

## **Immigrant Experiences in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake***

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Jhumpa Lahiri, a Pulitzer Prize winner is one of the best diasporic writers in English fiction. She has enhanced the Indian English writing with her meticulous dexterity. She is widely read throughout the world particularly for her diasporic consciousness. She has influenced many other great writers. Her beautiful novel *The Namesake* explores the issues of alienation, identity, discrimination, homesickness etc. She has depicted the portrayal of many multicultural issues in her novel. This novel can be said as the best example of immigration. In this novel she has depicted the sufferings of immigrants in an alien land.*

**Keywords:** *Immigration, Alienation, Displacement, Identity, Homesickness, Discrimination.*

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### **Introduction:**

Diaspora is one of the most discussed phenomena of present time which inevitably associates itself with the issues of nation, migration, culture, and identity and deals with the human experiences such as dislocation, marginalisation, leads her attempt to bridge the gap between two generation as well as the two totally different cultures they are place in are pole apart and never twain can meet. Even then, adjustment is very necessary for survival in a foreign society and therefore they adjust not only with the manners and mores of the new society but also with the food requirement, discrimination, homelessness, memory and longing. Diasporic people, therefore, adopt various strategies to cope up and survive in the host land

and food becomes an infallible mode to cement the fragile bridge between their past and present. The implication is that one can easily remain rooted in one's home culture and be a part of the host culture at the same time without affecting one's individuality and distinctness of identity. Jhumpa Lahiri, the Pulitzer prize winner for the year 2000, is a significant writer of Indian Diaspora who has enriched the corpus of international writing in English. Her novel *The Namesake* deals with the tribulations of the immigrants in an alien land, the yearnings of exile and the emotional bafflement of cross cultural dilemmas. The novel continues to develop further the themes of cultural alienation and loss of identity. She tries to incarcerate the experiences and cultural dilemmas of 30 year struggle for the Ganguli family, for their integration and assimilation into alien. Lahiri's protagonists are the continental immigrants but they endure cultural introspection. They have their conflict of consciousness between two selves- the native and the foreign. They have their journey towards home and identity, being recognized as unsettling race through alienation, cultural conflict and hybrid culture. By carefully delineating the selves of her tormented characters she has imparted universality to their themes. Thus her narratives are the real social documents on tormented souls not with the usual sound and fury but rather through imaginative reconstructions.

Jhumpa Lahiri, had received critical acclamation for her warm and intricate portrayal of family life and Indian immigrants trying to be on both sides of the two cultures- their Indian heritage and the American dream, Lahiri from her childhood had experienced the conflicts experienced by an immigrant who has to continuously struggle with her environment and herself in order to find her true identity in the world. In her novel "The Namesake" she portrays the themes of cultural alienation and loss of identity that the immigrant faces in making a new home in foreign country. *The Namesake* revolves around the life of an Indian immigrant couple Ashima & Ashok Ganguli who have come to create a new life for opportunities for themselves in the University of Suburbs in Boston. The novel opens with Ashima Ganguli trying to make a spicy Indian snack from African ingredients - Rice Krispies & Planters peanuts- but "as usual, there's something missing". Ashima, who is pregnant when taken to the hospital for delivery does not find anything customary in America - a country, where she is designed to spend her rest of life and even in labours she is petrified to elevate a child in country where "Life seems so tentative and spare". The novel begins with the pathetic depiction of apprehension, clumsiness and an assortment of psycho-sociological problems such as longing, rootlessness, estrangement, schizophrenia experienced by Ashima,

who at a young age has migrated to a country where "she is related to no one". Motherliness for Ashima does not bring only cheerfulness but also the menace of raising the child all alone in country of strangers. The child's birth was a lonesome celebration and the realization that his entry in the world was, "unaccompanied and deprived" laid the foundation of that predicament that small child had to experience throughout his life. Ashima's struggle to adjust in a foreign country, to become accustomed her to the newly found atmosphere is the struggle of every immigrant to expose their self- identity in an alien land. Feeling lonely and displaced in a foreign land, Ashima begins to feel that: Being a foreigner is a sort of life-long pregnancy-a perpetual wait, a constant burden, a continuous feeling out of sorts. It is an on-going responsibility, a parenthesis in what had once been ordinary life, only to discover that previous life has vanished, replaced by something more complicated and demanding like pregnancy being a foreigner Ashima believes, is something that elicit the same curiosity from strangers, the same combination of pity and respect. Being an Indian woman Ashima, had learnt from the childhood to give up her own needs and cravings in order to gratify her husband and family. So for her, the pain, the longing for going back to her own country, own land has been bottled up in some secluded corner of her heart, to herself. She does not like to share her longing to her native country as it would hurt her husband Ashok or worry her parents. Ashima feels upset, homesick and sulks alone in their apartment that is too hot in summer and too cold in the winter far removed from the descriptions of houses in the English novels she has read. She feels completely dislocated from her comfortable home of her home to that of her foreign home. Most of the time, she used to think about the activities going on there. Ashima progressively adjusts herself to the new environs and devises a schedule for herself where she absolutely merges herself in looking after Gogol, her son, who demands her extreme commitment and "last ounce of strength". She starts accepting the American ways of living but longing for her home country in her is kept intact by adhering to the Indian traditions and rituals. By the time Gogol is six months old, they know enough people to entertain on a proper scale on the occasion of Gogol's Annaprasan. The connection, the contact with Indian culture is kept integral by firmly following the rituals that are part of Indian culture. Ashok and Ashima create a sense of Indianness for themselves, by getting them familiar with all the Bengali families living around. She also maintains address books in which she has recorded the names and address of every Indian whom she comes across. She prides herself on each entry and feels fortunate to "have the fortune to share rice with them in a foreign land". Her discomfort with the life around her represents the incomprehensible

world of American immigrants who are born in one country but squander their life either gracefully engrossed or completely drowning in the civilization of another people. The anxiety, the fear of losing one's identity in an entirely foreign land, is passed on to the next generation also. Ashok and Ashima's son Gogol, who emerges as the central figure in the novel is the typical example of this phenomenon. As T. S Eliot categorised culture of society in two ways, Now there are of course higher cultures and lower cultures, and higher cultures in general are distinguished by differentiation of function, so that you can speak of the less cultured and the more cultured strata of society, and, finally, you can speak of individuals as being exceptionally cultured.(Eliot:1948 )

*The Namesake* successfully deals not only with issues of different culture and sufferings of the new immigrants, but also with the identity crisis of second generation immigrants, who have no intention to be linked with India in any way, but fails to become hundred percent Americans in their approaches to life. Although the immigrants try their best to preserve their heritage and culture, in the foreign land they cannot help but imbibe the social and cultural traditions of the host country, for that first generation immigrants train their children in the Bengali language, literature and history and expose them to their religious customs, traditions, beliefs, food habit, and social mannerism. Culture is a concept that includes a refining and elevating element, each society's reservoir of the best that has been known and thought, as Mathew Arnold put it in the 1860's Arnold believed that culture palliates, if it does not altogether neutralizes, the ravage of a modern, aggressive, mercantile and brutalizing urban experience....In time culture comes to be associated , often aggressively, with the nation or the nation or the state, this differentiates 'us from them' almost always with some degree of identity, and a rather combative one at that....(xii) (Said:1993).

This shows that the first generation migrants overcome their cultural dilemmas and the sense of displacement by combining the sensibilities of both the cultures. This is evident of the fact that over a period of time, the two cultures do intertwine and a new "hybrid" cultural identity is formed. Lahiri shows that in this novel that the migrants and their children might adopt and assimilate the culture of the new country but they are not considered to be a part of the host country. Lahiri's focus is on the hidden layers of the psyche and the inner turned of the characters who find themselves entrapped in the midst of two cultures. Thus *The*

*Namesake* grapples with characters that are caught drifting between two worlds, two identities. They want to keep the memories of their homelands and to preserve its values, customs and belief. Majority of her protagonists who are second generation immigrants have in some way or other adjusted and assimilated themselves into the folds of the new culture. All these situations are the common feeling of loss, alienation, and marginalisation. To conclude, one can say that Lahiri wears the different hats of culture - The Indian, the British and the American. , she presents a wonderful multicultural world with the force of universal theme. Women have always played a significant role in every society and culture, their contribution being as important as that of men. In presenting these images women writers clearly indicate the status of women in society and their subjectivity and agency. How women see women is thus most crystalline indication of women's place in community and culture. Jhumpa Lahiri's first and only novel *The Namesake* (2003) explores the themes of immigrant experience, the clash of cultures and the trauma faced by the culturally displaced Indian settled in foreign countries. Some of the women of Lahiri's fiction fit into the traditional roles assigned to women. Her women do bear the burden of relationships and responsibilities to some extent, even in America, where women are supposed to be much more liberal and independent. But they do not hesitate to shed the burdens and compromise on carrying with their relationships only up to the extent of their convenience. In the novel, the protagonist is meant to signify the identity problem that he faces, exposed as he is to twin cultures - American and Indian .Her characters are the children of post-modern times so they do not recognize boundaries of any type political, social or cultural. Over a period of time intermixing of culture is inevitable in her debut novel. Lahiri tries to capture the experience and cultural dilemmas of so year struggle for integration and assimilation into alien culture. Loss and nostalgia are key point of diasporic writings and autobiographic note also obtained. There are again amalgamation of three cultures - Indian culture, American culture and British culture. A second generation Diaspora found in nostalgia and cope up with a new culture there is clash of culture and the trauma faced. So the assimilation of culture is must the need for them. Lahiri shows that all migrants carve their own 'routes' in the course of time and it is not necessary that they want to settle in the countries of their origin. Ashima is shown to grow with passage of time during her thirty two years of stay in America, retaining her culture in dress and values as well as assimilating the American culture for her personal growth and for the sake of her children. She after the death of her husband decides to divide her time every year both at Calcutta and in America, she has grown more confident, and

enjoys the best of both cultures. Sonia's decision to marry Ben (a half Chinese boy) and Maushumi's attitude of not sticking to any one culture or country shows how the second generation are going Global and are becoming multicultural. They are also exploring new identities through "translational contingencies of routes" (Gilroy: 1993). So, we come to the conclusion that while portraying the theme of cultural dilemmas and dislocations of the migrants, Lahiri does not remain confined to the dislocations of migrants in foreign lands alone. Rather she is philosophical in her approach; she presents dislocation as a permanent human condition.

Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* is an example of the Contemporary immigrant narration which doesn't place the idea of an 'American Drama' at the centre of the story, but rather positions the immigrant ethnic family within a community of cosmopolitan travellers. She chronicles dislocation and social unease in a fresh manner. She blends the two cultures and creates inner turmoil for many of her characters who struggle to balance the Western and Indian influence. Though she lives in US, got married with a Spanish American boyfriend, Alberto Vourvoulias in the traditional Bengali fashion but her works are imbued with the ethos of Indian culture and sensibility. Her novels are more about the co-operation of culture than about confrontation. Stereotypes are examined from a number of angles and deconstructed from both sides- Indian and American. *The Namesake* vividly portrays what Lahiri had expressed herself and she never allows her characters to be submerged under their problems, thus making *The Namesake* in welding the theme of immigration and displacement to that of human relationships.

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