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The Identity and Cultural Issues in Jhumpa Lahiri's Novel "The Namesake"

Rupali P. Hiwarkar

Assistant Professor,
Department of English, Vivekanand College, Aurangabad.

Abstract:

The present paper endeavours to examine the identity and cultural issues and try to understand the conflicts before the second generation of Indian Diaspora with special reference to 'The Namesake' by Jhumpa Lahiri. She is an American author, born in educated middle class Bengali parents in London and grown up in Rhodes Island. Lahiri, genuinely exposes her diasporic experiences in her first novel 'The Namesake'. In this novel Jhumpa Lahiri records the problems and the perplexity of the characters, their feelings and emotions. In the stories the incidents take place one after another and the reflection of the incidents on the character, their reaction to the incidents is venerable. The development of each story and the wrongs being mended either by the character or by situation to bring a craving result on the minds of the readers is the most remarkable quality of her writings. In the case of the first generation, the immigrants face dilemma, consciousness of being an outsider and cultural identity crisis due to the language, dressing essence and food habits. But the second generation immigrants they mainly face the crisis in relation to the personality, identity and adjustment in an alien land. This paper looks into the vicissitude of name and sense of identity and belongingness of the characters of the Indian origin and immigrants in the USA.

Key words: *Diaspora, Identity, Culture, Immigrant, Alienation.*

Jumpha Lahiri is a popular Contemporary American writer of Indian origin was born in London on July 11, 1967 to Bengali parents. Jhumpa Lahiri was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for fiction on 10 April 2000 for her debut collection Interpreter of Maladies. Her mother always wanted and makes efforts to raise Jumpha Lahiri to be Indian although she born in London and brought up in America. She is also known as Nilanjana Sudeshna. She learned about her Bengali heritage from an early age. She is also the first person of South Asian Origin to win an individual prize. The novel Namesake which has also got the best book award of the year. The novel has won critical acclaim overseas for its elegance, perception and compassion in identifying lives transported from India to America. Lahiri an American born Indian has portrayed in a sensible and realistic way of the agonies of non-resident Indians. The present novel revolves around the difficulties faced by a Bengali couple in a different country the clash of cultures, the relationship between parents and children, the generation gap, identity problems etc. This paper makes a modest attempt to analyze the identity crisis, faced by the immigrants as portrayed in Lahiri's novel.

The Namesake revolves around the lives of the Ganguli's. The novel begins with the protagonists Gogol Ganguli's father Ashoke. Ashoke is a graduate student in engineering, who returns to Calcutta for an arranged marriage with Ashima Bhadhuri. They portray the first generation immigrants Ashima and Ashoke and the second generation immigrants Gogol, Sonia and Moushumi. In the beginning scene in which Ashima, a pregnant woman from Calcutta, who is about to deliver her first child, two months before the due date. She is married to Ashoke Ganguli, who is an engineering student at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology their families arranged their marriage and she moved to the USA to live with her husband. She lives in

a small and cold apartment and she is alone despite her pregnancy, which is an abnormal situation for the Indians. The naming of the child revolves around Ashoke's past emotional memories and also the traditional ties to the family left behind in India. She successfully bore a boy.

The naming of the child revolves around Ashoke's past emotional memories and also the traditional ties to the family left behind in India. The baby is named after Nikolai Gogol, famous Russian author. Ashoke selects Gogol as the pet name for the newborn baby. The reason is that Bengali culture requires a baby to have two names, a pet name to be called by family and a good name to be called in the society. Ashoke and Ashima have their first-born, whom they are forced to name, because of hospital rules and fear of 'red tape'. A baby cannot be released from the hospital with a birth certificate and a birth certificate needs a name. As an official name for their boy, they just write Gogol on the birth certificate, with a hope that they will change later with a good name. They also have a daughter Sonia, who totally portrays the second generation of immigrant Americans and is least involved in family matters.

Jhumpa Lahiri concerns her writings with the consciousness of the need for regaining roots in the tradition of India. She writes about how the English culture produces disenchantment in the minds of the expatriate Indians, and how they find themselves crushed under the burden of alienation and rootlessness. There is a sense of loss of identity with their own culture. With every detail of the experiences of both first and second generation of Indian immigrants, the topics of the stories range from emotional struggle of love to immigrants battling a new world.

The young boy Gogol is engrossed with the matter of his name. His hatred for his name is explained thus: "But instead he takes a deep breath and tells the people in the courtroom what he has never admitted to his parents. I hate the name Gogol. I've always hated it" (Lahiri 102). Gogol feels that his name is both unclear, illogical, wildly unreasonable, inappropriate and ridiculous. The reason is that he was born and brought up in American tradition more than the Indian traditions and cultures. He finally decides to get changed to Nikhil. It is as Nikhil, Gogol faces the predicament of establishing his real identity. He finds it impenetrable to acknowledge that Gogol and Nikhil are both a part of his own individual self. He is having two sides regarding changing his name. On one hand we find that Gogol, the son of Indian parents, behaves and acts according to Indian culture and values. On another hand, Nikhil is the free, open-minded person, who has nothing to do with Gogol. His parents never reject their old culture. Gogol and Sonia view their multi-cultural life differently. They both are interested and take pleasure in American food more than Bengali dishes. The reaction of his father is completely different when he announced that he had changed his name to Nikhil. At last the father says, "In America anything is possible. Do as you wish." Gogol feels free from all restrictions. He even begins to have relationships with white American women, keeping his private life a secret from his parents. Jhumpa Lahiri also admits that she never felt comfortable with her name. In her times it was very difficult for the people to spell it and what it meant. She feels that her name was causing people pain on some level. Jhumpa Lahiri's novel, not only speaks to immigrants but also to the original settlers on different levels. However, if a person is born on a foreign land, the question of identity starts to round up, he feels like a total stranger on the new land. The difference in skin colour, language, cultures from a unique blend where he starts to search for his own identity.

Diasporic writing is now a dayacquired admiration.Diaspora is a voyage towards self-recognition,self-definition and self-realization. The Indian Diaspora literature gathers information which solves many cultural and psychological problems. Lahiri's the Namesake is an example of the Modern day immigrant ethnic family. She balances the two cultures and shows struggling of her characters to balance the western and Indian influence. It also shows the character Ashima's determination, patience, boldness, caring mother and her sacrifice. We feel always sorry for her. She fulfilled all roles skillfully.

Thus, the paper analyzes the cultural dislocation of the characters in Jhumpa Lahiri's novel 'The Namesake' The novel leaves permanent and lasting impression on our hearts. Her skill of handling complexities of immigrant experience is a simple and straight forward but a very mature manner of a mature fiction writer. Lahiri weaves together number of narrative threads in her novel.

References

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