Struggle in Ethnic Existence: A Diasporic Study of Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Namesake*

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Abstract  
Ethnic study has become an expression in the English Literature. Originally it stood for the Jews who dispersed from Israel/Palestine to all kinds of places in the world. Those people carried with them a profound attachment to their last place of residence. Tracing the various processes which Indian communities went through in different regions of the world as they dropped anchor in new lands and adjusted to their new surroundings, it is startling to see how they hold on to their identities as ethnic Indians while remaining loyal to their adopted cultures. Language and cultures are transformed as they come into contact with other languages and cultures. It becomes important to question the nature of one’s relationship with the culture of their origin and to examine the different strategies they adopt in order to negotiate the cultural space of the countries of their adoption. Expatriate occupies a significant position between cultures and countries. Cultures take root or get dislocated. Cultural theory is today being created by people who live on the margins. An important question is how does one define the margin? Do the margins exuberant areas further divide themselves and the centre remains the same, indifferent to what is happening around it. The migrant worker/scholar, who moves from one culture to another, needs to relocate himself/herself in relation to the centre. Sometimes it will even put the migrant in a schizophrenic situation, with regard to crossing from one culture to another. A good amount of instability is also involved at this point.

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Indians in the United States comfortably acclimatize themselves to the American way of life as they are born and brought up there. Even though their parents impart their cultural ethos to their children, they do not attach much importance to them as they had no chance through them.

Jhumpa Lahiri shows the immigrants who follow their own cultural beliefs along with the culture of the host country. The children, Gogol
and Sonia, born and brought up in America want their parents to help them celebrate American festivals. Their parents, Ashoke and Ashima, celebrate Christmas in their home and they invite their American friends to celebrate their traditional festivals. Ashoke and Ashima ask their children to sit in Pujas and other ceremonies along with other Bengali children. But their children like American festivities like Christmas and Thanksgiving. They also like American food rather than Bengali.

The novel, The *Namesake* is about the expatriate experience. In the novel, Ashima finds herself totally alienated in the beginning. Lying on the hospital bed to be delivered of her baby she feels for the first time that she is terribly lonely, she thinks that if it had been in India, there would be plenty of relatives standing by her side in this hour of pain. But in the United States there are just two strange human beings, Dr. Ashley and his nurse are ominously silent.

The immigrants seldom forget their homeland. Ashima carries a magazine, Desh, with her to the hospital. Though it is a tattered copy it gives comfort to her. Ashoke, her husband, also has a handkerchief that has the letter ‘A’ embroidered on it by his mother. He also wears the spectacles which is fitted by a Calcutta optometrist. The couple are ignoring the forms from the hospital about filling the birth certificate of the newly born. Ashima’s grandmother even has mailed a letter containing two names –one name for a girl and another for a boy. Her grandmother “was particularly thrilled at the prospect of naming the family’s first sahib” (*Namesake* 25).

Ashima feels dislocated in America and spends her time reading Bengali poems, short stories and articles which she has brought with her. She also has the habit of calculating the time in India with her hands and imagines what her close relatives would be doing at that time. She also keeps her ears trained to hear the click of mail-box slot in the door to receive letters from home.

The immigrant women want to go to their parents’ places when they are about to bring up their babies in the newland. Like that Ashima also wants to go but, according to Tejindar Kaur, she “decides to stay back for Ashoke’s sake and brings up the baby in the Bengali way” (35). She keeps all her disappointments to herself and writes in her letter about the facilities available and also the cleanliness of American environment.

The expatriates of the same community join together to celebrate the festivals and ceremonies to connect them to their land. Ashoke and Ashima also get friends from their own community. They all gather together to celebrate their birthdays, marriages and religious ceremonies. While conducting such parties in the newland, they leave their new dressing style and dress up in traditional attires and thus they preserve their culture in the new land.

Ashoke and Ashima buy a house of their own and they are happy to possess something of their own in the United States. But their move to the university town, Massachusetts makes Ashima worry as there are no good facilities.

The children of the immigrants face problems in the host country. Gogol Ganguli, Ashoke and Ashima’s son, experiences this plentifully. He is irritated whenever someone from the neighbourhood, remove the letters ‘uli’ from ‘Ganguli’ in the mail box and the name is shortened to ‘Gang’. So he feels sickened. American always do this. They love calling each other by their pet names. But, Indians who are accustomed to a different kind of address, invariably feel unhappy about it. In his adulthood also he faces problems. While celebrating his birthday, in Maxine’s house he is made aware of his Indian heritage by Pamela, their neighbour. She says to him that when the people go to India they fall ill because India is not clean; Gogol feels unnerved by such catechisms.

The immigrants want their children to learn Bengali poems and also want to learn about the culture and tradition of India. The parents wish their children to follow their instructions. Ashima teaches Gogol, Bengali poems when he is a child. But when he grows up he is not interested to
go to Bengali classes. She teaches him the names of gods by showing the pictures of gods. The expatriate always think about their culture. They are imbibed in the ethics of their motherland. According to William sofran, “… the retention of a collective memory, vision or myth about the original homeland – his physical location, history etc” (cited in James 199) is one of the six features of diasporas.

The second generation immigrants suffer a dual loss. During their trip to India, Ganguli visits some important tourist destinations like the Tajmahal. In their return journey, the children develop some illness and their relatives remark that the children “were not made to survive in the poor country” (Namesake 86). On their return to America, Ashima sits silently while Gogol is relieved as they are getting back to their normal life. After they reach their home in America, “they are disconcerted by the space, by the uncompromising silence that surrounds them. They still feel somehow in a transit” (87).

Jhumpa Lahiri attaches much importance to the concept of home in her stories. Whereever man is, he needs a permanent abode to lay his head on. It is the home that gives stability to a man. Accordingly, man has to find a home and an address for him, be it in India or abroad. According to Tejinder Kaur, “Man is dislocated in this world. He may have a home in the native nation, build a ‘home’ in ‘a new land’ adopting to the cultures, but ultimately he has no home. He has to leave all the ‘homes’ as death takes him to the ‘other’ world / home – ‘where’ – nobody knows” (42). This, of course is, philosophical. When Ashoke leaves the world, his place is taken over by his son, which, of course is the law of nature. After his father’s death, Gogol realizes the meaning of his life and he makes an earnest attempt to relive the life of his parents’.

Gogol goes to New York in a train after the death of his father. He remembers his father always. He also thinks “…of that other train he has never seen, the one that had nearly killed his father. Of the disaster that has given him his name” (Namesake 185). Gogol’s mind is crowded with loving incidents involving his father. He realizes his father’s love for him; he realizes why he is called Gogol. He is the Indian immigrant who is Americanized in the novel. He has plenty of boyfriends just like a typical western boy. Though his parents try to put Indian values into his brain, they are of no use to him. The global citizen, Gogol stays with Ruth and Maxine, his girlfriends. His parents do not react openly as they know that they cannot force their children to go in the Bengali way. His sister is also Americanized. She also changes her attitude after her father’s death like her brother.

After a long struggle the immigrants overcome the cultural dilemmas and a sense of displacement by compromising the value system of their home land. Though a Hindu, Ashima draws on her own and makes Christmas cards with the greetings, ‘Merry Christmas’ cards with nativity scene. She has lived in America for about thirty years. She has retained her dressing style and values. She has also accepted the American culture and allowed herself to be impacted by it to some extent.

The second generation migrants go global and become multi-cultural. Sonia, the sister of Gogol, decides to marry the American Ben and Moushumi, Gogol’s wife’s attitude shows that they are becoming multi-cultural and are going to explore new identities. But Gogol is dejected because of his bi-cultural identity. He also wants to find a new route, a new space like Lahiri’s other characters, Jhumpa Lahiri is an Indian by ancestry and American by immigration. She is an interpreter of people’s malaise and maladies and according to Jyoti Mishra, she “seems more inclined towards her native land. But at the same time she is also not blind to the American virtues” (30). Jhumpa, through the words of Ashima, talks about this. When Ashima gets back her lost things, she says, “only in this country” (43) this is possible. After Ashoke’s untimely death due to heart failure, Ashima does not immediately return to India with her children. She has spent nearly three decades in the United States and so she has had her own difficulty in wriggling out from America and American life. In a way she has also become a global citizen.
She remembers her life with Ashoke and though she does not feel fully at home, “she knows that this is home nevertheless – the world for which she is responsible, which she has created, which is everywhere around her, needing to be packed up, given away, thrown out bit by bit” (280). Though the characters of Jhumpa Lahiri can at any time claim their roots, they choose to stay back in America because they have made America also as their home. It is not money that pulls them back to the American soil. There are many other powerful elements that keep them in the fold of mother America. Some of these are transparency, openness, individuality, respect for the other and cleanliness. Globality thus is not only a vision for Jhumpa Lahiri’s character but also a reality.

References