

Cultural Spaces: Re-Thinking Alterity in Diasporic Fiction

Shalini Attri

Abstract

Diaspora includes trans-state triadic networks involving a wide range of ethnic communities. The term is considered 'transnational' or 'other' and is given a 'metaphoric designation' to describe dislocated communities of people, expatriates, and political refugees leaving their native homeland because of colonial expansion, trade, better prospects, globalization, warfare, or other natural calamities. The withholding of collective memory, alienation, and identity crisis are the features of diaspora and diasporic literature. Literature, a product of culture is the illustration and representation of ideas and thoughts, which gives the authors an articulation of their minds in the form of writings. In the post-modern world, identities have been constructed and deconstructed flexibly due to the movement of people. The present paper will discuss the representation, alterity, and sustenance of Indian culture in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* where culture becomes a metaphor of nativity and space in the host country. Lahiri uses memory as a tool to preserve culture and it is through the eyes of first-generation settlers that the second generation frames an understanding of their homeland and culture. The paper further focuses on migration and the development of the global identity of Indians with a focus on Bengali identity through diasporic re-orientations, alterity, and representations.

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

Literature of the 'migrant voices' has received recognition throughout the world, and, has evolved as a distinct literary genre. It has produced a radical transformation or 'shift' in literary and multidisciplinary studies. The term alterity is taken from the Latin word *alteritas* meaning 'different' (qtd. in Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 9). Alterity, in the post-colonial context, is the state of being 'different' or 'Other' i.e., where one

group separates itself which corresponds with identity politics. Many writers equate alterity with marginality but rethinking alterity as the 'central other' existing in 'neutral state' positions the 'otherness' to center. The cultural production and otherness together construct identity. The 'new voices' that emerged negotiate spaces within the social, cultural, political, and economic contexts, asserting a separate identity of native or diasporic writers. These voices offer a conceptual framework of how 'representation' works in migrant texts, providing an understanding of the transformative potential of literature. The idea of 'Representation' formulating in Aristotle's *Poetics* is connected with aesthetics and semiotics. It can be seen as a construct, artifice, invention, or an imaginative and creative act of an artist. Early twentieth-century writers posed a serious challenge to how reality could be represented. Since it is impossible to separate 'representation' from the culture and society that produces it, therefore all representations are essentially social and cultural. For Stuart Hall, a 'representation' connects meaning and language to culture whereas 'production and circulation of the meaning of language' produce images (1-2). Representation further implies the ability of texts to draw upon the features of the world and present them to the viewers and readers not as reflections but as constructions. Image construction through representation presents culture and society loaded with pre-existing meaning and also generating new meanings. The writers of diaspora constructed new meanings of home, culture, identity, and hybridity through their works.

While considering different cultures, Multiculturalism possesses shades of sanguinity where the diasporic writers celebrate their 'culture and space'. The writers of the diaspora have made their homeland unforgettable and famous through their writings demonstrating a sense of 'belonging' and 'Identity'. The diasporic literature represents the rebuilding and recreating of memories through the process of migration and this discourse has also changed its course by focusing on convergence and coexistence. In diasporic texts the act of remembering and memorizing frames the argument around the cultural minorities. Thus, they become the catalysts and play an important role in the creation of history, culture, and construction of a nation of past, a nation in their memory. Memory is a storehouse of the past while the diasporic narratives provide a connection between past (native place) and present (adopted place) further stressing the 'prospect of return'. The re-positioning of social memory, shaping of identities, and alternative stories which construct the 'home' culture are few observations that form the setting of diasporic works. The geographical dispersion, decentering and imaginary plenitudes of 'Home' force the authors to patronize the dislocated.

There has always been a close connection between migration and literature. Many writers have depicted nostalgia, cultural conflict, and alienation in their works. These diasporic authors effectively pondered on social isolation, historical identification, subjectivity, loss, and displacement of the migrants. Simultaneously, there also emerged a new critical dimension that paid attention to developmental migration which no longer makes one feel nostalgic or alienated.

Many writers have described their adopted land as 'land of opportunity, transformation, and construction of new identity. It also offers dialogues on the constructive outcome of 'New Home' where migrants have a key role to play i.e.,safeguarding their identity and culture. Diasporic literature gives an in-depth knowledge of the culture of a particular country. It would be appropriate to mention *The Penguin Atlas of Diasporas* that gives four yardsticks for Diaspora: "The collective forced dispersion of religious/ethnic group... collective memory, which transmits both historical facts that precipitated the dispersion and a cultural heritage ...the will to survive as a minority by transmitting a heritage ..." (Fernandez and Diwedi X). Diaspora is now an expanded concept "as it has evolved to operate as traveling metaphor associated with tropes of mobility, displacement, borders and crossings" (qtd. in Keown, Murphy and Proctor 1). The notion of diaspora with the development of different theoretical frameworks given by critics including Homi Bhabha, Stuart Hall, and Gayatri Spivak have investigated and conferred new elucidation and understanding of cultures cross bordering the nation-states. Similarly, James Procter describes, "diaspora as a geographical phenomenon – the traversal of physical terrain by an individual or a group – as well as a theoretical concept: a way of thinking or of representing the world" (qtd. in Shackleton 4).

Diaspora as a theory sees migration as an adjustment to a new environment, creation of new understanding, dislocations, and transformations. Thus, many diasporic authors write with different standpoints and experiences. Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* elaborates on the freedom from the past in contrast to Carlyle Phillip's work on African diaspora which is engrossed in past detaching from the multicultural present. Jonathan P.A. Sell gives an informative but questionable new vision of the representation of multicultural identities and suggests models of identity and history where the practices of the past do not invade the present. While dealing with the diasporic notion Edward Said in his article 'Reflections on Exile', defines exile as an enforced state in terminal loss (qtd. in Tziovas 193). The mentioned authors thus establish that di-

aspora is a dual ontology that looks in two directions. The diasporic writers have made their homeland unforgettable and famous by writing about it and by writing in the adopted language they also validate their 'belongingness' and 'Identity' for the 'new home'.

The narratives produced by these diasporic writers have encouraged many critics and academics to categorize literature in a specific frame. Their literature, especially novels and short stories—brought more recognition and visibility. While dealing with literary texts produced by hybrid and hyphenated, diasporic writers present a finite union that brings the divergence of these works to a universal commitment. The culture then plays a prominent role for diasporic people. The use of the term culture goes back to the late eighteenth century and it has been defined and viewed differently in various disciplines. Anthropologists use the term culture as a descriptive and unifying concept that finds identification with distinct communities or traditions. Historians concentrate on the formation of particular patterns of culture whereas sociologists focus on the recurrent process rather than emphasizing on the unique patterns of culture. Culture is a way of living as Raymond Williams in *Culture and Society* defines it as an individual habit of mind, the state of the intellectual development of whole society, arts, and whole way of life of a group of people (qtd. in Milner and Browitt 2).

Culture is the construct of society that brings forth the identity prominent. Jenks gave four categories of Culture: Culture is cerebral or a cognitive category; Culture is a collective category; Culture is descriptive; culture is a social category (Jenks 8-9). Likewise, Edward Taylor's definition of culture "in an ethnographic sense is a complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, laws, customs and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (1). These definitional concepts sum up culture as a dynamic process that evolves, and, the resultant interactions that occur due to movement are termed as acculturation i.e., cultural modification. Thus, culture is not inherited biologically it is inculcated through socialization within a particular cultural context. Indian diaspora is one of the largest diasporas in the whole world as per the UN world migration report. This becomes a major reason for the spreading of Indian culture, preservation of heritage, customs, and values.

Jhumpa Lahiri, a diasporic author born in London in 1967 and of Bengali origin emigrated from India and was raised in Rhode Island. She learned about her Bengali heritage by traveling to Kolkata (Calcutta), thus knowing about and becoming a part of her extended family. Her writings draw upon the matters of life-changing, relationships, sudden calamities, sense of loss, and the powers of survival. Her protagonists or the central characters are placed in India and abroad exploring individual

and collective identities. As a writer, she articulates compassion for the alienated immigrants and her characters are explorers in search of self.

Lahiri's *The Namesake* (2003) is a trope of uprooted immigrants that has open-ended dialogues on psycho-cultural space. The narrative describes the Ganguli family who moves from their tradition-bound life in Calcutta into America mingling East and West. Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli, the central characters settle in Cambridge, Massachusetts and they have two children Gogol and Sonia born and raised in Boston. Ashoke tries to adapt to the transformed state while his wife craves for home. 'Home' here occupies a special place as it has remained a typical feature in the diasporic narratives. This work is a narrative that takes into account characters' spatial and locational attachment to their native place. Although Ashoke climbs the academic ladder but he never compares or analyzes the merits and demerits of the two countries.

As far as the duality of the diasporic author, Lahiri falls into the former category as we find her talking about the tradition and culture of her ancestors from Bengal. The couple in the narrative practices cultural blending and movement having a variety of identity codes. The idea of diaspora as a notional construct develops out of experiences of alienation and memory of home and seeks to record the concept of heterogeneous culture. Space becomes the imperative parameter and provides various designs about Indian culture in the host country. The text creates spaces in which identities unite in different ways along with the collective reminiscence of their homeland. Accordingly, the diaspora has taken up a changed dimension giving a new sociological construct to the culture of a country and is an interesting method to introduce writers' 'memoirs' in fictional form functioning as memory construction of culture. Culture in *The Namesake* emerges as a revelation into the individual psyche and enters social traditions as symbols.

Jhumpa Lahiri's work addresses evolving definitions about family, nationality, nativity, and ethnic-global movement. The family connections of the trio-Ashima, Ashoke and Gogol explain the complexities existing due to migration and displacement. Ashima and Gogol are more inclined towards their roots, howsoever, Gogol being American born has adopted hybridity. There are profound impressions of this intermingling of cultures in their personal and interpersonal relationships. After the colonial rule there developed a new understanding of nationality or nativity. People who have migrated from their native land got involved in a new setting but their hearts found solace for their land. They had been tempted

for life and stability but their inner self still craved for the nativity. The ethnicity which has been a part of globalization is dialectical in nature offering hybrid perspectives becoming the flux of diasporic ethnic categories. *The Namesake* investigates the notion of culture and identity that is formed and further elaborates how the characters existing in the new space have internalized the ethos of the culture they are raised in. Jhumpa Lahiri's writing is a discourse on the culture of origin i.e., Bengali culture, values, and customs. There are instances in her work where readers get to know that the people of West Bengal are called Bengalis. They experience the performance of certain rituals from birth till death. There is Goddess Durga/Kali in every religious practice they observe. There is *annaprasan* for the naming of a child, compulsory use of *haldi* (turmeric) during wedding ceremonies, and prohibition of wearing black on certain religious occasions. The immigrants of two generations from West Bengal, their American-born son Gogol and their journey from India to America and back to India make 'home' a continuous thought existing in their mind. The experience of Indian heritage, Gogol's disregard of his culture and customs, his slow embracing of Bengali culture conserved by his family are the cultural references that challenge the terrain of in-between spaces. Gogol's decision to marry Maxine, an American born infuriates his mother but his father's death changes Gogol and he becomes a follower of Indian customs and traditions. Cultural change occurs through interaction and hybridity with other cultures as it happens with Gogol which enunciates his reason to marry Maxine providing supposed flexibility to identity. But traditional identity supersedes the new identity, the actual cause of change in Gogol's viewpoint. Lahiri's vision negotiates paradoxes and differences, the real and imaginary, providing cultural critiques. The writer's culturally infected attitude reproduces new perspectives on the culture and country in which they live and also on the one to which they return from time to time.

Ashima's decision to return to Calcutta at the end of the novel again completes the circle of home and happiness which she got from Bengali culture. The reflective mode of Ashima to locate her society in the bigger picture is suggestive of the space between the two worlds. The diasporic existence expresses through creating a dialogue between identities and location of home and host country. This culture-oriented fiction enlarges on second-generation migrants like Gogol and Maushami and the key role played by Ashima and Ashoke in passing on their culture, customs, and tradition to the second generation.

The remnants of Bengali accents and vocabulary are the strands of cul-

ture and identity. The act of not calling husband's name in the very first chapter of *The Namesake* "When she calls out to Ashoke, she doesn't say his name...It's not the type of thing Bengali wives do" (2). The Celebration of the birth of the baby through the rice ceremony practicing different Bengali rituals as well as naming the boy had to be done by Ashima's Grandmother. Ashima's grandmother who is past eighty has named six great-grandchildren to do the honors.... The child needs to be fed with gold and silver (25). The usage of Bengali words like *daknam* for the name used at home and *bhalonam* for an official name is an act of preserving Bengali culture. Lahiri has emphatically used the native words to show her intent. Learning a native language allows the imbibing of cultural patterns. Language is a symbol of social identity. The author thus identifies with her own culture by using the words from a language of her native land. Language expresses ... embodies symbolizes cultural reality (Kramsch 3). The naming of the child is also based on Ashoke's memories and traditional ties at home. The name too becomes the marker of identity and culture. Linguistic and cultural heritage is transmitted through informal schooling at home. The children become bilinguals: In Bengali Class, Gogol is taught to read and write his ancestral alphabet, which begins at the back of his throat with an unaspirated and marches steadily across the roof of his mouth, ending with exclusive vowels that hover outside his lips (65-66).

Further, the celebration of Bengali festivals and worshipping of deities are elements of Bengali culture which again is transmitting of cultural values by parents to Gogol. The cross-culture encounter is not able to shake the relationship between Gogol and his parents which is the very ethos of Indian Culture. Although living in American culture, the Bengali culture becomes the main feature of Ganguli's household. The customs, rituals, language, food habits are the expression of their culture. On Gogol's birthday as well as his marriage with Maushami the "women are dressed in saris: the groom is dressed in Bengali manner(72). Ashoke's death too involves certain rituals that are fulfilled by Indians on death. The dinners are occasionally organized to keep the Bengali culture alive leading to cultural consolidation.

The women are ready to play an active part in the new culture but they still keep alive their traditions through their dressing, food habits, and home furnishings. Expanding on the bond between the home and the adopted country, the reflections in these narratives indicate the change of geographical boundaries that can intensely affect the mindset which was rooted deeply in the traditions of the native country. Migrant women like

Ashima experiences displacement intensely in comparison to men thus giving rise to internal conflict, push and pull between the adapted and their native culture. Diaspora is not merely a scattering or dispersion but an experience made up of collectivities and is also a move towards an understanding of one's culture. Almost all the migrants struggle due to the clash of diverse cultures, environments, alienation followed by the challenges to adjust, adapt and accept. Ashima had moved away from her location, but she recollects her culture and preserves it through customary practices which becomes a reminder of her identity and Gogol's identity later on. The oral transmission of customs is fulfilled by women who are the tale-tellers, the agents of socialization.

The diasporic narratives take into account the character's spatial and locational subjective relation to their homeland, their culture. They experience cultural mingling and social displacement which are uttered in mixed identity codes. Such concept of diasporic space as a theoretical construct, evolving out of the practical journey from alienation to acceptance seeks to project and map out the space of different cultures and heterogeneity. This space of experience is potent to become the pulsating contemporary parameter, offering various other new scopes of negotiations about the location of culture. Hybridization and Americanism are both cultural indicators that are visible in *The Namesake* leading to the transformation of Gogol thus narrowing the gap between his distant past.

Diasporic authors like Jhumpa Lahiri have used the concept of 'memory' quite frequently and efficiently. Memory as a tool is used by the first-generation immigrants to impart cultural values and ethics hence representing their heritage through the transmission of the cultural patterns of their native countries to their American-born children. Migrants are the intellectual, social, and political resources that construct identities. Memories of culture are recorded and documented in the form of writings that epitomizes the nation and culture. Exclusion creates a sense of insecurity which embeds more togetherness among the migrants and inclination towards their culture. For Code, Diasporic identities may be complex (qtd. in Agnew 12) but it is the representation of cultural traits, differences, and nation. The Indian immigrants act as a reagent in constructing Indian traditions. The diasporic writers are the outcome of different social and cultural circumstances, writing in a universal language belonging to the adopted and home country. The writings deal with multiple issues of the homeland with cultural, religious, and political specificity, building a cross-cultural bridge.

The hyphenated or hybrid identity of Gogol is replaced with the articula-

tion of Bengali culture and moves towards self-identification. The ability to cultivate the cultural qualities integrating them into the adopted country is an added feature of Lahiri's writings. Ashima becomes the instigator and promoter of Bengali ethos spreading the familial morals, Indian regional culture, of Identity. She is the carrier of cultural values while recognizing the differences and spaces in the host country.

To conclude, it can be reiterated that Diasporic literature, a discourse on identity, dislocation, hybridity, and multiculturalism, is also an illustration of one's roots, a way of redefining the country of origin registering cultural location. Jhumpa Lahiri, though a second-generation immigrant, successfully portrays nuances of Indian culture through Ashima, Ashoke, and Gogol. Through her narratives, she has effectively crafted Indianness that allows her to be seen more like an Indian. The culture, identity and social sphere are representational discourse shaping 'alterity' in Lahiri's work. The otherness delivers categorization as one gets conscious of self-image. While establishing identity categories the diasporic people search for their origin and contest the prevailing social identities. The new space that these diasporic characters acquire allows them to speak their own languages, recover their own histories, as well as construct their new roots.

Works Cited

- Agnew, Vijay. eds. *Diaspora, Memory and Identity*. University of Toronto Press, 2005.
- Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts*. London: Routledge, 2007.
- Fernandez, Cristina M. Gamez, and Veena Diwedi. *Shaping Indian Diaspora*. Maryland: Lexington Books, 2015.
- Hall, Stuart, eds. *Representation: Cultural Representation and Signifying Practices*. London: Sage Publication, 1997.
- Jenks, Chris, eds. *Culture: Critical Concepts in Sociology Volume 1*. London: Routledge, 2003.
- Keown, Michelle, David Murphy, and James Proctor, eds. *Comparing Postcolonial Diasporas*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.

-
- Kramersch, Claire. *Language and Culture*. Oxford UP, 1998.
- Lahiri, Jhumpa. *The Namesake*. Boston: Mariner Books, 2003.
- Milner, Andrew, and Jeff Browitt. *Contemporary Cultural Theory: An Introduction*. Oxon: Routledge, 1991.
- Raghuram, Parvati, et al., eds. *Tracing an Indian Diaspora: Contexts, Memories and Representations*. Sage Publications, 2008.
- Shackleton, Mark. *Diasporic Literature and Theory: Where and Now*. UK: Cambridge Scholar Publishing, 2008.
- Taylor, Edward B. *Primitive Culture: Researches into Development of Mythology Vol 1*. John Murray, 1871.
- Tziovas, Dimitris eds. *Greek Diaspora and Migration Since 1700: Society, Politics and Culture*. Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2009.