



DEPICTION OF CULTURAL DILEMMA IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S THE NAMESAKE

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Abstract:

Living between East and West and the introduction of western elements in a country creates a cultural clash. The diasporic Indian writers have generally dealt with characters from their own displaced community but some of them have also taken liking for Western characters and they have convinced in dealing with them. The meeting of East and West culture brings complications in the life of individuals. Jhumpa Lahiri, the Pulitzer Prize winner for the year 2000, is a significant writer of Indian Diaspora who has enriched the corpus of International writings in English. Being an immigrant herself, Lahiri deeply feels the importance of family bonds which tie people to their homelands. In her debut novel *The Namesake*, Lahiri tries to capture the experiences and cultural dilemmas of 30 year struggle of the Ganguly family, for their integration and assimilation into alien culture. There are several situations in the novel where Ashima and Ashoke face cultural dilemma and receive unfair treatment from the Americans despite their attempts to adjust themselves with the new culture. This article titled "Depiction of Cultural Dilemma in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*" attempts to explore the cultural dilemma that is apparently seen first in Ashima, the representative of first generation Indian immigrant and then in Gogol, her son, the representative of the second generation Indian immigrant.

Key Words: Diaspora, Culture, Dilemma, Immigrants, Integration & Assimilation

Diasporic or expatriate writing occupies a place of great significance between countries and cultures. Diasporic writers live on the margins of two countries and create cultural theories. Migration takes place due to various reasons and in the Indian context, the migratory movements were governed by historical, political and economic reasons including higher education, better prospects and marriage. The sense of homelessness which every immigrant suffers is genuine and intense; but in recent times it has been seen that this concept has been minimized and less intense through their social networking and sense of solidarity.

The chief characteristics features of the diasporic writings are the quest for identity and uprooting, insider and outsider syndrome, nostalgia, etc. Diasporic Literature helps in the circulation of information and in solving many problems too. This literature works as a channel to strengthen the bonds between the different states of India and of in relation with the other countries at large. The writers of the Indian diaspora, through their literary contributions have greatly enriched the English Literature.

When people happened to live in a new world; they have to construct their own world based on their acquired culture and civilization. Each and everyone have embedded in a particular social, cultural, social institutional or ideological context. A pride in one culture gives them the sense of historical and social rootedness whereas a weak and fractured sense of identity is isolated and confused. These people have to assume a dual culture and dual loyalties. They have to struggle between the forces of modernity and tradition. Living between East and West and the introduction of western elements in a country creates a cultural clash. The diasporic Indian writers have generally dealt with characters from their own displaced community but some of them have also taken liking for Western characters and they have convinced in dealing with them. The meeting of East and West culture brings complications in the life of individuals.

Jhumpa Lahiri, the Pulitzer Prize winner for the year 2000, is a significant writer of Indian Diaspora who has enriched the corpus of International writings in English. Being an immigrant herself, Lahiri deeply feels the importance of family bonds which tie people to their homelands. Her stories and her novel are set in India and America and established a certain Indo-American Cultural link, in the post-colonial context. In her debut novel *The Namesake*, Lahiri tries to capture the experiences and cultural dilemmas of 30 year struggle of the Ganguly family, for their integration and assimilation into alien culture. There are several situations in the novel where Ashima and Ashoke face cultural dilemma and receive unfair treatment from the Americans despite their attempts to adjust themselves with the new culture. This article titled "Depiction of Cultural Dilemma in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*" attempts to explore the cultural dilemma that is apparently seen first in Ashima, the representative of first generation Indian immigrant and then in Gogol, her son, the representative of the second generation Indian immigrant.

The novel, *The Namesake* deals with the geographical emotion of a Bengali family who were migrated to America. The novel starts off with the events leading to an arranged marriage of Ashima and Ashoke Ganguli in India, who migrated to America for employment of Ashoke. The novel describes the struggles and hardships of a Bengali couple who immigrate to the United States to form a life outside of everything they know. The

story begins as Ashoke and Ashima leave Calcutta, India and settle in Central Square, in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Ashima is living in Massachusetts, far away from her home in Calcutta. She is alone in her apartment most days while her husband is studying at MIT. She speaks a small amount of English and has no friends or relatives in America. Ashima gave birth to a son there. When they are about to move out of the hospital for their home, they are told that they could leave only after christening their son. Much to the discomfiture of them, they could not name the son according to Indian tradition, which is dearer to them. The name chosen by an elder in the family and sent by post is lost somehow. So, Ashoke names his son as Gogol, after Nicolai Gogol, a Russian novelist whose writings fascinated him. Ashoke has another reason also. It was the desire to read his book that saved his life when the train in which he travelled met with an accident and the rescuing team spotted him by identifying the book, which acted like a flag. Through a series of errors, their son's nickname, Gogol, becomes his official birth name, an event that will shape many aspects of life. Thus the title of the novel is justified.

Ashima and Ashoke are different from their children. While the parents are still holding onto the ideals and traditions of India, the children Gogol and Sonia are taking on the traditions of the land they call home. The lunches and the dinners that the children desire are the cultural norms of America while the Indian foods that the parents desire are the cultural norms of their home in India. Gogol resists his parent's traditions for several reasons. One being that the lack of communication between the parents and the children causes tension and misunderstanding. Gogol wants to be like every other American teenager and does not understand the value of his parent's traditions and so resists them.

A few years pass away, and Gogol becomes an architect, and falls in love with an American girl called Maxine. He starts to live with her family, and slowly becomes more closer to her family. With Maxine's family, Gogol is slowly becoming Americanised. Being born and bred in America, Gogol behaves himself an American in language, in dressing but his looks reveals his origin. Soon Gogol gets over the love he developed for her, as expected by his mother and loses the chance of entering into wedlock with Maxine because of his father's death. He held the ceremony for his late father, visited his mother and sister more often. On the advice of his mother, he marries a Bengali girl named Moushumi. Both Gogol and Moushumi assimilated the American culture, while keeping Bengali culture in their sides. Moushumi was of the view that she should not marry a Bengali man., like Gogol. She does not love Gogol. She has a liking for her white schoolmate. When Gogol comes to know about the affair between Moushumi and Dimitri, he gets divorce from her.

The story ends with Ashima selling her family home so that she can spend half a year in India with her brothers and the rest of the year in America. Sonia, Gogol's younger sister is engaged to an American named Ben. Gogol feels secluded. After a number of relationship failures and some few successes, Gogol is attracted to the comfort of his heritage. His perspective changes dramatically over the course of events, especially when he sets a bond with his father as well as the name given to him. Gogol has come to accept his name and picks up a collection of the Russian author's stories that his father had given him as a birthday present many years ago.

The Namesake opens with an apparent picture of contrasting culture of the two entirely different countries. In America, Ashima cannot imagine giving birth to a child in the hospital without being surrounded and cared by her mother, grandmother or aunt. The cultural dilemma in language begins when the doctor asks her questions in a language with which she is not comfortable. "She is told that she is still in early labour three centimetres dilated, beginning to efface. "What does it mean dilated?" She asks, and Dr. Ashley hold up two fingers side by side, then draws them apart, explaining the unimaginable thing her body must do in order for the baby to pass" (3). At the American departmental store, Gogol's parents are not properly attended and the cashier smirks at his parents' English accents and the salesman prefers to talk to Gogol, as if his parents were either incompetent or deaf.

Ashima being a traditional Indian woman who has been used to live in a joint Indian family, who, like other Indian women is very much in habit of talking and sharing thoughts. She feels lonely and deserted in the hospital when the other American woman who has just delivered a baby does not respond her as to what to expect such a moment. Ashoke and Ashima's ultimate settlement, after two years has their own home "67 Pemberton road" (51) which they buy in a locality where all the houses belong to Americans. Like immigrants of their communities, Ashima and Ashoke try to make their circle of Bengali acquaintances. They become friends with other Bengali's only "for the reason" that "they all come from Calcutta" (38)

These Bengali families gather on different occasions like the rice and name ceremonies of their children, their birthdays, marriages, deaths and Bengali festivals. They celebrate these as per Bengali customs, wearing their best traditional attires, thus trying to preserve their culture in a new land. In fact, their beliefs, traditions, customs, behaviours and values along with their possessions and belongings are carried by migrants with them to new places.

However, the problem of cultural dilemma does not stop there. Ashoke and Ashima face and overcome these unfavourable situations. But their children Gogol and Sonia who are bilingual, bicultural and rootless face the dilemma more severely. Their fate falls in between India and America. Being the children of Indian parents, they are forced to sit in Pujas and in other religious ceremonies along with the children of other Bengali

families. Although the immigrants try their best to preserve their heritage and culture, they cannot help but imbibe the social and cultural traditions of the host country. Though initially Ashoke does not like the celebration of Christmas and thanksgiving yet as Gogol recalls that it was for him and for Sonia, that his parents had gone to the trouble of learning these customs.

Gogol, in *The Namesake* like a typical second generation Indian-American, makes a conscious effort to be different from his parents. He wants to live in a world free from the Bengali culture, from the traditions that tie him down to a country and culture, he does not know. He experiences the feeling of in-betweenness and belonging to no one nation quite intensely throughout his life. Gogol had this strong need to assimilate, amalgamate. He does not want to be known as an outsider. He feels he is an American and he wants to distance himself from everything, which is Indian or Bengali. He has seen throughout his life how the natives treat his parents with distrust and disdain. The parents are humiliated and segregated by the hosts. Gogol wants to avoid such circumstances in his own life and to achieve a sense of belongingness, he is ready to disown what is his own and assimilate into a culture that he wants to make his own.

Thus, in *The Namesake*, the cultural dilemma is apparently seen first in Ashima, the representative of first generation Indian immigrant and then in Gogol, the representative of the second generation Indian immigrant. The novel also shows that the second-generation immigrants face cultural dilemmas more severely than the immigrants of the first. It is obvious that man faces cultural dilemmas and these dilemmas can be overcome by recognizing and respecting the cultural differences.

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