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7. Cultural Isolation and Displacement: A Study of Jhumpa Lahiri's Namesake

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Abstract

Jhumpa Lahiri is the Diaspora writer of Indian origin. She is the Pulitzer Prize winner of the year 2000. Her novel *The Namesake* deals with the problems of the immigrants in a solitary land. The novel continues to develop further the themes of cultural isolation, displacement and dislocation. She tries to intern the experiences of cultural isolation and dilemma of the Ganguli family. Lahiri's characters have their conflict of consciousness between two selves- the native and the foreign. They feel the sense of dislocation hence journey towards their own culture and identity. It illustrates several elements of transition that are common to the stories of immigrant families and their children. As depicted in the novel, there is the illustration of two generations and the variedness between their thoughts and existence. The first generation connects with their cultural identity and roots to a far greater degree than their children do. The second generation exists between two realities of culture including their ethnic heritage and the world they live in presently. There is a barrier between parents and first-generation American born children. Some immigrant families will not accept the fact that times are changing and they did not grow up in the same country, they have not faced the same struggles, or even began to realize how hard and much different America is than most other nations. I have especially focused on the sufferings of the immigrants which can be seen in the life of two characters portrayed in the novel Ashima, the mother and Gogol, her son.

Key words: isolation, displacement, culture, identity, name, self.

Jhumpa Lahiri is the Diaspora writer of Indian origin. She is the Pulitzer Prize winner of the year 2000. Her novel *The Namesake* deals with the problems of the immigrants in a solitary land. Name and Belongings are integral part of one's life. The novel has autobiographical elements as Lahiri herself is the child of migrated parents. Hence the loss of belongings is the major concern of writer as well as her characters. Lahiri's characters have their conflict of consciousness between two selves- the native and the distant. They feel the sense of dislocation hence they journey towards their own culture and identity. It illustrates several elements of

transition that are common to the stories of immigrant families and their children. As depicted in the novel, there is the illustration of two generations and the variedness between their thoughts and existence. The first generation connects with their cultural identity and roots to a far greater degree than their children do. The second generation exists between two realities of culture including their ethnic heritage and the world they live in presently. There is a barrier between parents and first-generation American born children. Some immigrant families will not accept the fact that times are changing and they did not grow up in the same country, they have not faced the same struggles, or even began to realize how hard and much different America is than most other nations. The present paper deals with the issue of the migration to present the pain and the problems that are faced by the immigrants and throughout their lives they have the feeling of *lost*. Lost culture, lost manners, lost relations, lost country, lost language and what, what and what not. They are only in a dangling state. Even their breath is not theirs always lamenting and memorizing the past. The first generation that have experienced the days in their homelands lives in memories and the second generations live by imagining their homelands but happy in the present life for it is their 'Home'. However, both of them are the restless ones who are in quest of something but helpless to find it. Thus, here is the special reference to cultural isolation and displacement. *The Namesake* Which can be described as for the sake of name moves around the life of an Indian immigrant couple Ashima and AshokGanguli who have come to make fortune and bring a better stand in life. The University of Suburbs in Boston was their destination for accepting opportunities and creating a better future. The novel opens with AshimaGanguli trying to make a spicy Indian snack from African ingredients - Rice crispies and lanterns peanuts- but as usual, there's something missing no doubt this could be psychological feeling too because she longs for her 'Homeland'. The dish might have the better taste than that of her own native dish but mind has left its dwelling place in search of the lost belongings.

Jhumpalahiri has authentically presented her own experience as an immigrant's child. In the novel Ashima's position as an immigrant lends her a unique perspective that her children can't share. They are unaware of the drastic experience of leaving home, because America is their Home. There is a bit of rift between her and her children which she could share only with her husband. 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 to the newly found atmosphere is the struggle of every immigrant to expose their self-identity in a strange land. As an Indian woman Ashima had learnt from the childhood to give up her own needs and cravings in order to satisfy her husband and family. So her longing for going back to her own country, own land has been en-caged in the corner of her heart. 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 mourns alone in the 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 to that of her foreign home. She has had reminiscences of Calcutta and her home there. As the time passes she adjusts herself to the new surroundings and forms a schedule for herself where she absolutely busies herself in looking after Gogol, who needs her care as he is a small child of six months. She starts accepting the American ways of living but longing for her home country in her is kept alive by performing Indian traditions and rituals. She is too traditional in her Indian style she arranges Gogol's Annaprasan in which the family invites all the other Bengali families residing in the surroundings. After this gathering she comes close to her own people and later maintains contacts with them. Ashok and Ashima create a sense of Indianness for themselves. 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 inexplicable world of American immigrants who are born in one country but waste their life either gracefully immersed by drowning in the civilization of others.

Ashok and Ashima's son Gogol, who emerges as the central figure in the novel is the typical example of this phenomenon. The worries, the nervousness, the agitation, which his mother had experienced, when he was in the womb; passes genetically to him. He inherits not only his parent's way of life or looks, but also inherits the same pain of being lost in the mire of an unknown culture. Gogol who is born in Indian immigrant family but presently, a citizen of America by his birth is restlessly searching Who I Am? He is like a nowhere man and feels himself to be caught in the strange land same as Lotus-Eaters in Tennyson's Poem *The Lotus Eaters*. Gogol is dissatisfied with his name and hates it for lacking self-respect. He experiences paradigm of shifting identities of his parents from being Ashoke and Ashimato Monu and Mithu. When their son is born, the couple anxiously awaits a letter from a grandmother that will decide the infant's name, but the letter never arrives. Unexpectedly, the

couple must decide on a name quickly, and settle on Gogol, the surname of Nikolai Gogol, a Russian author whose work Ashoke seems has saved his own life years earlier. Gogol Ganguli is born into a world of multicultural sensibilities, his name an indication of his own hybrid existence.

A trans-cultural existence has been Gogol's tragedy as much as it has been that of his parents. The second generations are more sufferers than the first because they have grown up in the world which was 'Borrowed' by their parents due to circumstances. They are living but always with the feeling of 'variedness.' As they have different colour and language those that of natives. We find immigrants even are in search of native food and find solace in the companion of some Indian families there who arrange a meal for them. Jhumpa Lahiri addresses the issue of the intersection of cultures and threat of the loss of cultural identity. Through some favorite metaphors she unfolds the strangeness of the situation in her stories as well as her novel. In her collection *Interpreter of Maladies* the story "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine" has Pirzada yearning for his roots, his country and his family in America. Dinner time becomes his supporter as it brings him closest to his country with the same kinds of food and similar eating habits shared by the host family of Lilia. Asha Choubey points out the food metaphor working through many a stories in this collection: "Food serves more as a symbol and acquires a metaphoric stature than mother tongue for the simple reason that even in India most of these characters speak English, but English food, though enjoyed occasionally, is still not an intrinsic part of the Indian cuisine or diasporic identity." Thus, Gogol presents the hyphenated space that Jhumpa Lahiri seems to occupy in America: "It is the complications of being a hyphenated American that informs her work, the same challenges that Gogol faces as the American-born person in *The Namesake*." In one of her interviews Jhumpa Lahiri has told that **Jhumpais** her pet name. Her real name is Nilanjana Sudeshna Lahiri.

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