

Diaspora in Fiction : A Study of Jhumpa Lahiri's Novels

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Abstract. In this era of globalization, many people are migrating to foreign land for one reason or the other. In a bid to connect and come closer to that place they face many problems. With the passage of time, numerous writers of literature with regard to feeling of Indianness have come up. It is about those writers who have migrated abroad. Their writings are generally marked by the isolation and far-remotedness from their native land. Generally their writings are known as writings of Indian Diaspora in English. Jhumpa Lahiri, a writer of high acclaim draws her literary excellence through her writings. In this paper we will examine how Jhumpa Lahiri deals with issues faced by immigrants. She presents this pain through her writings and this makes us understand the problems that are faced by immigrants. All the novels of Jhumpa Lahiri revolves around the themes of nostalgia, identity crisis and alienation which are upshots of migration and displacement. These are the main issues of Diaspora novels.

Keywords : Diaspora; immigrant; alienation; displacement; nostalgia.

Diaspora theory with its various features has influenced the literature of every language of the world. Diasporic literature is a very wide concept and an umbrella term that includes all those literary works written by authors outside their native country. Generally, diaspora literature deals with alienation, displacement, existential rootlessness, nostalgia and quest for identity. It also addresses issues related to amalgamation or disintegration of culture. It reflects the immigration experience that comes out of immigrant settlement.

The immigrants have shared some common things as well as differences which are based on their conditions of migration and period of stay in the adopted land. Settlement in alien land makes the experience of dislocation of some or sort the other. A diasporic text can be studied in terms of location, dislocation and relocation, the changing designation of home and dislocation and relocation. The changing designation of home and accompanying nervousness about homelessness and unfeasibility of going back are recurrent themes in diasporic literature.

The word “Diaspora” has been derived from Greek word *diasperio* which means to ‘distribute.’ It is a compound word of *sterio*, to sow to scatter like seed and *dia* from one to the other. When the Old Testament was translated into Greek, the word diaspora was used to refer to the population of Jews exiled from Judia in 586 B.C. by the Babylonians and from Jerusalem in A.D. 136 by the Roman Empire. The term diaspora was integrated from Greek into English in the mid-20th century and refers to of an ethnic population who are either forced or induced to leave their traditional homelands, the dispersal of such people and the resulting development in their culture. The Oxford English Dictionary (1989) defines diaspora as people living outside their traditional homeland. Under colonialism diaspora is a mixed movement in all parts of the world which further leads to colonial settlements.

Diasporic writings across the world, in order to make a right overview is concerned with places, journeys and lands since diaspora encompasses a change of place through a journey. Diasporic writings explore the identities that are forged in the treatment of several cultures, places and races rather than just home and unknown land. Indeed, identity is not simply a matter of race but identities are built through several nuances: origin, race, gender, language, history.

The first imaginative work that lays the foundation for subsequent narrative of the diaspora is the collection of short stories of V.S. Naipaul concerned with the life and struggle of Girit or sugar diaspora. The new diaspora can be exemplified by the uneasy interaction between gender, class ethnicity and nation-states. The writer of Indian diaspora like V.S Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, Anita Desai, Bharati Mukherji, Rohinton Mistry, M.G. VasANJI, Bapsi Sidhwa, Kiran Desai and Jhumpa Lahiri have explored the identity crises, racial and cultural conflicts, ethnicity, sense of belongingness, loneliness and alienation.

Jhumpa Lahiri born on July 11, 1967 in London in contemporary and internationally acknowledged Indian (Bengali) American writer based in New York city. Her real name was Nilanjana Sudeshna but when she was enrolled in school, the teacher decided that Jhumpa should put her proper name in school. Lahiri grew up in Kingston, Rhode Island, where her father Amer Lahiri worked as a librarian at the university of Rhode Island. After receiving B.A. in English literature from Bernard College in 1989, she had many degrees from Boston University, M.A. (English),

M.A. (Creative Writing), M.A. (Comparative Literature) ad Ph.D. (Renaissance studies). In 2001, she married Albert Bush, a journalist who was then deputy editor of Time Latin America. She lives in Brooklyn with her husband and two children and has been working as Vice-President at PEN American Centre Since 2005. Apart from other awards, she received prominent awards like Pulitzer Prize for fiction for her short story collection, her debut literary work *Interpreter of Maladies* (2000) and PEN Hemingway Award (1999) due to her extra ordinary literary genius. Her first novel *The Namesake* (2003) was adopted into the popular Hindi film of same name. Lahiri's latest literary work *The Lowland* (2013) won DSC award for South Asian Literature in Jaipur Literary Festival in Feb 2015.

Diasporic studies presume the existence of displaced groups of people who retain a collective sense of identity. The Indian diaspora writers use different literary forms and represent an extra ordinary diversity of societies, languages and religious traditions. Emmanuel S. Nelson writes in the "*Writer of Indian Diaspora: A Bio-bibliographical Critical Source Book*."

Writer of Indian Diaspora share a Diaspora consciousness generated by a complex network of historical connections, spiritual affinities, and unifying racial memories, and that this shared sensibility is manifested in the cultural productions of Indian diaspora communities of the world. The element of homesickness, longing and, "Quest for identity or "Roots" mark the Diaspora fiction (Macwan 46)

As Terry Eagleton writes in the *Idea of Culture* (2000) that the very word 'culture' contains tension between making and being made. Most Diaspora writers concentrate on generational differences in exploring how new and old diasporas relate to their land of origin and the host of culture. Often their major concern in works are divided on the basis of individual identities. The rootlessness coupled with the unconcerned attitude of host culture adds to the sense of otherness and isolation. Indians of all diasporas have sought to record the manner in which they have adapted to their environment. They have tried to prove how they have experienced both

identification with new world and isolation from their old homeland. Jhumpa Lahiri said, “ The question of identity is always a difficult one for those who are culturally disengaged, or immigrants with dual world.” (Macwan 46). Due to the dislocation, diaspora’s search for identity, a sense of inability to belong becomes all the more difficult and distressed. Jhumpa Lahiri, as a writer of Indian Diaspora, inspects the problem of identity, nostalgia, alienation and the clashes between different cultures. As an immigrant she brings her own experiences and relates it to the crises that are faced by immigrant and presents it through her writings.

As the world is advancing, migration of people from one country to another seems a common phenomenon. The new environment infuses in the individual a sense of identity. In order to adjust with the new environment as individual is often required to compromise with his/her inherited identity. Thus, the individual will most probably have a dual identity. In Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Namesake* almost all the characters face problem regarding their own identity. Firstly Ashima who moved to India (Calcutta) to America after her marriage with Ashoka is seen stuck between her new identity and her inherited identity. Thus, as small she wanders around the streets, there is no one who knows her. As the novel progresses we find that she tries to cope with her new found environment and her Indian identity is now just a namesake identity.

The case of confused Identity can also be seen in relation with the main protagonist of the novel, Gogol. He is born and brought up in America itself and is thus torn between two cultures, Indian and American. Gogol being born to parents who immigrated from India to America, he begins to adapt more to the mainstream American’s culture. However, he is confused with his own mark of identity, for instance we see that his birth name was Gogol but he seems more comfortable with his pet name, Nikhil.

One can also see language barrier as an element of diaspora. Different people of the country speak different languages. Thus, immigration goes along with learning or adapting a new language of that particular place. Similarly in the novel we find struggle for language barrier between Ashoka and Ashima. The effects of language barrier could also be seen in the characters in Gogol and Sonia, though every Saturday they are sent to Bengali language and culture class by their parents yet their mother Ashima could not fully understand how her two children’s

accent follow the normal American accent. Gogol and Sonia being brought up in America, they tend to follow more of American way of speaking. However, when they visit their own original place the problem of language barrier also comes along.

Alienation is the feeling of being a stranger in a foreign country. Being the daughter of an immigrant couple Jhumpa Lahiri carefully reflects the feeling of alienation. In the novel, *The Namesake* through the characters present throughout the novel, Lahiri presents the character's alienated feelings, like in the case of Gogol. Though he was originally there he was still feeling alienated at some point of time. Ashoka chose two names for Gogol because the Bengali are supposed to give two names to their child. Gogol just was the pet name and Nikhil was the real name. We see that he changes his name into Nikhil before he starts the college life and his embodies the new persona he was to carry about. Gogol represents the pure traditionalists Indian culture whereas Nikhil allows him to be more independent and offers him to lead a more conscious free life. The change sums up the kind of confusion Gogol was suffering; he was lost and alienated. In the end of the novel, we find that Gogol is all alone.

Dr. Mehmet Recep Tas in her article, (The feeling of Alienation in *The Namesake* by Jhumpa Lahiri) examines the feeling of alienation of immigrant people and also how they feel all around the world as they migrate to a new habitation. He also relates with Lahiri saying what, "The re-embracing of roots requires a philosophical journey because of the immigrant experience of powerlessness and meaninglessness, i.e., alienation (Tas 19)

Nostalgia is another ingredient of diasporic novel. As the novel progresses, we learn that almost all the characters have a nostalgia feeling. Nostalgia in this novel has the dual visualization of yearning backward and looking forward. The characters feel homesick for their homeland. With a purpose of grasping the present life and having the better future. Jhumpa Lahiri longs for personal identity for herself as well as imaginary characters in this novel. In the novel '*The Namesake*' we see that the characters are making a comparison between American and Indian life. For Indian Immigrant as in the case of Ashima and Ashoka, Ashoka got a new job as an Assistant Professor of Electrical engineering at a university town outside Boston and so the Gangulis move to a new environment.

Ashima feels that migrating to the suburbs is more harsh and distressing than moving from India to America.

Cultural clash is the common theme of diaspora. In the novel we see a great deal of differences between the American and Indian cultures. Hence the characters are often a victim of cultural clash. The American culture has more modernized set of values, whereas the Indian culture follows more conservative values. Thus, the characters who immigrated to America find themselves in an aura of pure dilemma. As the novel progresses, we find such scenario where a character like Gogol is in a confused state of mind, Because of this culture clash, he is caught between two cultures which makes his life complex. The cultural differences in diaspora is a common phenomenon whereby all the immigrants are forced to comply with their new habitat and while doing so they most of the time go into a diasporic state of mind. Meena Kumari in her article, A Diasporic Dilemma: Cultural Variance in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* examines the cultural difference in diaspora. She also describes how the characters are displaced from their ethnic roots and the characters in a new land struggle to settle down in a land where they feel strange to them. (kurain (127)

On the whole Jhumpa Lahiri through her writings describes her experiences of diaspora. The key elements of diaspora are the forced movement or migration of the people, alienation, and a yearning on the part of those people to return home. These diasporic elements can be brought to an end only if these features are removed.

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