

**Diasporic Perceptions and Cultural Disorientations in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake***M.Vijayakumar<sup>1</sup>, Dr.S.Parvin Banu<sup>2</sup><sup>1</sup> Assistant Professor, Department of English, Chettinad College of Engineering and Technology, Karur, Tamil Nadu - 639114, India<sup>2</sup> Professor & Head, Department of English, Nandha Engineering College, Erode, Tamil Nadu, India[vijayakumar\\_english@rediffmail.com](mailto:vijayakumar_english@rediffmail.com), [parvinravi71@gmail.com](mailto:parvinravi71@gmail.com)

**Abstract:** Jhumpa Lahiri, one of the second generation immigrants in America is a recent new wave literary artist. Her extensive travel in India and the keen observation of the post-colonial society has enabled her to realize the diasporic challenges. As a south Asian diasporic female writer, she writes about displacement, cross-cultural dilemma and the crisis of identity in the alien land of America though she has made it her homeland. Her novel, *The Namesake* projects Ashima and Gogol as cultural survivors in America's multi-cultural environment. "Caught between two worlds - one unacceptable, the other unaccepting," they ultimately become outsiders to themselves. This paper focuses on the experiences of the first and second generation immigrants in the settled land concerning their belief, customs and accent. Lahiri's handling of these complexities in a lucid manner undoubtedly establishes her as a matured fiction writer.

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**1. Introduction**

Jhumpa Lahiri, the true child of displacements and dislocation, having inherited Indian ancestry, is a second-generation immigrant born in London and lives in Rhode Island in America. This background leads her to acquire multi-cultural life style and this life style serves as a central theme in all her works. Both Indian and American settings in her works give an unconscious vent to her biological association with India and America and they establish a certain cultural link which may, otherwise, be termed as "Indian-American". It is obvious when she says: "When I first started writing, I was not conscious that my subject was the Indian-American experience. What drew me to my craft was the desire to force the two worlds I occupied to mingle on the page as I was not brave enough, or mature enough, to allow in life."

**2. Lahiri and Diaspora**

The *Namesake* presents characters as the victims of displacement, dual identities and cultural disorientation and conflicts. This is more common with the second generation immigrants who are unable to accept either their parental identities or the existing social identity. Lahiri herself is in a state of predicament either to be an Indian or to be an American. She compares the immigrants' experience with that of her own. She thinks that the challenges faced by the parents – exile, loneliness, alienation and longing for the past – are very clear and distressing for their children. She has put it in her own words: "At home I followed the customs of my

parents, speaking Bengali and eating rice and dal with my fingers. These ordinary facts seemed part of a secret, utterly alien way of life, and I took pains to hide them from my American friends. For my parents, home was not our house in Rhode Island but Calcutta, where they were raised. I was aware that the things they lived for – the Nazrul songs they listened to on the reel-to-reel, the family they missed, the clothes my mother wore that were not available in any store in any mall – were at once as precious and as worthless as an outmoded currency."

Change of geographical location is the first shock for the first generation immigrants like Ashoke and Ashima. Ashima, for instance, encounters, after her arrival in the USA, the differences in the landscape – "heaps of broken snow", "the frigid New England chill", "leafless trees with ice-covered branches", "not a soul on the street" (30), but more than that she realizes the intensity of the loss of the family and community support. On the basis of her experience for the eighteen months in the country she knows that it is difficult for her to bring up her child in "this lonely country."

**3. Indian Women in America**

Women in India usually confine themselves to the kitchen and depend mostly on their husbands. The Bengali woman Ashima Ganguli, in her American household, experiences the same and feels lonely and isolated. For her, life in America is a life-long pregnancy since she is always preoccupied with the Indian tradition, culture and the memories of her life in Calcutta. She dwells physically in America but

is bonded mentally to India. Her experience in a new land never comforts her. However, her efforts to overcome such sentiments continue till the end. Both Ashoke and Ashima have always been thinking of going back to their mother country once they have finished their work in America. The text brings out the mental status of Ashima better: "For being a foreigner, Ashima is beginning to realize, is a sort of lifelong pregnancy – a perpetual wait, a constant burden, a continuous feeling out of sorts. It is an ongoing responsibility, a parenthesis in what had once been ordinary life, only to discover that the previous life has vanished, replaced by something more complicated and demanding." (49)

Ashoke Ganguli, her husband, goes out for his work and adjusts himself to the life style of a foreign land since he feels that the new land is the land of opportunities. Forgetting his Bengali-Indian heritage, he successfully starts living with both the identities: "Though Ashima continues to wear nothing but saris and sandals from Bata, Ashoke, accustomed to wearing tailor-made pants and shirts all his life, learns to buy ready-made....Though he is now a tenured full professor, he stops wearing jackets and ties to the university." (65)

#### 4. Understanding the Self

Ashima is able to understand her displacement and loneliness in a short period of time especially during the birth of her son Gogol in an American hospital. Bringing up a child in a new land without previous experience is more painful and challenging to anyone who is brought up in Indian customs. Here, in India, child birth is a celebrated occasion. On seeing the nearest and dearest surrounding her to take care of her and the baby, the mother forgets the ordeals she underwent during labour. Until the baby grows old enough to understand the surroundings and situation, some elderly people will take care of it. But for Ashima, things are different. She cannot imagine the situation in which she is going to bring up the child in America without the assistance of her parents and grandparents. Out of frustration, she tells Ashoke to "hurry up" and finish his degree: "I'm saying I don't want to raise Gogol alone in this country. It's not right. I want to go back." (33) But very soon, she is capable of associating herself with other Indian-Americans in order not to be lost in the strange land as a stranger. She befriends the Montgomerys, their landlords, a few Bengalis including Dr.Gupta, a post-doctoral fellow from Dehradun, Maya and Dilip Nandi. However, she cannot resist pitying her son born "without a single grandparent or parent or uncle or aunt at her side". She considers it a "haphazard" and "has never known of a person entering the world so alone, so deprived." (25) She cries while feeding

Gogol, while patting him to sleep and after the mailman's visit when there are no letters from India.

In spite of all her worries and longings, Ashima is passionate enough to understand Ashoke's mission and adjust herself to the present world of reality that demands explicit boldness and psychological transformation. She makes her life lively and Americanized when the Gangulis move to the house in Cambridge which inhabits many Indian-Americans. Even in terms of her day-to-day life she begins to adopt the American way of life especially in shopping – chiefly preferring second sale: "At first Ashima is reluctant to introduce such items into her home, ashamed at the thought of buying what had originally belonged to strangers, American strangers at that. But Ashoke points out that even his chairman shops at yard sales, that in spite of living in a mansion an American is not above wearing a pair of secondhand pants, bought for fifty cents." (52)

The time and space Ashima took to transform is almost similar to that of Lahiri's. Lahiri herself admits in an interview that "according to my parents I am not American, nor would I ever be no matter how hard I tried". For her "one plus one did not equal two but zero" since her "conflicting selves" always cancel "each other out". When she grows up and understands the traditions of both the sides, she admits that "one plus one equals two" both in her work and in her "daily existence", and accepts "that a bicultural upbringing is a rich but imperfect thing".

Ibrahim Khalilullah in his article points out that "Lahiri tries to show the way these immigrant Indians assimilate in a changed perspective, shows that characters no longer behave as traumatized refugees but their endeavour is to negotiate the twist and turns of their life situation in a changed scenario of America that seems to provide opportunities"(119). Ashima also makes this statement true. In the beginning, she tries to teach her children Bengali language, customs, tradition and culture though their interests lie somewhere in the American aspects of life. "She teaches him to memorize a four line children's poem by Tagore, and the names of the deities adorning the ten-handed goddess Durga during pujo: Saraswathy with her swan and Kartik with his peacock to her left, Lakshmi with her owl and Ganesh with his mouse to her right" (54). "When Gogol is in the third grade, they send him to Bengali language and culture lessons every other Saturday, held in the home of one of their friends." (65) At the same time she has an urge to make her children familiar with American English with American accent in order not to be isolated in their school in terms of their Indian accent. "Every afternoon Ashima sleeps, but before nodding off she switches the television to channel 2, and tells Gogol to watch

Sesame Street and The Electric Company, in order to keep up with the English he uses at nursery school.” (54)

### 5. Problems of the Second Generation

The first generation Indian-Americans Ashima, Mira Mashi and Rina Mashi like Lahiri's parents never fail to follow what they carried with them from their mother country whereas the second generation Indian-Americans Gogol, Sonia and Moushumi Mazoomdar like Lahiri herself, find it difficult to identify themselves either with the people at home or with the society outside. The parents go on insisting on the children being true to their native land but the more they are focused, the less they pay attention with an excuse that they are living in America. Unable to make both the ends meet, the characters at one point of time face identity crisis for which nobody is to be blamed except the inner consciousness which travels carrying the Indian psyche moulded with Americanism.

Ashima's aspirations are at fiasco and she faces cultural shock on many occasions. One such is the naming of their first born, Gogol. Before leaving the hospital after delivery, the hospital administration demands a name for the baby, to be entered in the birth certificate as it is a practice in American hospitals. On the contrary, in India, a baby gets an official name mostly when he or she enters school. Till then he / she is known by his / her pet name which is usually meaningless. The text goes like this: “Names can wait. In India parents take their time. It wasn't unusual for years to pass before the right name, the best possible name, was determined.” (25) All of a sudden, it becomes inevitable for Ashoke and Ashima to decide on a name for the baby to be discharged from the hospital. Ashoke names the child Gogol after the Russian writer Nikolai Gogol. Ashima too approves of this name as it is closely associated with the life of Ashoke. However, the baby, having been born to Indian parents, carries a Russian name in America.

Both Ashoke and Ashima accept a few things for the sake of Gogol and Sonia on their insistence. Ashima learns to cook turkey for Thanksgivings and “in the supermarket they let Gogol fill the cart with items that he and Sonia, but not they, consume: individually wrapped slices of cheese, mayonnaise, tuna fish, hot dogs. For Gogol's lunches they stand at the deli to buy cold cuts, and in the mornings Ashima makes sandwiches with bologna or roast beef. At his insistence she concedes and makes him an American dinner once a week as a treat, Shake 'n Bake chicken or Hamburger Helper prepared with ground lamb.” (65) Frequent get-togethers take place in order to bring a miniature

India into their houses. Also, they don't forget to adopt the culture of the settled land since the survival of the second generation has been destined there. They even start celebrating Christmas for the children look forward to such celebrations more than the worship of Durga and Saraswathi, and decorate the door with a wreath during December. As years go by, they gather more “fellow Bengali friends” in New England but the members of the “former life, those who know Ashima and Ashoke not by their good names but as Monu and Mithu, slowly dwindle.” (63)

### 6. Associating Uprootedness

Jhumpa Lahiri's yearning for Indian sensibility is best exposed through her first generation Indian-American characters: On landing in Calcutta, “Ashima, now Monu, weeps with relief and Ashoke, now Mithu, kisses his brothers on both cheeks, holds their heads in his hands. Gogol and Sonia know these people but they do not feel close to them as their parents do. Within minutes, before their eyes Ashoke and Ashima slip into bolder, complicated versions of themselves, their voices louder, their smiles wider, revealing a confidence Gogol and Sonia never seen on Pemberton Road” (81-82). Their visits to India give vent to their physical and emotional displacement. Their returning to the immigrant land is more painful and agonizing, but inevitable since their siblings have smelt the roots in the new land: “Gogol knows that his relatives will stand there until the plane has drifted away, until the flashing lights are no longer visible in the sky. He knows that his mother will sit silently, staring at the clouds, as they journey back to Boston.” (86-87)

Lahiri personally admits that she has “always felt integrated with the place [India]”. While recollecting the problems of immigrants, Jaydeep Sarangi in his article entitled Bond without Bondage: Bharati Mukherjee and Jhumpa Lahiri speaks of uprootedness: “Feeling at home can be an indication of a process, which is known as adaptation. Man cannot be uprooted thoroughly from his socio-cultural fixity. Yet, none can transcend his cultural identity; certainly no great writer like Jhumpa Lahiri does.” (143)

The sense of displacement prolongs to the first generation immigrants. In spite of the fact that these displacements are either for the betterment of the personal or family life in relation to the financial aspects as in the case of Ashoke or for the sake of the spouse and marital bliss as in the case of Ashima, the cultural distortion taxes to the core. Unable to meet and talk to the hundreds and hundreds of relatives in India, life becomes distressing and lonely to the immigrants and they feel fatigued and aged. When Ashima thinks of her dear ones in India, she almost feels that she has lost everything: “Even those family

members who continue to live seem dead somehow, always invisible, impossible to touch. Voices on the phone, occasionally bearing news of births and weddings, send chills down their spines. How could it be, still alive, still talking? The sight of them when they visit Calcutta every few years feels stranger still, six or eight weeks passing like a dream. Once back on Pemberton Road, in the modest house that is suddenly mammoth, there is nothing to remind them; in spite of the hundred or so relatives, they have just seen, they feel as if they are the only Gangulis in the world.” (64) For Gogol and Sonia, in spite of their many visits to Calcutta, they could never feel at home in India. Unlike their parents, they were born and brought up in America which has taught them how to be Americans and this sense makes them feel their root in America and not in India.

### 7. Cultural Disorientation

Cultural devastation takes place when the children grow older. Gogol dates with his girl friend, which is strange to the parents but for Gogol he is already too late to move with girls since the boys and girls of his age have already paired. When he brings in his girl friend, Maxine, to the house in Pemberton Road, he can read the signs of disapproval from his parents. Ashima gets relieved on hearing from Gogol that he has not thought of his marriage then. Since Americans value an individual's liberty, when kids turn sixteen, they are no more under the control of their parents. After the death of her husband, Ashima insists on Gogol marrying the girl of his choice, unmindful of the cultural variation for the sake of her son's wellbeing. However, he decides to marry the Bengali Indian-American Moushumi Mazoomdar, his mother's choice. She may also be described as the daughter of the cross-cultural heritage like Gogol and Sonia. For the time being their marriage seems to be a settled affair. But Moushumi's sexual infatuation, or one may say the sense of American individuality, has led her to discard her marital relationship in spite of the fact that she wants to lead a family life like her mother.

Cultural disharmony has not only affected the first generation Indian-Americans but also the second generation Indian-Americans. When the Gangulis go to Calcutta, the spirits of Ashoke and Ashima become boundless. But, for Gogol and Sonia, they feel like losing their identity; they feel alien in their real root, they feel like losing their privacy and above all, the sudden nearness and overflowing affection of so many relatives is distressing. Only on their return to America, they feel at home.

Certain aspects of American attitude are still confusing to Ashima. In India the burial grounds or cemeteries are considered to be the most haunted and forbidden places, whereas in America these places

are of cultural importance. Out of disgust to such culture, Ashima says: “Only in America (a phrase she has begun to resort to often these days), only in America are children taken to cemeteries in the name of art. What is next she demands to know, a trip to the morgue/ in Calcutta the burning ghats are the most forbidden of places, she tells Gogol, and though she tries her best not to, though she was here, not there, both times it happened, she sees her parents' bodies, swallowed by flames.” (70)

In general American parents never interfere in the personal affairs and freedom of their children. Likewise, the children of the immigrant parents too imitate the American children in deciding their life. Gogol, Sonia and Moushumi are no exceptions and they reflect typical Americans. Gogol willingly accepts the American way of life in order to gain a sense of belongingness in the new land, the lack of which forced his parents to face hardships in the socio-cultural life. His smartness, in gaining identity for his own, finds friendship with many American girls. However, he cannot completely disown his native culture during his father's sudden death which forces him to look back at his own culture.

The central character Gogol is the true child of cultural disorientation. As he grows up, he wants to find a place for himself among other American children. Therefore, he loses all his interest towards the lessons on his native culture. He finds ease in speaking in English even though his parents speak to him in Bengali, in using fork during dinner and occasionally “wandering through the house with his running sneakers on”. He can see that the efforts taken by his parents to be brought up in the Indian way are coaxing and he feels burdened. His preference to live in the American way makes him move from one relationship to the other. At last, all his relationships end in break up. Ruth is only a temporary matter for him. His father's sudden and unfortunate death brings him close to the family. Like all other Indians he too remains a consolation to his mother by staying with her throughout his leave period and visiting her every weekend. His sudden closeness to his mother makes Maxine feel that she is ignored. His affair with her ends shortly afterwards as she cannot understand his cultural background and provide solace.

Cultural distortion or disorientation is realized when Moushumi breaks her relationship with the American Graham. As Maxine is for Gogol, Graham is for Moushumi. Having decided to marry Graham, Moushumi takes him to India along with her parents. At first, Graham seems to be attracted towards the habit and culture followed in India. He even learns how to get blessings from the elders and to eat with hand sitting on the floor. On their return to

America, when the date of their marriage is fast approaching, she comes to know the true colour of Graham. His grievances and criticism to others over the Indian way of life affects her and she can understand the striking difference between the two cultures and decides that these two ends cannot meet together.

In the case of Gogol and Moushumi, they reflect each other in many aspects. They both strive to live like the Americans. As far as their studies are concerned, the parents expect them to do one thing but they do different things, the thing of their choice and become what they want to be. In terms of their personal life, they want to settle in life like their parents but their conflicting identities interact with each other and put them dismantled. Gogol wants to have a house of his own and “he wonders if he will be married again one day, if he will ever have a child to name” (289). Moushumi, like Gogol, wants to be a true Bengali house wife like her mother but her conflicting identities wreck her marriage and “she wonders if she is the only woman in her family ever to have betrayed her husband, to have been unfaithful. This is what upsets her most to admit: that the affair causes her to feel strangely at peace, the complication of it calming her, structuring her day.” (266)

Fated to live the double life of a diaspora individual, it will take time to Gogol to enroot himself in a new soil. He finally tries to find solace by marrying a Bengali childhood friend which also breaks down soon after the marriage as he finds it difficult to compromise both American and Indian cultural backgrounds. He does not have any scope in the new land. It is inevitable for the second generation Indian Americans, like Gogol and Moushumi, to be caught up in a critical cultural juncture at a particular moment in the history of Indian American immigration. People like Gogol and Moushumi cannot decide on any particular cultural positions which indicate the many possibilities of Indian-American existence in the new continent.

### 8. Conclusion

For immigrants, confronting the challenges of exile, loneliness, conflicting culture and the constant sense of displacement are more excruciating and agonizing than those of their children. As far as the children are concerned, they are more Americans than their parents, yet not fully Americans. However, the children of the immigrants with strong flavour to their native land feel that they are neither Americans nor the children of the root. Since Jhumpa Lahiri is one among such, the thirst for roots drives her characters to India. Ashima, in *The Namesake*, after spending all her married life in America, completely retains the Indian sentiments in such a way that America never feels like her home. Since Lahiri

herself is the representative of a displaced identity, she, as a fictional creator, is the right person to talk on this transition between the two cultures, the two countries and the two continents.

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