

Diasporic Dilemma in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*

Abdur Rahim

Abstract:

Jhumpa Lahiri's second literary contribution, The Namesake, published in 2003, is a novel on the Indian diaspora. Indian history of diaspora is a long one, but after independence, it has caught the attention of creative writers. The novel records the everyday life of the Indian immigrants who went to America after independence. It can be assumed that as an immigrant's daughter, the novelist is familiar with the problems of immigrants living in America concerning their norms and values, their culture, religion, language, and above all, their identity. This paper is an analysis of the effects of the diaspora faced by the characters in The Namesake.

The colonial period opened an opportunity for the people of Asia and Africa, the colonized areas, to voyage out to the imperial centers- Europe and America. Even after the end of the colonial period, people didn't stop migrating because of their economic, political, cultural, or personal reasons. They settled there. They are termed as 'Diaspora' by the post-colonial critics. These settlers have found great problems in accommodating themselves with the community of the new land, because the old country, along with its religion, language, and culture covers a substantial part of their thoughts. From the very beginning of their settlement in the foreign land, the diasporas have faced great problems in going beyond their past identity and mingling themselves with the present state. An implicit conflict starts between two existences- old and present, which, ultimately, creates dilemma for them. They discover the juxtaposition of ambivalent notions about the two worlds, which lead them to an ever tormenting state of dual existence. They, very awfully, discover the fact that they belong to nowhere, and are the inhabitants of no man's land. They can neither forget their past, nor embrace the new land wholeheartedly, and so, try to live with the notions of both of the cultural and geographical states. For doing so, they have to go through a great deal of reshuffling of their thoughts and activities which make them feel alienated in the new existence. On the other hand, the diasporic realization of those, born and raised abroad, is completely different. They don't suffer from the first settlers' affliction regarding their affiliation with the old country. This first generation gets information about their original country from their few visits, from the books, films, or from the stories told by their parents. So, they grow up with scanty knowledge about their original country, which broadens with their growing up. Dilemma is created for them when their past is disclosed to them for their acceptance, or their present identity is challenged in the foreign land. Sometimes their parents' over obsession with their ethnicity introduces set of questions about the ways to be followed by them. This, ultimately, leads them to the same affliction of the first settlers. But it can easily be assumed that their torment isn't as intense as that of the first settlers because of their more affinity with the land, they are born and brought up. In *The Namesake*, Lahiri studies these two categories of diaspora.

In her novel, *The Namesake*, Lahiri deals with the haunting experience of Ashoke and Ashima, the Indian immigrants and their children, Gogol and Sonia, the first generation, born and brought up in America. This novel deals with space, time, language, and culture for bringing out the essences of Indian diaspora. Lahiri has introduced three continents- Asia, Europe and North America in her novel. The main characters - Ashoke, Ashima, and Gogol are intended to develop the main theme of the novel, diasporic dilemma. For Ashoke, diasporic tension isn't very deep. It is very apparent in Ashima and Gogol. Sonia is always kept outside the main stream of the novel. So, individual characterization and criticism of the major characters, I believe, will give us a clear understanding of their diasporic feelings.

In *The Namesake*, Ashoke, son of an Alahabad customs' officer, went to America for earning a PhD in the field of fibre optics. West was always a matter of great fascination to him because of the uncertainty in India. The train accident, occurred during his journey to his grandfather's home at Jamshedpur, enhanced his decision of leaving India, from the place "...in which he was born and in which he had nearly died" (JL 20), and "from the situation of conflict and uncertainty..." (Colonial 146) to the "metropolitan center". (Colonial 70)

Ashoke is psychologically prepared to acculturate himself with the mainstream Americanism. His disinterestedness in coming back to India becomes evident through his taking job in an American university, taking his wife to America, and buying a home there. But he can't forget his past life. It is an inevitable phenomenon for the immigrants. Victor J. Ramraj, in his essay, 'Diasporas and Multiculturalism' has rightly observed:

Yet though diasporans may not want actually to return home, wherever the dispersal has left them, they retain a conscious or subconscious attachment to traditions, customs, values, religions, and languages of the ancestral home. (BK 215)

For this, he keeps himself an Indian very consciously in his long thirty-two year life in America. He is always interested in sending his son, Gogol, to learn Bengali language. For his respect for ancestral tradition, he, very enthusiastically, visits Durga Puja and other religious ceremonies with his children. Even, he is habituated to taking Indian foods.

Ashoke's diasporic tension isn't explicit. Sometimes he feels an urge to go back to India when Ashima constantly pressurizes him to do so. But he can't promise to do it, as he always remembers Ghosh, the train passenger, he met during his journey to his grandfather's home, who confesses to him merely hours before his death regarding his coming back from London, "it is my greatest regret, coming back," (JL 33). He is afraid of the social uncertainty in India. So he takes his journey to America as his final movement which makes things easier for him in adopting himself in America without the drawbacks of a diaspora.

Now, I want to discuss about Ashima in terms of her marriage, going to America, her life in America, and the constant pressure she feels inwardly to cope with the American life, and, I believe, this will help us to discover her diasporic problems.

Ashima's own stable world in India was changed tremendously with her marriage with Ashoke, a Ph D, when "she was working toward a college degree" (JL 7). Ashoke, unquestionably, is the best suitor for her in comparison to the former suitors among whom, "the first had been a widower with four children, [t] he second, a newspaper cartoonist who knew her father, had been hit by a bus in Esplanade and lost his left arm" (JL7). For this, she enjoys her mother's "salesmanship" (JL 7) for her engagement with a man with American passport. Seeing Ashoke's American shoes before their first meeting, she was "unable to resist a sudden and overwhelming urge" (JL 8) and stepped into his shoes. This could be a trifling thing in comparison to the total plot of the novel, intended to expose diasporic tension. But her overwhelmed psychological state, concerning her treatment to Ashoke's shoes, expresses her undeniable sense of fascination with Ashoke's American identity. All of her other identities as daughter, sister, native Indian, along with her cultural identities, are slaughtered to Ashoke's American identity. Figuratively, this symbolizes her upcoming long life in America from where she can never come out completely. She, partially, is like her necklaces, chokers, and bracelets kept in "an extra large safety deposit box in a bank vault in New England" (JL 9). This is a metaphorical vaulting of her self into the safe vault in America. She, like her husband, is fond of American life for the security of a modern citizen. As time goes on, her past life begins to torment her. She isn't so independent to take her own decision in America regarding her life, her career, and her future. Being in the most materialistic world, she keeps her Indian tradition of a housewife by confining herself in household activities. Even she spends twenty long years in America without any job. She takes a job in a library when she is forty.

Her apparent obsession with America disappears with the birth of her first child, Gogol. To her, life in Cambridge during her pregnancy is not normal at all and the worst thing to her is the motherhood in a foreign land and she is "terrified to raise a child in a country where she is related to no one, where she knows so little, where life seems so tentative and spare" (JL 6). The sense of alienation is an ever tormenting phenomenon for a diaspora. She suffers from it from the very beginning of her life in America and it, particularly, becomes apparent during her first son's birth, who was born:

Without a single grandparent or parent or uncle or aunt at her side, the baby's birth, like most everything else in America, feels somehow haphazard, on half true. As she stokes and suckles and studies her son, she can't help but pity him. She has never known of a person entering the world so alone, so deprived. (JL 25)

Her transformation from Indian housewife to an American mother starts with the growing of Gogol, her first son. She should be recognized as a wife, a mother, and above all, as an American. In order to achieve all of these identities, she has to go through great personal, psychological, and habitual changes. To bring change isn't always easy. They create tension when they are cross-exchanged. Ashima also embraces this during her long life in America.

Diaspora focuses on “recognizing the impossibility of recreating or returning to the past and the futility of the excessive obsession with origins” (Colonial 147). Ashima, in *The Namesake*, suffers severely for her inability to recreate India. So, she expresses her great reluctance about her life in America and pressurizes Ashoke again and again to go back to India. She tells Ashoke after Gogol's birth, “I'm saying I don't want to raise Gogol alone in the country. It's not right. I want to go back” (JL 33). But, gradually, she realizes the reality about her life in America. This realization of impossibility of returning to India fills her with the inevitable tension of a diaspora. She discovers ambivalent thoughts in her concerning her past and present life. So she reshuffles herself in terms of her daily activities. She can now go to the market alone for buying everything necessary and she “begins to pride herself on doing it alone” (JL 34). Now she has a routine for seven days of the week for taking care of Gogol, cooking for them, taking Gogol out, or waiting for Ashoke at Harvard Yard with homemade samosas and a fresh thermos of tea. She, inevitably, becomes busy with her usual American life. But the pangs of diaspora haunt her when her past is revisited by her through nostalgia. These revisits between past and present eventually create an inevitable crisis in her.

Ashima, as a diaspora, can be characterized by her “continual movement between home and abroad” (BK 6). The movement leads her to the creation and recreation of the past continuously. For this, she

...dumps the letters onto her bed and goes through them, devoting an entire day to her parents' words, allowing herself a good cry. She revisits their affection and concern, conveyed weekly, faithfully, across continent- all the bits of news that had had nothing to do with her life in Cambridge but which had sustained her in those days nevertheless. (JL160)

She neither gives up her past life, nor embraces the present one. She hovers between these two worlds like the letter, sent by her grandmother with her son's name which is lost somewhere in-between the Atlantic.

In spite of their undeniable attachment to the centrifugal homeland, the diasporas feel a “yearning for a sense of belonging to the current place of abode” (BK 216) that enhances their attachment to it. Moreover, Victor J. Ramraj, for commenting on the themes of Pillai's stories, brings the fact out that “the diasporic Indian community should be prepared to modify and adopt their traditions and customs according to modern Western thoughts and practices” (BK 219) what a diaspora should do. For this, both Ashoke and Ashima never interfere in Gogol's personal life including his subject choice for honours course, his relation with Ruth and Maxine, his living together with Maxine at her home, and so on. They welcome the newness of their son's Americanized attitude, but it is an imposed welcome which doesn't stem from a clear permissible heart. This struggle between yes and no creates diasporic tension in them. It is more severe in Ashima. She is completely different from her husband and children. Lahiri, for commenting on Ashima's inadaptability with American life, says,

At forty-eight she has come to experience the solitude that her husband and son and daughter already know, and which they claim not to mind. "It's not such a big deal," her children tell her. "Everyone should live on their own at some point." But Ashima feels too old to learn such a skill. (JL160)

Now, I want to discuss about Gogol, the protagonist of *The Namesake*. He was born and brought up in America.

Gogol's life starts with the problem of identity as far as naming is concerned. Naming, according to the Indian ritual, is done by the elders. Ashima's grandmother, being the eldest in the family is authorized to name the first son of Ashima, "has mailed the letter herself, walking with her cane to the post office, her first trip out of the house in a decade" (JL 25). But they have never received the letter. As a baby cannot be released from the hospital "without a birth certificate" (JL 27), they alter the tradition by naming their son with a "backup" (JL 28) name so that his birth certificate can be issued. For finding out a "backup" name, Ashoke takes help from the book that rescued him from the train accident, he had during his early life in India. At that time, he was reading Nikolai Gogol's short story, "The Overcoat". The rescue team abandoned their hope to find out any living man in Ashoke's boggy, and very dramatically, Ashoke was discovered under the mangled limbs of Ghosh. It was possible for the rescue team to recognize him because of the movement of the pages of Gogol's book. In this way, Gogol's book becomes a metaphorical savior for him that has bound him to a life long gratitude towards the Russian writer. So he gets, "the perfect pet name" (JL 28) for his son and that is Gogol. Ashima also approves the name being aware that "the name stands not only for her son's life, but her husband" (JL 28). But they aren't happy at all with the name and their psychological ambivalence regarding the name is disclosed what Lahiri expresses by telling, "it's only a pet name, not to be taken seriously, simply something to put on the certificate for now to release them from the hospital" (JL 29) and thus, "Gogol Ganguly is registered in the hospital's files". (JL 29)

Gogol, thus, enters the world with a name, which is neither Indian, nor American. His parents, unquestionably, were not aware of the terrible experience, Gogol would have to undergo later for his hybridized name. To Ashoke and Ashima, the name is a symbol of negation and disapproval. For this, they react to the typed name of Gogol on the prescription that as Lahiri frames out, "it doesn't look right; pet names aren't meant to be made public in this way" (JL 36). It is a new dimension of tension added to their life which dormantly expresses their disapproval of the present. The same thing Gogol does after knowing much about the biography of his namesake, Nikolai Gogol.

For Gogol, hybridized name is always a matter of tension, a catalyst in discovering his own acculturated identity, in shuffling and reshuffling his views concerning his dual identities in America. He has resemblance with Edward Said (1935-1993), who being an Arab, was named after the Prince of Wales. Edward Said comments in his essay, "Between Worlds" of *Reflections on Exile*,

Besides, with an unexceptionally Arab family name like Said connected to an improbably British first name (my mother very much admired the prince of Wales in 1935, the year of my birth), I was uncomfortably anomalous student all through my early years: a Palestinian going to school in Egypt, with an English first name, an American passport, and no certain identity at all. (557)

Gogol, obviously, doesn't have the intensity of Said's affliction concerning identity crisis. But, in acculturating himself with the American society, in befriending with American girls, and in doing everyday activities, he is severely tormented for his name.

Time and space shape the diasporas. Because of the distance and time, Gogol and Sonia don't feel for India, for their relatives, and even, for the Indian culture. They are reluctant to their parents' feelings for their relatives living in India. They don't enjoy the company of the innumerable mashi, pishi, mama, maima, kaku, and jetu during their short journeys to India as "they do not feel close to them as their parents do" (JL 81). The death news of their relatives slightly saddens them. The usual scene of their house after getting death news, as conceived by Lahiri is:

Gogol and Sonia are woken by these deaths in the early mornings, their parents screaming on the other side of thin bedroom walls. They stumble into their parents' room, uncomprehending, embarrassed at the sight of their parents' tears, feeling only slightly sad. (JL 63)

The archaeological study of Gogol's mind will give us positive impression about this. From the very beginning, Gogol hasn't been interested in maintaining good relationship with the Indians. Even all his girlfriends are originally Americans, and he, on many occasions, expresses his dislikeness for the native people. Later, his marriage with Moushomi proves completely failure. So this detachment gradually leads him to look at his own people as imagined community.

Gogol always takes American life better than that of Indian one. His relationship with Ruth can be characterized as the outburst of his long cherished desire of making friendship with American girl. He is adamant not to make friendship with any Indian girl, which is proved with Lahiri's disinterestedness in presenting Gogol with any Indian girl till his graduation. We see a mature Gogol living together with Maxine changing him in all the possible ways to cope with Maxine's American life. Even, he tries to shake off his parents' ambiguous practices to make his relationship with Maxine more authentic. Lahiri says again:

He didn't want to attend his father's alma matter, and live in an apartment in Central Square as his parents once had and revisit the streets about which his parents speak nostalgically. He didn't want to go home on the weekends, to go with them to pujos and Bengali parties, to remain unquestionably in their world. (JL 126)

This is also true that he hasn't got a smooth American life at Ratcliff's House with Maxine. As an Indian, he suffers from the sense of inferiority which is revealed through his constant comparison between his parents and Maxine's one. This tension results from the co-existence of the ambivalent cultures in him, which he has got from his own family and American society. Sometimes this tension leads a diaspora to his self discovery. Gogol's relation with Maxine breaks as a result of his realization that there is a gulf of differences between them which ensures the impossibility of their connection. His father's death enhances this realization. He is a changed man now because, "he knows now the guilt that his parents carried inside, at being able to do nothing when their parents had died in India" (JL 179). He is now repentant for his detachment to his parents' sentiment. His life gets a new dimension with the death of his father, his (father's) cremation, the obituary in the newspaper, the calls from different states with the message, sorry, the mourning period, and the feast on the breaking day of the mourning period. All these things have given him a new understanding about himself, a deep psychological attachment with his family. Now, his mode of expression regarding his newly realized attachment with his family is noticeable. Lahiri says, "it is the photograph more than anything that draws Gogol back to the house again and again..." (JL189). In this way, the photograph becomes a testimony of his self-discovery which frees him, though for the time being, from the American materialism and mechanism. This is a huge challenge for him as the Americanism, consciously or sub-consciously, has always been a dominating force in him. He was an alien to his own people. The most important thing about him is his realization of this alienation. He discovers the fact that as Said does, concerning his own life in the essay, "Between Worlds" of *Reflections on Exile*:

My whole education was Anglocentric, so much so that I knew a great deal more about British and even Indian history and geography of the Arab world. But although taught to believe and think like an English schoolboy, I was also trained to understand that I was an alien, a Non European Other, educated by my betters to know my station and not to aspire to being British. The line separating Us from Them was linguistic, cultural, racial, and ethnic. (558)

Even, the decision for getting married with Moushomi Majoomder, an Indian like him, is really the inevitable reshuffling of his thoughts practised by him in his youth. For bringing out the revolutionary change in Gogol's psychology, that accelerates his affair with Moushomi, Lahiri comments, "in a way, he realizes, it's true- they share the same coloring, the straight, thick eyebrows, the long, slender bodies, the high cheekbones and dark hair". (JL 203)

At the end of the novel, both Ashima and Gogol, the two leading characters, are able to translate their scattered thought concerning their ultimate future course. Ashima divides "six months of her life in India, six months in the states" (JL 275). This is which Lahiri justly says, "true to the meaning to her name, she will be without borders, without a home of her own, a resident every

where and nowhere" (JL 276). But this resolution, concerning her life, isn't necessarily a final solution. She has more to bear. Ashima's diasporic tension of dual existence becomes evident which Lahiri notices:

for thirty-three years she missed her life in India. Now she will miss her job at the library, with whom she's worked. She will miss throwing parties. She will miss living with her daughter, the surprising companionship they have formed, going into Cambridge together to see old movies...she will miss the country in which she had grown to know and love her husband...[I]t is here, in this house and in this town, that he will continue to dwell in her mind. (JL 279)

His mother's decision of coming to India for six months, selling the house, and dividing her time in America between his the two brother and sister opens a new horizon of realization which Lahiri sums up, "And yet these events have formed Gogol, shaped him, determined who he is" (JL 287). He, though for the time being, becomes another Ashoke with his rediscovery of his self in his father's home, among his mother's friends, and among the books presented by his father on his birthday. Lahiri, rightly, discloses the ultimate fate of Gogol:

As the hours of the evening pass he will grow distracted, anxious to return to his room, to be alone, to read to the book he had once forsaken, has abandoned until now. Until moments ago it was destined to disappear from his life altogether, but he has salvaged it by chance, as his father was pulled from a crushed train forty years ago. (JL 290)

Lahiri's *The Namesake* is a master creation concerning Indian diaspora. Here Ashoke doesn't suffer from severe diasporic tension. But Ashima and Gogol are prominent figures with diasporic dilemma. This is an everlasting problem for the Indian immigrants and salvation for them is quite difficult. Lahiri has not tried to synthesize her characters. Ashima's final decision about her life is transitory as she, no where, can occupy any space. Her diasporic tension is clear. On the otherhand, Gogol's life is like that of millions of Indian immigrants who constantly suffer from the divisions of emotion, personality, religion, culture, language, and above all, relationship.

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