in his would-be wife, at the same time his focus is on returning back to America. Thus America is an 'attraction', people go there to fulfill their 'American Dream'. For Ashoke, America stands for job but Ashima goes there to stay with her husband at a new place. Thus 'American Dream' varies from person to person. We can see hybridity in culture at this point he is Indian by roots but wants to adopt American culture. A hybrid is something that mixed, and hybridity is simply a mixture of two separate races, cultures and plants. In this sense, he feels himself in the middle of two realities. One reality is of his birthright as an American and the other is his undying Indian identity. Ethnically moved immigrants live in two worlds. The second generation thinks much like Americans but the first generation hardly accepts themselves as an American. The tension grows between the relationship between the parents and their children. This clash further doubles the sense of isolation, loneliness and alienation because they see their children going far away from them.

In the novel Ashima suffers for so many reasons. She suffers loneliness when she reaches America, she remains alone after the death of Ashoke and feels isolated because of the indulgence of Gogol in American world. The second generation on the other hand feels suffocated with their Indian identity and later on when they try to accept it then it becomes even more difficult for them to be a part of it. Thus just like their parents they see themselves in the two worlds. By becoming the part of two cultures Gogol realizes that he doesn't belong to any. At one side he sees himself as a part of American culture and tries to maintain his belongingness to it; on the other side he realizes that this culture is not accepting him as no doubt he belongs to America but America does not belong to him. Similarly he belongs to India and to some extent he doesn't. He doesn't belong to anywhere completely. Jhumpa Lahiri's diasporic element is a choice or a desire to act as others do. Immigrants are haunted by sense of loss and emptiness. Ashima recalls her home when she is in hospital, and she tries to talk to others but could not. At this moment both Ashima and Ashoke missed their parents and grandparents because without them Gogol's birth was only half truth. In India, people celebrate various ceremonies before and after the birth of a

baby. But here the couple realizes the emptiness at the birth of Gogol because there is nobody with whom they can share their joy. In Bengali, the word for pet name is *daknam*, which means the name by which a person is called by friends, family and other inmates at home. Ashima's pet name was Mona and Ashoke's nick name was Mithu. This is another mark of Diasporic Consciousness, which means we live in fractured world. We want identity in everything whether we are in a relationship or we are normally standing and talking to somebody. In India, we have different identities but in a foreign land we are just Indians. In actual diasporic situation, such as in an American hospital where Gogol was delivered to the world, the nurse demanded the name of the new born baby. Both Ashoke and Ashima felt the necessity of name. Nandi calls the boy "Bura" which means "old man". The couple also named the baby Bura. So Gogol right from his childhood experiences so many names which are also a sign of shifting identity. Salman Rushdie in his essay 'Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism' addressed the identity of the Indian Diaspora:

Our identity is at once plural and partial. Sometimes we feel that we straddle two cultures; at other times that we fall between two stools. (Rushdie 1991)

In *The Namesake*, Gogol lets go of his inherited culture to assume an American identity. We see Gogol's efforts to alienate himself from his parents by spending all the time with Maxine and her parents. Similarly, he is alienated from Ratliffs and their friends, since they never knew him as Gogol and they are unsure of his past. He didn't want to attend his father's alma-mater and lives in an apartment in Central Square and doesn't want to visit the streets about which his parents speak nostalgically. He didn't want to go home at the weekends and never wish to attend the Bengali parties. Despite that, he carries plural identity.

Man is essentially social and in need of 'Identity' for living within society. Gogol's struggle with the Russian name troubles him not just for the sake of name but for so many other things also. He becomes part of joke among friends, parties and gatherings. This very different name somehow attracts and at the same time remains a question for its meaning and relation. Gogol is neither American nor Indian. Gogol tries to change his name to Nikhil but Nikhil remains the name only in paper, not in the real world, people still kept calling him Gogol but he constantly tries to change his name from Gogol to Nikhil and Nikhil to Nic. It was all like living life like others but the pain continuous of not living his own life. Gogol thus suffered all his life with the loss of identity. Both sad and amusing aspects come out of his name. Sonia called him "Goggles". The name remains controversial. Perhaps

his name is a joke for others, but for him it is everything. Gogol said that there's no such thing as perfect name. He further says, "I think that human beings should be allowed to name themselves when they turn eighteen". But for Ashoke, naming his son Gogol carries so many reasons. As he says:

... More than with any other writer. Do you know why? ...
He spent most of his adult life homeland. Like me. Ashoke
again adds, "We all came out of Gogol's Overcoat (Lahiri
77-78)

The Namesake is not only the identity crisis of one name but many. In India we get acknowledged or identified even with several relationships which we represent, we are somebody's Bua, Chachi, Maasi, Bhabhi, and Tayi but here in America we are 'just names'. When Gangulis are addressed by Maxine as Ashoke and Ashima without the name of any relation; pinches the stereotypical side of Ashoke and Ashima because they were expecting some relevant and relational name for them from Maxine rather than their names.

Isolation is again the main theme of the novel. Man always needs a company, even a child needs company to play with. Ashima Ganguli faces isolation from the very beginning of the novel and that isolation suffocated her. Gogol also faces isolation after his break-ups. The novel is also about short-term relationships and need for a partner to fulfill the emptiness of life. In India, we have so many people to share with, but in America the characters feel isolated. The novel also talks about the acceptance and change due to the circumstances. Ashima who was once a typical Bengali wife is now a changed woman. She often asks Gogol about his girlfriends. She feels sad because of his loneliness. She even suggests him to patch things up with Maxine.

The Namesake is about the continuity and the role of travelling without stopping. Time never stops for anyone whether it is good or bad one has to face it in all ways and there is no way-out. And also with the Diaspora aspects, just like the seeds one should germinate wherever one reaches. Life is all about acceptance. If we do not accept the truth we suffer. To start a new life something previously adjusted destroys to give space to new things. But carrying both the things together sometimes becomes tough.

Lahiri has dramatized not only the loss of identity but also the growth of individual by accepting the truth. Gogol accepts his name, Ashima returns back to India, and Gogol's slowly and gradually recover from several break-ups and a failed marriage. Moushumi outwardly seems a strong decision maker but she is also a victim of multiculturalism. Gogol recovers and manages to understand the complex experiences of Diaspora.

The novel, thus, highlights the complexities of Diasporic Community. Life remains confused until one realizes the truth of identity. Identity in a nutshell thus not remaining or sticking to one's name or country, actually this mixed identity gives birth to new identity. Hybrid identity because of multiculturalism is eventually a new identity and only by accepting this truth one can get rid of the nostalgia of past memories, home sickness and sense of homelessness. One's identity lies where one sees oneself.

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