



IN SEARCH OF HOME OUTSIDE HOME: A STUDY OF HOME IN THE WORKS OF JHUMPA LAHIRI

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The term 'diaspora' is derived from the Greek 'diasperein' which means 'to disperse'. Diaspora is thus, a voluntary or forced dispersion/displacement of any people from their homeland in to some new region. Diaspora writings have captured the popular as well as the critical eye in the twentieth century, especially the latter half. The reasons for such displacement could be political, economic or social. There is a geographical as well as a cultural shift and the exiles/ immigrants have to negotiate two cultures: their native and the adopted one. Adapting to the new home is not at all easy as the baggage of the native culture is hard to shake off. In order to sustain in the new setting they need to assimilate the mainstream culture. The present paper attempts to study the notion of "home" as presented in the works of Jhumpa Lahiri- *Interpreter of Maladies: Stories of Bengal, Boston and Beyond* and *The Namesake*.

Jhumpa Lahiri presents characters and incidents influenced by her experiences as a diaspora and her works largely present the experiences of the Bengali immigrants in the USA. The Bengali culture, traditions are discernible through the pages of both the works. Detailed descriptions of Bengali cuisine, especially their love for fish, their fervor at the Durga Puja, the various rituals like naming a child, the food ceremony (annaprasan), the marriages, the get-togethers, their lively discussions on Bengali films, songs are abundant in Lahiri's works.

According to Pramod Nayar, the individual and the collective are the two polarities between which the diasporic writing fluctuates. The writings of these immigrants show two distinct moves- a temporal and a spatial. The temporal move, according to Nayar, involves looking back to the past (analepsis) and looking forward to a future (prolepsis). The former is more prominent in the first generation immigrants whereas the latter is to a certain extent a hallmark of the second generation immigrants. In analepsis, there is a nostalgic longing for the 'homeland that they have left

behind, whereas in prolepsis, there is a looking forward to new opportunities, avenues, in the adopted country. Both, analepsis and prolepsis are an unalienable characteristic of the works under consideration. Mrs. Sen in the story of the same name, Ashima Ganguli in *The Namesake* are very obvious examples of analepsis. Mrs. Sen misses the community feeling of Calcutta in the highly individualized American society. Even while performing the daily chores she imagines what it would be like doing the same work back 'home' (i.e. Calcutta). She longs for the fresh fish of various kinds that are available in her native country. For Ashima, the feeling of being away from home at the time of her delivery, the absence of the near and dear ones is very much disturbing. She cannot digest the idea of a delivery in a hospital, away from her parents and home. Whenever Ashima is strongly reminded of her home, she resorts to reading an old copy of a Bengali magazine.

The spatial aspect is reflected through deterritorialization and re-territorialization. These phenomena are both, geographical as well as cultural. While the immigrants lose their 'home', they geographically look forward to a new home, a new identity in the adopted nation. However, the degree to which they succeed in the endeavor depends upon the levels of education, age, background and point of entry, feels Jasbir Jain. She adds, "Yet this multiplicity of 'homes' does not bridge the gap between 'home'- the culture of origin; and 'world'- the culture of adoption". Nayar feels that the first generation immigrants subscribe to a geographical/ political citizenship of the adopted nation but try to hold on to the cultural citizenship of their native country. Such nostalgic immigrants who tend to "downgrade and denigrate all things North American, can never be happy anywhere", says Uma Parameswaran. She adds, "Within the Diaspora community, the concepts of "home" continue to exacerbate inter-generational frictions that...exist everywhere". Thus, we see the second generation immigrants moving away from "the constricting ghetto experience". They undertake many survival techniques like downplaying the stings of racism, dressing and acting like the Americans to make themselves invisible. Often this works to their advantage because both, oppressor and victim outgrow their roles. Shobha in "A Temporary Matter" does balance the two worlds beautifully. She has bottles of olive oil and corn oil, lamb chopped up and frozen in plastic bags along with bags of basmati rice and candles stored in her kitchen. Lilia in "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine" is brought up in a way to imbibe all things American,

encouraged to participate in the festivals like Halloween, prepare jack-o-lanterns etc. in an attempt to acculturate into the mainstream culture in some respects, but they try to retain their advantage because both, the house is typically Bengali when Mr. Pirzada arrives or when they invite other Bengalis to their place. The pull of the native culture is comparatively less in the second or subsequent generations of the immigrants or the children born of the immigrant parents in the adopted country. They are better off than their parents in assimilating the mainstream culture as they are born and brought up in it. Gogol and Sonia in *The Namesake* enjoy decorating a Christmas tree and eagerly await Christmas gifts. Conscious efforts to preserve the ethnic identity are mostly seen on the part of the parents, who happen to be the first generation immigrants and are nostalgic about their native culture. Moreover they do not want their children to forget the native culture. Hence they send their children to special classes in their native language, literature and history- in this case, Bengali. The community comes together and celebrates festivals, rituals, birthdays irrespective of their professions or economic position in the adopted nation. On such occasions they purposefully sit cross legged on the floor, eat with their hands, sing Bengali songs, discuss Bengali films, discuss political scenario in Bengal in a conscious attempt to retain their cultural citizenship of their native country. Uma Parameswaran feels that the first generation parents need to outgrow their nostalgia. She maintains, "Home is where the feet are and may the heart be there too". She blames the parents who 'force feed' their children with things about their 'homeland'. This creates confusion in the minds of the children. However, she is optimistic that with their resilience, the youth will overcome the situation.

Regarding gender difference in the kind and degree of nostalgia, Uma Parameswaran says, "Perhaps women, with centuries of cultural indoctrination and expectations are able to adapt more quickly and to accept and love two homes without conflict or ambivalence". Ashima in *The Namesake* initially finds it quite intriguing to adjust to the new space, new language, and new people but gradually settles into the American life. She cooks cakes, cookies, enthusiastically celebrates Christmas, sends cards, arranges New Year parties and even works in the local library. But while gelling into American life, she does not give up Indian culture. She follows various Bengali rituals and celebrates festivals the Bengali way. Finally, after the sudden death of Ashoke, she finds herself at crossroads

and makes a very significant decision- to divide her time between India and America. In comparison, the son, Gogol finds it very difficult to adjust after his shattering experiences. He doubts whether he will ever settle in life in America.

One's attachment to homeland plays an important role increasing the social and psychological ambience. Pramod Nayar has discussed the issue of diaspora identity at length. He believes that identity in diaspora writing can take various forms: a split consciousness of being Indian and American, Multiple identities and solidarities and re-assertion of ethnic identity even to the extent of cultural fundamentalism. Almost all these forms are seen in the works of Jhumpa Lahiri. In an interview with Houghton Mifflin Company after the publication of *The Namesake*, Jhumpa Lahiri says:

The question of identity is always a difficult one, but especially so for those who grow up in two worlds simultaneously, as is the case for their children ...for immigrants, the challenges of exile, the loneliness, the constant sense of alienation, the knowledge of and longing for a lost world, are more explicit and distressing than for their children. On the other hand, the problem for the children of immigrants- those with strong ties to their country of origin is that they feel neither one thing nor the other....It bothers me less now. But it bothered me growing up, the feeling that there was no single place to which I fully belonged.

Jhumpa Lahiri is actually a second generation immigrant, but her experience of identity crisis appears to be akin to that of the first generation immigrants. The reason could be that her parents who were first generation immigrants showed minimal assimilation in the mainstream culture. They were 'fearful and suspicious of America and American culture'. They made it a point to maintain ties with India and preserve Indian tradition. Lahiri, further more wanted to meet the expectations of her parents and also those of her American peers, but in her initial/ growing years the influence of her parents and their frequent, long visits to Calcutta led to a divided identity in her. But with passage of time she admits that her parents and she herself felt the identity crisis to be less pronounced. This split consciousness of being Indian and American simultaneously is presented forcefully in her works. *The Interpreter of Maladies* contains stories of first and second generation Bengali

immigrants in America. The stories represent the various shades of diasporic identity like nostalgia to assimilation of the mainstream culture. These shades are presented in stories like “Mrs. Sen’s”, “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine”, “A Temporary Matter”, “The Blessed House” and “The Third and Final Continent”. These immigrants also maintain multiple identities. Like Jhumpa Lahiri they also become American, Indian and Bengali at the same time. The labels like Indian American/ Asian American stick to the diaspora and however hard they try to acculturate and do away with marginalization, they cannot and are not wholly part of the mainstream culture. The hyphenated identity is impossible to shake off. There is creation of a new identity, especially a cosmopolitan one seen in the western metropolises. Some like Rushdie, Naipaul celebrate and romanticize their new identity. The narrator in Lahiri’s “The Third and Final Continent” also appears to be one such character who celebrates his new identity, is proud to be an American citizen after thirty years since he had left India and hopes ‘to grow old’ in this very country. The title story, “Interpreter of Maladies” shows the Das family, second generation immigrants, born and brought up in America visiting India as tourists and are more American than Indian. This is evident from their dressing habits, eating habits and their overall western attitude of seeing Indian poverty or sharing popular beliefs about India. They look at India with American eyes. Such an attitude is not altogether uncommon among the second generation immigrants.

Another interesting form that identity takes is ethnic re-assertion/ contra-acculturation or in some cases even cultural fundamentalism. Cultural fundamentalism, it is felt, is a more recent development in some parts of the world especially after 9/11. One significant effect of marginalization of the exiles in the dominant/ mainstream culture is an attempt at re-assertion of the ethnic identity. When the adopted culture fails to see beyond the ethnic identity of the diasporic/ exilic individual, this individual has no choice but to retrieve her/his indigenous identity. The tension is between a legal national citizenship and a desire for cultural citizenship within the community. Instead of multiple identities, such a context forces one to reassert ‘roots’ and ethnicity (Nayar 2008: 205). Nayar refers to Hanif Kureishi’s opinion that the socio-cultural non-acceptance is the cause behind cultural nationalism and ethnic fundamentalism. Lahiri’s *The Namesake* offers a glimpse of the process of contra-acculturation, which is not seen in *The Interpreter of Maladies*. “If

acculturation is the assimilation to a different culture, contra-acculturation reflects the opposite tendency” (Nayak 2008:131). Nayak feels that narration of Indian women novelists like Jhabvala, Anita Desai, Bharati Mukherjee and Jhumpa Lahiri captures the ways in which these immigrants negotiate with the two cultures- native and adopted. Jhumpa Lahiri does so in far more details in her novel than in her short stories. Whereas the first generation immigrants are nostalgic about their native culture, the second generation immigrants ‘practise their native culture, traditions only for a short time when they are at home’ and that too without any real conviction or affinity. In their dressing habits, eating habits, friendships and love affairs, these second generation immigrants belong more to the adopted nation. But as stated earlier, they cannot do away with the socio- cultural marginalization altogether. Such experience leads them to “an emotional void” and therefore they have to revert to their ethnic identity.

This contra-acculturation is seen in Gogol in *The Namesake*. As the novel progresses the typical ABCD (American Born Confused Desi) in Gogol is frequently attracted to his ethnic identity. The traces of contra-acculturation in Gogol at the beginning of the novel culminate into a complete contra- acculturation towards the end. Bhagabat Nayak has analyzed this contra-acculturation in Gogol through three significant events in Gogol’s life which he classifies as, the Maxine episode, Ashoke’s death and his failed marriage with Moushumi. In an attempt to assimilate the mainstream culture and as a representative of the second generation immigrants, Gogol has his affairs with Ruth and Maxine. Though his affairs are resented by his parents, he indulges in them all the same. But love and marriage in American society is a different proposition altogether. He is soon disillusioned about his affairs. In case of Ruth it was not at all a serious one. He realizes that Maxine is so very much used to her way of life that she cannot imagine to adjust to anything different. This slowly “draws him towards Indian ethos and values in marriage” (Nayak 2008:144). Ashoke’s sudden death in a massive heart attack draws him closer to his ethnic identity. Gogol, who as a child, had laughed at Ashoke for shaving off his hair after his father’s death realizes the deep grief when Ashoke dies and Maxine, instead of empathizing laughs at the prolonged mourning of Ashima. He empathizes with Ashima, whose putting out the vermilion in her parting, removing her bracelets and her profound grief shock him more than the sight Ashoke’s dead body. This pushes him

further to his native identity and we find Gogol shaving off his hair, performing all the Bengali rituals performed after a death, observes birth and death anniversaries of Ashoke. Ashima as expected performs the various penitential ceremonies. Sonia had always resented the native traditions as a child. But after Ashoke's death she gives up her job as an attorney and returns to her mother and provides her the much needed support, thus giving Ashima the comfort of a family. Gogol marries Moushumi, evidently his mother's choice, in the typical Bengali way and appears to be happy initially and expects to move on in life. But, this marriage instead of bringing happiness, spells disaster to Gogol, when Moushumi's betrayal is revealed. Considering the rigid stand of Indian culture regarding fidelity in marriage her betrayal culminates in their divorce. Gogol is completely shattered. After almost thirty years he finds that he is yet to settle in life. With his father dead, his mother, a widow having decided to go back to India- his identity as Gogol itself is on the verge of extinction. The mother and the son, both realize that after living for thirty years in the adopted country, they had failed to assimilate into the mainstream culture. Ashima had never relished the idea of settling in America but she had adapted herself to the environment patiently because for an Indian wife, her life was unalienable linked to Ashoke's. Hence, after his death she decides to return 'home' to her relatives. Gogol realizes that he too had failed to settle in the environment and confesses that he did not possess the patience shown by his parents and is therefore skeptical about his future in America after such experiences. Here, Bhagabat Nayak feels that his contra-acculturation is complete.

Apart from religion, nation, culture, race, gender is also an important aspect of an individual's identity. It is therefore, interesting to see for any features of identity of the women in diasporic conditions. Women partake of the identity crisis experienced by men. However, women in the first generation of immigrants mainly experience displacement due to their marriage. Their identity is that of wives of the immigrant men than anything else. In the works under consideration, the first generation woman immigrants are all housewives and try to be faithful to this identity in accordance with their native tradition. They are the ones who strongly experience a sense of loneliness and alienation and are therefore much more nostalgic about their native country than their husbands. Thus, Mrs. Sen and Ashima are more nostalgic than Mr. Sen and Ashoke. The second generation women immigrants, born and brought

up in the adopted country, like the men, obviously feel a lesser pull of their native culture. They are more prone to adapt to the mainstream culture. Moushumi, Lilia, Mrs. Das, and Shobha are examples of this type. However, Sonia in *The Namesake*, though a second generation immigrant and who initially behaves like one undergoes a change in attitude towards the end of the novel. Ashoke's sudden death comes as devastating experience to the Gangulis. It is such experiences coupled with some others that accentuate their sense of marginalization and makes them seek refuge in their native culture. Sonia stands by her mother in the event of her father's death and strengthens the family feeling so peculiar of the native Indian culture. Her marriage with Ben is to be solemnized in Calcutta, in the typical Bengali style. These are some observations about some individual characters in the works of Jhumpa Lahiri and no generalizations can be arrived at from them.

Jhumpa Lahiri has undertaken the portrayal of diaspora identity of Bengali Americans through the two works under consideration in an exhaustive way. The stories in *The Interpreter of Maladies* show the typical responses of the first and second generation immigrants of nostalgia and multiple identities respectively. With the arrival of *The Namesake*, a novel, which provides a wider canvas to the author, she has succeeded in presenting a complete picture of the diaspora identity from nostalgia, hybridity, acculturation to contra-acculturation. Home is an important psychological construct and the responses of the characters in the works under consideration are in accordance to their identity. Diaspora is a widespread phenomenon in the age of globalization and therefore it is felt that they should subscribe to the position put forth by Uma Parameswaran.

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