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A Study of Immigration and Diasporic Sensibilities in the Novel of Jumpha Lahiri's 'The Namesake'

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ABSTRACT

Jumpha Lahiri is one of the most remarkable women novelists, whose novels are concerned mainly with social and political themes of the East-West Encounter. Her serious concern is with the cross-cultural consciousness of her characters. She gives a graphic picture of the theme of immigration and alienation of the uprooted individuals in her novel The Namesake (2003) .The novel is based on the theme of immigration of native Indians who went to America; it deals with the theme of coloured immigrants in USA and presents their difficulties of adjustment there. These uprooted individuals, Ashoke and Ashima, symbolize two sides of the immigrant experience and also suffer from exile, alienation and humiliation. This paper tries to focus the diasporas' sensibilities and handled the thematic concerns like search for identity, displacement, cultural dislocation, isolation and alienation in their novels.

Keywords: The Namesake, Immigration, Indians, America, Racial prejudices, Cultural differences and Uprooted individuals.

1. INTRODUCTION

A Diaspora is a large group of people with a similar heritage or homeland who have since moved out to places all over the world. Diaspora writing has created a great significant place between countries and cultures. The quest for identity marks the Diaspora writing. The Indian Diaspora is a general term to describe the people who migrated from India. Immigration has taken place due to historical, political and economic reasons, including higher education, better prospects and marriage. However, the migrated Indian community has shown a greater sense of adjustments, adaptability, mobility and accessibility.

Writers of the Indian Diaspora wrote about the loss of identity, feelings of alienation, sense of adjustments, adaptability and mobility of the migrants on a foreign land. Literature of the Indian Diaspora constitutes a major study of the literature and other cultural texts of the Indian Diaspora. This literature works as a channel to strength the bonds between India in relation with the other countries.

Many Indian writers contributed to the diasporas' writing among them Jhumpa Lahiri gains a predominant place. Immigration occupies an important theme in her novels. Her fiction is thus structured on historical and cultural dislocation. Jhumpa Lahiri- 'an anthropologist':

Jhumpa Lahiri other than being a popular novelist and an eminent writer is an excellent anthropologist. She observes the feelings of the individual and studies their problems in an efficient manner. Her interest mainly centres around the problems of the displaced migrants and their attachment to the settlement. She mainly focuses on cultural displacement and immigrant experiences in her novels.

It has been seen that the novelist portrays her characters to cling to the national identity and undergo the immigrant experiences. They delineate an array of victims of the diaspora who stand basically detached and yet strongly attached to the nostalgic past. Consequently, the characters develop a sense of insecurity and attempt to resurrect their nostalgic homes. This is their identity crisis. Basically, they are the immigrants on a quest for an identity in their new location. Though they attempt to adapt to the new culture, their nostalgic past shakes them and they become victims of tension and anxieties.

1.1 Quest of identity

Although the immigrants in this novel find it initially a little difficult to adapt to the way of life of the host country, they lead a sophisticated life which makes their stay in the alien land more comfortable. They earn as much as possible and are contented with their income. Lahiri has explicated in *The Namesake* the enthusiastic life, some of her characters lead. They get slowly adapted to the alien culture. In the beginning, Ashima prepares her favourite Indian food and at the end of the novel she has learnt to prepare Christmas cake. As an immigrant in the USA, Ashoke enhances his educational qualification by pursuing Ph.D. in Electrical Engineering at MIT, and as a result he gets employment in a University.

In course of time even he purchases a house on Pemberton road which helps his family lead a comfortable and sophisticated life. His immigrant status has helped him to promote his academic and professional pursuits, resulting in intellectual and economic gain. When compared to Ashoke, the other characters have experienced loneliness and alienation. While Ashoke is pursuing his studies at MIT, most of the days, Ashima is alone in her apartment feeling lonely. And then again she feels the pangs of loneliness when she is admitted at the maternity ward, with no known persons around her either to comfort or to console. She is exceedingly afraid of raising a child in a country where she is related to no one, where she knows so little, where life seems so burdensome and worrisome that she fumes with indignation:

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"I'm saying I don't want to raise Gogol alone in this country. It's not right. I want to go back". Ashima has language barrier which needs critical attention. Ashima finds difficult to cope up with the nurse and doctor in the maternity ward. Ashima and Ashoke send their children, Gogol and Sonia, to learn the Bengali language and also to attend culture classes every Saturday. It shows their parents "fails to unsettle them that their children sound just like Americans, expertly conversing in a language that still at times confounds them in accents they are accustomed not to trust".

1.2 Gogol's feeling of alienation

Gogol, son of Ashima and Ashoke feels alienated, especially when he realizes that no one in India or America or elsewhere in the world bears his name. When Gogol is fourteen he starts hating his name and he responds rudely when he is asked about his name. At the college party, Gogol is reluctant to introduce himself to Kim as Gogol, so he asserts that his name is Nikhil. Gogol considers himself an America whereas American society considers him an Indian. His name symbolizes the problem of his identity. Nikhil enters Yale as a freshman. Here nobody knows his earlier name. He feels relief and confident. He can now relate himself with American environment.

He starts doing many activities which he wants to do. He goes on keeping girlfriends, having live in relationship but he is not satisfied from within. He lives his life in American style, away from his parents, working to sustain himself. He keeps this life secret and does not allow his parents know about it. "After eighteen years of Gogol, two months of Nikhil feels scant, inconsequential", He hates everything that reminds him of his past and heritage. But the loss of the old name was not so easy to forget and when he visits his home on alternate weekends, "Nikhil evaporates and Gogol re-enters again".

1.3 Two sides of immigrant experience

The characters Ashoke and Ashima, provide a unique perspective on seemingly everyday things within American society. Husband and wife have differing reactions to the barrage of new customs that greets them in America, and together they embody two sides of the immigrant experience. Ashoke is often amused and fascinated by the world around him in America, and prospers first as a student and then as a professor. Although he remains attached to the family's Bengali traditions, he has always been inclined to travel, and is not actively homesick. Ashima, on the other hand, misses her life in India intensely, and often finds life in Massachusetts to be cold and lonely. She finds it difficult to understand the customs of those around her, and clings to her correspondence with her family in India, as well as the family she has in America: her husband and children. Ashima in many ways anchors the narrative, providing an emotional center and working most actively to hold her family together and maintain their Bengali traditions. The intense isolation she often feels demonstrates the difficulty that can be involved in fitting into an entirely new culture while struggling to retain one's own cultural heritage. Though Gogol is a born citizen and desires to be an American, he is not accepted in the American society.

2. CONCLUSION

Jhumpa Lahiri has brilliantly potrayed the dilemma of uprooted individuals through her novel The Namesake (2003). Lahiri is concerned with the lives of Indian immigrants in America. The experience of exile, cultural conflict, human relationship and existential problems which are the common problems in the twentieth century literary scene are visibly dealt with in this novel. The novel explores the existential problems of alienation, adjustment, rootedness and the final decision in the lives of the three major characters - Ashoke, Ashima and Gogol.

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