

Jumpa Lahiri's Novel The Namesake In An Diasporic Perspective

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Abstract

The term "Diaspora" comes from the Greek word meaning "Dispersion". Diasporic literature encompasses stories about those who disperse or scatter away from their homeland. These novels follow characters who try to assimilate life in a new country, who for several reasons leave home and create a new one, sometimes thousands of kilometers from what was known to them. Jhumpa Lahiri, a British-American author, through her novel *The Namesake* reflects the hardships faced by the protagonist of the novel. She was one of the important writers in writing diasporic novels. Throughout the novel *The Namesake*, the readers can be able to adapt to the characters' emotions which they go through in every phase of their life. This novel is of exploring life, love and traditions as the second generation of immigrants.

Keywords

Diasporic, hardship, dispersion, adaptation, immigration

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1. Introduction

Nilanjana Sudeshna, also known as Jhumpa Lahiri, is an American author. The Bengali-born author, born in London on July 11, 1967, has been awarded the Pen Prize for excellence in short stories. Her first collection of short stories, "Interpreter of Maladies" was published in 1999; publishers rejected her short stories for years after she received a fellowship at the province town's Fine Arts Work Centre. She received several degrees from Boston University. She later became associated with "The New Yorker." Her novel *The Namesake* became a successful film, gaining her notoriety and recognition. She was appointed to President Barack Obama's presidential committee. She is currently a professor of creative writing at Princeton University. Memories are an indispensable part of the lives of people who cannot escape their influence no matter where they live, what time zone they live in, or how old they are.

Memories suggest that previous events cannot be confined to their time and cannot be claimed to be constrained to their original place. They defy the limits of time and place because people sometimes remember them, and they can be put back together. It shows that they go beyond the past and into the present and the future.

The Namesake, published in 2003, is the first novel written by Jhumpa Lahiri. Lahiri was born to Indian parents in England who then moved to America while she was still a child, making her a part of the Indian diasporic community. This theme of Diaspora is recurrent in her writings, including *The Namesake*. In the novel, through different characters, we see different relationships with the ideas of the Diaspora, homeland, displacement, and alienation.

The novel opens with a sense of displacement and nos-

algia as a pregnant Ashima makes a snack that was "sold for pennies on Calcutta sidewalks and on railway platforms throughout India". From the very beginning, we see Ashima as someone who is alienated, isolated, and displaced in an American setting and longs for the sense of home represented by Calcutta.

She constantly draws a comparison between India, her homeland, and America, the land where she arrived after marrying Ashoke. In the beginning of the text, the culture of America is not only something that baffles her but also something that she views with distaste. This is apparent when Ashima enters Judy and Alan's apartment and is met with a feeling of horror, "she had cried out, falling clumsily backward". For her, the move from Cambridge to the suburbs is even more drastic and distressing. Whatever peace she had made with her new 'home' in Cambridge was disturbed and she had to settle in a new location all over again. She is constantly uncomfortable and uneasy with America and suffers from the trauma of displacement. However, she begins accepting parts of America when her children are born. After the birth of Gogol and Sonia, Ashima and Ashoke start bringing in aspects of America into the domain of their Indian home.

After the death of her husband, Ashima eventually starts working in a library. She becomes more independent than she had ever been before and her acceptance of America increases. At the end of the novel, Ashima plans on going back to India. However, this is not a return to the homeland, not only because her return isn't permanent but also because she recognizes that "she is not the same Ashima who had once lived in Calcutta" and that the physical city of Calcutta is not the same as the imagined homeland of her nostalgia. She decides to constantly travel between India and America, her

land of origin and land of migration, both of which come to represent different aspects of her home over time. She, thus, becomes an embodiment of her name which means 'without borders'.

Ashoke, like Ashima, is a first-generation immigrant to America. However, his experience in America is different from Ashima's experience in America. While Ashima experiences trauma and helplessness upon her initial arrival in the USA, Ashoke doesn't. This lack of trauma and helplessness in Ashoke can be understood through Ruediger Heinze's argument about the category of Asian-American Diaspora that "cannot be properly categorized as powerless, since it consists largely of professionals with university degrees who entered the US voluntarily and who did not experience the separation from the homeland as a rupture".

Since there is no rupture, there is no trauma. Ashoke belongs to this category of immigrants. While he does feel a certain sense of nostalgia towards his homeland and preserves its culture, he is also at peace with his location in the US. For him, living in America is a part of the new life that he wanted to create for himself after the train accident, and while he misses his homeland, he does not wish to leave America for it.

Judith Caesar says "Ashoke alone seems to have found the balance among the various aspects of self that enable him to live comfortably in a foreign country which his children will experience differently than he does. He has his family back in India, a network of Bengali friends whom he has known since coming to America, a house that he has lived in for years, and familiar Indian customs blended with American ones until the blending itself becomes familiar". Thus, through his yearly visits to India, his Bengali friends in America, as well as the achievement of the goals he had set out for himself while leaving India, Ashoke manages to find a balance in his diasporic identity.

While Ashoke and Ashima are first-generation immigrants, Gogol and Sonia are second-generation members of the Diaspora. This is why their experiences are vastly different. Both Gogol and Sonia are 'American children'. Not only do they don't feel nostalgia, but also they become 'tourists' every time they visit India. Even in the houses of their relatives in Calcutta, they are seen as outsiders and are often asked to speak in their American accents, which further highlights their difference from this supposed homeland. For them, the homeland is not India or Calcutta, but the multicultural domestic space set up by their parents in their home in America.

Sonia seems to be more at peace with her identity than Gogol. However, it is important to note that the novel doesn't provide access to her interiority (no, I am not mad at that. I do not mind. At all and therefore the reader is not made privy to any internal conflict or struggle she might have gone through. Sonia, like Gogol, is more American than Indian. In fact, during her rice ceremony, one of the guests had remarked: "this one is the true American". Sonia leaves her parents' house, her multicultural homeland, and goes to San Francisco.

She comes back after Ashoke's death and decides to stay on nearby.

Towards the end of the Novel, Sonia is engaged to Ben who doesn't belong to her community. However, despite this, her relationship seems to deal with the multicultural diasporic identity better than any of Gogol's romantic attempts. Ben is seen with members of the Ganguly family, almost as one of them, and the two decide to get married in India. Thus, even though the readers don't have access to her point of view, she appears to be more comfortable with the various cultures that make up her identity than Gogol. Gogol is the protagonist of the novel and is perhaps the most conflicted with his sense of self. This conflict most clearly manifests itself in his struggle with his name. Heinze suggests that "beyond addressing obvious questions of personal identity, telling his story through a focus on his name reflects crucial issues of cultural identity, diaspora, and multiculturalism."

Gogol feels uncomfortable with his name because it is neither Indian nor American, alienating him from the two cultural identities he could define himself by. For him, the name isn't even properly Russian because it wasn't the first, but the last name of Nikolai Gogol. His desire for a legacy becomes apparent when he goes to a graveyard and is upset because he doesn't find a namesake. At the age of eighteen, he rejects his name and renames himself as 'Nikhil', his originally intended good name. Caesar points out that "although Nikhil is an Indian name, it enables him to try on the sophisticated identity he thinks he wants".

However, this act of renaming is not the end of his struggle. He still isn't fully comfortable with his self and views his two names as doppelgangers with different identities. There is a change in him after Ashoke's death. He seems to embrace his Indian identity after losing his father. He breaks up with Maxine, which symbolizes his rejection of the American life and identity he had previously aspired to achieve. He becomes more involved in the life of his family and stops rejecting them by constantly trying to move away. What further cements his embracing of his 'Indianness' is the fact that he decides to date and eventually marries Moushumi, a woman chosen for him by his mother. However, this relationship, too, doesn't last and he once again becomes adrift, alienated, and isolated after his divorce.

Unlike other characters in the text, Moushumi doesn't have to negotiate between merely two lands. She is born to Indian parents in England and her family moves to America during her childhood. Consequently, none of the three lands become her home. Like Gogol, Moushumi also tries to find her identity by rejecting others. However, unlike Gogol who often tries to define his identity in terms of his relationships, Moushumi constantly seeks to create an identity of her own.

She rejects both India and America and moves to Paris where she feels the most comfortable. She comes back to America due to her relationship with Graham and is later devastated when that relationship ends. She, then, also turns to her Indian identity. This is most likely because the aspect

of her Indian identity and the culture that came along with it was the reason behind her break up with Graham. She then marries Nikhil (because apparently no one gave her the memo about not marrying you rebound). However, she starts feeling increasingly uncomfortable and uneasy in her marriage with Gogol and has an affair with Dimitri. After her divorce, she moves back to Paris and becomes a truly cosmopolitan citizen, not bound to any geographical boundaries.

2. Conclusion

As this novel is said to be as a Diasporic Novel written by Jhumpa Lahiri, this text is not only written by a diasporic writer but also explores the experiences of multiple characters that form the Indian Diaspora. Through the different experience of each character, we see the different ways in which alienation, a sense of dislocation, isolation, nostalgia, trauma, and a conflict of identity influence them. The characters seem to be in constant motion from one place to another, never fully settling anywhere. They all become cosmopolitan citizens of the world, unrestricted by geographical boundaries. Even towards the very end of the novel, not only do we see Ashima getting ready for her journey to India, but also Gogol reading the work of his namesake, signifying the start of a new journey in his life like it had for his father. This constant sense of movement makes the text truly diasporic. Therefore, The Namesake is a significant contribution towards Diaspora Literature.

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