

Rootless Roots : A study of Cultural Displacement in

Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*

Dhivya JK, Assistant Professor of English, Arunachala College of Engineering for Women, Manavilai.

E-mail: dhivyajkdhivya@gmail.com

Latha Devi R, Assistant Professor of English(Sl. Gr.), University College of Engineering, Nagercoil,
(Anna University Constituent College) E-mail: lathadevigiri@gmail.com

Abstract

Jhumpa Lahiri's second literary work, *The Namesake* (2003), centers on the experiences of the Indian diaspora and explores the complex realities of migration. Although the Indian diaspora has existed for centuries, it has only recently become a subject of serious interest in contemporary literature. Set in the years following India's independence, *The Namesake* follows an immigrant family's long journey who settles in the United States and navigate everyday life in a foreign soil. Lahiri demonstrates a nuanced understanding of the challenges immigrants face, particularly in reconciling differences in norms, values, culture, religion, language, and—most significantly—identity. This paper analyzes how the diasporic experience shapes the lives and identities of the vivid characters in *The Namesake*. Jhumpa Lahiri depicts the diasporic identity in *The Namesake* as a silent, internalised battle characterised by silence, fragmentation, and an ongoing sense of in-betweenness. The novel examines how identity is gradually and silently negotiated throughout time, memory, and generational differences rather than via spectacular confrontations. This conflict is embodied by characters like Ashima and Gogol, who both struggle with the weight of a name that binds them to a culture they

don't completely comprehend and yearn for the familiarity of Calcutta while playing the part of an immigrant mother in America. Lahiri employs silence as a metaphor for the unsaid burden of cultural displacement, where identity is ever-changing and belonging is never fully established, in addition to using it as a narrative device. This paper underscores and depicts the extensive effects of migration and the subsequent events which make the diasporans to face mental trauma throughout the course of their life in the alien soil.

Keywords: Trauma, Diaspora, Migration, Alienation, Silent struggle

Introduction

During the colonial era, people from Asia and Africa—the colonized continents, travelled to Europe, the imperial center in search of greener pastures. Even after the colonial period, migration continued for various reasons which include economic, political, cultural, and personal motivations. Many of these migrants eventually settled down in the new countries often retreat into a world of crises and conflict. This phenomenon of relocation and establishing a new life in foreign land is referred to as *diaspora*. However, assimilation into the host society often proves challenging, as the memory of the homeland—its religion, language, and culture—continues to occupy a central place in the migrants' identity and consciousness and it forms layers of taunting memories.

The Namesake by Jhumpa Lahiri is a moving examination of the experience of being an immigrant family and the novelist unpacks every layer of the immigrant lives through the Ganguli family as they deal with the existential, emotional, and cultural challenges of diaspora. The novel explores themes of Trauma, identity, cultural dislocation, generational conflict, identity development, and the quest for belonging through the lives of Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli, Bengali immigrants who settle in the United States, and their son Gogol. The psychological toll of immigration—not only the physical act of leaving home, but the emotional struggle of creating a new identity in a place that frequently feels

foreign and the contentious issues of migration is well documented by Lahiri. *The Namesake*, the title of the book, is a metaphor for the larger identity dilemma that diasporic people experience. Lahiri propagates the idea of existing clash that navigates the differences between traditional Indian values and modern American culture.

Diasporic Identity Crisis

No wonder it is irrefutable that the diasporic individuals face formidable obstacles from the very beginning of their settlement in a foreign land mainly due to the integration challenges. An underlying conflict divides their past and present lives, placing them in a state of inner turmoil. They are caught between opposing worlds and contrasting value systems, which thrusts them into the painful experience of living and allows them to lead a dual existence. Often, they come to the distressing realization that they are strangers both in their adopted homeland and in the country of their origin—belonging fully to neither. This duality leaves them unable to either relinquish their past or fully embrace the new environment. As a result, they are forced to undergo significant mental and behavioral adjustments, which can intensify their sense of alienation. To truly adapt, they must negotiate the complex process of transcending former identities while simultaneously integrating into the host culture. Lahiri examines these two types of dispersion in *The Namesake*. In her book *The Namesake*, Jhumpa Lahiri explores the eerie experience of Ashoke and Ashima, the Indian immigrants, and their first-generation children, Gogol and Sonia, who were born and raised in America. This book utilises issues of time, space, language, and culture to highlight the Indian diaspora. In her book, Lahiri mentions three continents: Asia, Europe, and North America. Through the major characters Ashoke, Ashima, and Gogol, she hopes to explore the diasporic conundrum that serves as the book's central theme. Diasporic anxiety is not particularly intense for Ashoke. In Ashima and Gogol too, it stands out clearly. Sonia is never included in the

novel's main conflict.

Navigating Diaspora

In *The Namesake*, Ashoke, the son of a customs official from Allahabad, moves to America to pursue a PhD in Fiber Optics. His fascination with the West, driven by the unpredictability and instability in India, is further solidified by a traumatic train accident that nearly claimed his life while traveling to his grandfather's home in Jamshedpur. This incident serves as a turning point, prompting his decision to leave the country “in which he was born and in which he had nearly died” (20), and escape from a “situation of conflict and uncertainty” (Bruce 146), toward the “metropolitan centre” (Bruce 7). Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Namesake* deeply explores the emotional, cultural, and psychological struggles that Ashoke and Ashima face as first-generation immigrants in the United States. Their journey reflects the classic tensions of the diaspora experience: balancing identities, sustaining traditions, and building a life in a land that often feels foreign.

Ashima, on the other hand, finds it difficult to adapt to life in America. She struggles with her inability to recreate the environment and culture of India, which leads her to express deep dissatisfaction with their life abroad. Shortly after the birth of their son Gogol, she pleads with Ashoke: “I’m saying I don’t want to raise Gogol alone in this country. It’s improper. I want to return” (33). However, over time, she begins to come to terms with the permanence of their life in the United States. She experiences the psychological burden of diaspora, caught between the emotional pull of her homeland and the practical reality of her new life. Eventually, Ashima adjusts her routines, gaining a degree of independence—venturing out alone to markets and managing household needs—which marks her gradual adaptation to the American way of life.

Ashima, as a diasporan, can be characterized by her “continual movement between home and abroad” (BK 6). The movement leads her to the creation and recreation of

the past continuously. For this, she

...dumps the letters onto her bed and goes through them, devoting an entire day to her parents' words, allowing her self a good cry. She revisits their affection and concern, conveyed weekly, faithfully, across continent- all the bits of news that had had nothing to do with her life in Cambridge but which had sustained her in those days nevertheless. (160)

She neither gives up her past life, nor embraces the present one. She hovers between these two worlds like the letter, sent by her grandmother with her son's name which was lost.

In spite of their undeniable attachment to their homeland, the diasporans feel a "yearning for a sense of belonging to the current place of abode"(216) that enhances their attachment to it. Moreover, Victor J. Ramraj, while commenting on the themes of Pillai's stories, brings the fact out: "The diasporic Indian community should be prepared to modify and adopt their traditions and customs according to modern Western thoughts and practices".(219)

The Silent Struggle of Diasporic Identity

Both Ashoke and Ashima are not indifferent to Ramraj's observation. For this reason, they never interfere in Gogol's personal life—be it his choice of subject for his honours course, his relationships with Ruth and Maxine, or even his decision to live with Maxine in her family home. Outwardly, they appear to accept the Americanized aspects of their son's life. However, this acceptance is not wholehearted; it is a forced accommodation rather than a freely given blessing. This internal conflict between acceptance and resistance generates a deep diasporic tension within them. The tension is more pronounced in Ashima, who remains significantly different from both her husband and her children. The subject of silence also encompasses the manner in which diasporic families express—or repress—their grief and emotional distress. The

novel demonstrates how Gogol's conception of himself and his ancestry is profoundly and silently disrupted by Ashoke's death. Gogol starts to subtly make peace with his cultural heritage as a result of this loss, indicating that diasporic identity is dynamic and changes as a result of reflective moments. Lahiri emphasises that a large portion of the diasporic struggle is lived in private, emotional domains rather than public settings in her nuanced yet impactful depiction of loss. Highlighting Ashima's inability to fully adapt to American life, Lahiri poignantly remarks:

“For being a foreigner, Ashima is beginning to realize, is a sort of lifelong pregnancy—a perpetual wait, a constant burden, a continuous feeling out of sorts.” At forty-eight, she has come to experience the solitude that her husband and son and daughter already know, and which they claim not to mind. “It’s not such a big deal,” her children tell her. “Everyone should live on their own at some point.” But Ashima feels too old to learn such a skill. (160)

Even, the decision for getting married with Moushomi Majoomder, an Indian like him, is really the inevitable reshuffling of his thoughts practised by him in his youth. Now, he tries to find out the similarities shared by both of them. Lahiri says, “in a way, he realizes, it’s true—they share the same coloring, the straight, thick eyebrows, the long, slender bodies, the high cheekbones and dark hair” (203). This realization of Gogol helps us in determining his changed mind. Jhumpa Lahiri masterfully portrays how identity, especially in the context of the diaspora, is not always loudly expressed but often silently negotiated—through inner conflict, cultural alienation, subtle acts of rebellion, and quiet moments of reflection. This “silent struggle” is deeply personal, continuous, and often invisible to outsiders.

Conclusion

At the end of the novel, both Ashima and Gogol—the two central characters—are finally able to reflect on their fragmented thoughts and reach a tentative understanding of their

future paths. Ashima decides to divide her time equally between India and the United States: “six months of her life in India, six months in the States” (275). This decision echoes Lahiri’s profound description: “True to the meaning of her name, she will be without borders, without a home of her own, a resident everywhere and nowhere” (276). Yet, this resolution is not a definitive solution. It is a compromise, and her emotional struggle remains unresolved. Ashima still carries the burden of dislocation and longing—common to many in the diaspora.

Ashima’s choice to sell the family home and spend half the year in India opens a new horizon of understanding for Gogol. It prompts him to reflect more deeply on his roots, his parents’ journey, and his own identity. Lahiri notes, “And yet these events have formed Gogol, shaped him, determined who he is” (287). In these moments, he begins to resemble his father—Ashoke—in his quiet rediscovery of self. He reconnects with the people, spaces, and memories that shaped his early life: his father’s books, his mother’s friends, and the home he once rejected

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