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Diasporic Language and Identity in “Namesake”

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Abstract—The present paper attempts to indicate the way through which Lahiri investigates the issue of name and immigrant's identity and belongingness in *The Namesake*. In the ancient era an enormous number of Indians immigrated to Far East Asia to advertise Buddhism. But in the modern time the Indian Diaspora describes the people who emigrated from land of India. Nowadays, the condition is basically the story of success of the Indian Diasporas settled in America, U.K. and Europe. This study considers the term Diaspora: and its function and role in the contemporary world where the issues such as multiculturalism, identity and belongingness are observed among the Indian diasporas. The namesake by Jhumpa Lahiri have vividly depicted Gauguli family's immigrate to American. Alienation and self-identity are main lines to connect the whole story. The most significant and debatable elements that the Jhumpa Lahiri covers in this novel is to depict the issue of multiculturalism and its influence on the person's identity very beautifully and utterly. Therefore, the theme of alienation, of being a stranger in a foreign land, isolation from a group or an activity to which one should belong or in which one should be involved. Main character Ashima's feeling of isolated is prominent throughout the novel.

Index Terms—diaspora, identity, multiculturalism, alienation, immigrant

I. INTRODUCTION

As a cultural product, literature has been recognized as the source that awakes us about globalization and multiculturalism. Valuable literary works adorn realities and adds captivating pages to absorb readers' eyes as well as minds and makes them aware about the contemporary world and its issues. In this respect, Diasporic literature has been playing a significant role in depicting culture and history of nations and revealing reality about people on diaspora. According to Jasbir Jain (1998), "Language and cultures are transformed as they come into contact with other languages and cultures. Diasporic writing raises questions regarding the definitions of 'home' and 'nation'. Schizophrenia and/or nostalgia are often preoccupations of these writers as they seek to locate themselves in new cultures". Hence it is literature that represents the history in the context of present social structure.

Diasporic literature, within a post-colonial framework, considers issues like marginalization, cultural oppression, social inequality, racism and so on. Diasporic writing deals with swinging between the memory of homeland and the new land, the migrants are in a permanent mental and emotional battle between the myth and customs of the old world and; freedom and attractions of the new one. Migrants stay in a dilemma as to pursue their old traditions or break the obstacles and accept the new values and culture.

In Diaspora there is a longing for homeland to get back to “the lost origin” and “imaginary homelands” (Rushdie, 1991). People in Diaspora encounter cultural conflicts when they have to leave their cultural values and practice the new ones. Therefore, they feel distracted and lost, nostalgic and try to resist against the discourse of power. But, in the next generations these bewilderments, difficulties and desires become less severe as they are influenced by the culture of that land and also conform themselves to its values.

Although the next generations were born to immigrant parents, they enjoy their settlement in that land but “their sense of identity borne from living in a Diaspora community [is] influenced by the past migrant history of their parents or grandparents” (McLeod, 2000).

The term Diaspora was derived from Greek word *Diaspeirein* that means to spread or disperse. The ancient Greeks used *Diaspeirein* to point to people of a dominant position who immigrated to a new territory with the aim of colonization, to change the land into the empire. In the ancient era an enormous number of Indians immigrated to Far East Asia to advertise Buddhism. But in the modern time the Indian Diaspora describes the people who emigrated from land of India. Nowadays, the condition is basically the story of success of the Indian Diasporas settled in America, U.K. and Europe. With the growing of national economies Indians became a nation to flatten the world. In America, Indian Diasporas are more than 2.5 million. Most of them are well representatives of India in various aspects of life especially in academic fields, as Jhumpa Lahiri (born in 1967) is one of these elite.

Lahiri was born in London on July 11, 1967, the daughter of Indian immigrants from the state of West Bengal. Her family moved to the United States when she was three; Lahiri considers herself an American, stating, "I wasn't born here, but I might as well have been. Lahiri is recognized as an Indian-American author who won the Pulitzer Prize (2000) for *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999). Also, her first fiction *The Namesake* (2003) was considered as a main national best seller by the New York magazine book of the year. In her fiction, Lahiri often illustrates Indian immigrants who are suspended between the culture and tradition of their homeland and their new world.

Lahiri considers the human misery in her novels. She attempts to cope with psyche of her characters, to examine, psychologically the difficulties and obstacles of people especially those who were born in India but immigrated to America. So who are they, Indians or Americans? In fact, they navigate between two societies. Lahiri depicts these issues and confusion in her first novel, *The Namesake*.

II. METHODOLOGY

The Namesake is the story of two Indian generations and their confrontation with new culture and values in the west. In her autobiographical novel Lahiri narrates the story of Gogol Ganguli, the American-born son who along with his family moved into Massachusetts from Calcutta in 1960. In *The Namesake*, Gogol's parents Ashoke and Ashima are among the immigrants to America while Gogol belongs to the present success story of the Indian Diaspora in America.

The Namesake is a story of immigrants who feel homesick, wandering in an unknown island, far away from their homeland. The significant question for them is about their identity and their quest and desire for it. The story, which published in 2003 gained immediate fame and even a Hollywood film was produced based on it.

Before getting into deep analysis of the plot and to start a discussion on the theme of diasporic clash of identity in *The Namesake* it could be significant to refer to Lahiri's own statement. In an interview appeared by Houghton Mifflin Company, Lahiri states that the story is absolutely about those people "who are culturally displaced or those who grow up in two worlds simultaneously" Discussing about the difficulties and problem of people on immigration Jhumpa Lahiri remarks: "I think that 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".

III. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

The fiction certainly has an autobiographical root as Lahiri's personal experience as a child of an immigrant family is similar to that of Gogol, the heroine, in *The Namesake*. In the same interview she declares: "I wanted to please my parents and meet their expectations. I also wanted to meet the expectations of my American peers, and the expectations I put on myself to fit into American society. It is a classic case of divided identity."

Like Gogol's story, the name of her pet unintentionally becomes her nickname. Also, Jhumpa has two other names on her passport. However, when she registered in school the teachers called her Jhumpa that is easier to pronounce. In the same interview, talking on the diasporic issue of hybrid identity Lahiri states: "The original spark of the book was the fact that a friend of my cousin in India had a pet name Gogol. I wanted to write about a pet name/ good name distinction for a long time. It is almost too perfect a metaphor for the experience of growing up as the child of immigrants, having a divided identity, divided loyalties etc."

Our names obviously refer to our identities. In a discussion with Mira Nair, director of Hollywood film on Lahiri's novel, she says, "The names we have, there is so much about them: who are we and they are the one world that exists that represents us. And yet we don't choose them. These are from our parents." Concerning the motif of immigration, cultural conflict and significance of names Lahiri shows her concern over the issue of immigration.

The present paper attempts to show the way through which Lahiri investigates the issue of name and immigrant's identity and belongingness in *The Namesake*. This study considers the term Diaspora: and its function and role in the contemporary world where the issues such as multiculturalism, identity and belongingness are observed among the Indian diasporas.

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Names we are given by our parents help shape our identity and sense of belonging. The whole novel is about Gogol's name and how his identity is shaped based on the name he was given as a child. Many critics have pointed out the importance of names in the shaping of our identity.

"For ancient peoples, all proper nouns were originally meaningful. The name showed a road and could thus have a bearing on the child's fate. Hence, the care dedicated to its choice is understandable. There was nothing childish or absurd about this as long as the name held a meaning inherent to it, since each person's name was associated with his future and could influence his fate.... The name serves not only to identify an individual, it also confers existence. This is doubtless one of the most important functions of bearing a name: it opens up to life. (Lahiri, 2003, p. 22)

In this novel, Lahiri depicts the issue of multiculturalism and its influence on the person's identity very beautifully. According to Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (2010) "Multiculturalism is a body of thought in political

philosophy about the proper way to respond to cultural and religious diversity. Mere toleration of group differences is said to fall short of treating members of minority groups as equal citizens; recognition and positive accommodation of group differences are required through “group-differentiated rights,” a term coined by Will Kymlicka (1995). Some group-differentiated rights are held by individual members of minority groups, as in the case of individuals who are granted exemptions from generally applicable laws in virtue of their religious beliefs or individuals who seek language accommodations in schools or in voting. Other group-differentiated rights are held by the group qua group rather by its members severally; such rights are properly called group rights, as in the case of indigenous groups and minority nations, who claim the right of self-determination. In the latter respect, multiculturalism is closely allied with nationalism. While multiculturalism has been used as an umbrella term to characterize the moral and political claims of a wide range of disadvantaged groups, including African Americans, women, gays and lesbians, and the disabled, most theorists of multiculturalism tend to focus their arguments on immigrants who are ethnic and religious minorities (e.g. Latinos in the U.S., Muslims in Western Europe), minority nations (e.g. Catalans, Basque, Welsh, Québécois), and indigenous peoples (e.g. Native peoples in North America, Maori in New Zealand).”

Based on the above mentioned description of multiculturalism, Gogol cannot shape his identity because of his name and also because of the fact that he is kind of torn apart between the two cultures. The culture with which he is raised as a child at home and the very different one that surrounds him outside home leave his mind in a state of confusion. All families from all around the world practice a set of rituals which is specific to their cultural background. These rituals are also an important factor in the shaping of a person's identity. The importance of the rituals has also been noted in several books.

“Every family has rituals. Rituals are the habitual ways we do both the everyday and the special tasks of life. Doing things the same way communicates to family members that they belong. Small children, in particular, love rituals; rituals provide security and a sense of meaning and purpose that may be hard to communicate in any other way. Rituals can be as simple as the time supper (which) is eaten each evening, distribution of the morning paper by sections to family members to read over breakfast, or how children and adults prepare for the night's sleep.” (Lahiri, 2003, p. 209)

Gogol's parents try very hard to cling to the traditions of India in which the first 20 years of their lives passed because for them India is home. When Gogol meets Maxine and starts living with her family, he longs for the life they have. Maxine's parents are in love and do not practice the rituals Gogol had to practice as a child although he did not like them. Maxine's mother is never worried about the dirty dishes left in the sink before going to sleep, they drink wine every night and Gerald and Lydia watch movies together whereas Gogol's parents had never been so close in this way. At some point in the book when he is asked to see his father off for a small journey he is about to make, he questions the rituals.

“Why do I have to see him off?” He knows that for his parents, the act of travel is never regarded casually, that even the most ordinary of journeys is seen off and greeted at either end.” (Lahiri, 2003, p. 144)

Lahiri does not allow Gogol's character to shape fully. It seems that he never makes the right decision. He doesn't like his name as a child and shapes a new identity when he changes his name but is not fully satisfied with it. Then he falls in love with Maxine who is the complete opposite of her parents. Gogol marries an Indian girl, Moushumi because she is also torn apart between the two cultures and he can win his mother's approval for the marriage but finally he has to divorce the girl. Gogole changes his name to Nikhil before going to college and with the new identity he is able to do the things he feared doing before like dating girls. His new identity is shaped with the single act of changing his given name. He can now more easily blend into the lives and culture of the people around him.

“Persons have changed their family names, or immigration officials have perfunctorily changed them, to bring about better “blending in” to a culture which saw itself as a “melting pot” for diverse ethnic identities.” (Lahiri, 2003, p. 208)

Both the nature of what we take to be a self and its expression are inherently cultural (Lahiri, 2003, p. 419)

For Gogol's sister, Sonia everything is different. She has successfully come to terms with the American culture. Being born after Gogol, her parents did not face any of the difficulties they had when Gogol was born. They chose her name before she was born because now they knew once they utter a name to the people at the hospital; their child will be called by that name.

“The right good book is always a book of travel; it is about a life's journey.” said by H.M. Tolinson. The namesake by Jhumpa Lahiri have vividly depicted Gauguli family's immigrate to American. Alienation and self-identity is a main line to connect the whole story.

The theme of alienation means a stranger in a foreign land, isolation from a group or an activity to which one should belong or in which one should be involved. According to Merriam Webster Dictionary” in the social sciences context, the state of feeling estranged or separated from one's milieu, work, products of work, or self. The concept appears implicitly or explicitly in the works of Émile Durkheim, Ferdinand Tönnies, Max Weber, and Georg Simmel but is most famously associated with Karl Marx, who spoke of workers being alienated from their work and its products under capitalism. In other contexts the term alienation, like anomie, can suggest a sense of powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, social isolation, or cultural- or self-estrangement brought on by the lack of fit between individual needs or expectations and the social order.” Main character Ashima's feeling of isolated is prominent throughout the novel. However there are two generations different alienation in the novel, first generation-Ashoke and Ashima and second generation their children Gogol and Sonia. They have shared different idea of alienation. It depicts the different

attitudes, outlooks and way of living of two generations in dealing with the problems in a foreign country. They face different problems as the meaning of culture differs for both the generations – the first generation being directly related to his/her homeland and second generation forming an image of culture based on the information transmitted by the first generation. But for the second generation Diaspora, Gogol and Sonia, identity problems are rather different, for they have a sense of pride and affinity with India, but it is America that is perceived as ‘home’.

“On more than one occasion he has come home from the university to find her morose, in bed, rereading her parent’s letters.” (Lahiri, 2003, p. 36)

Ashima’s homesickness is a major source of unhappiness. Beside cooking and cleaning and take care to their children, she has nothing to do at home, she has no friends. And she doesn’t even wants rise her baby at the country. She feels the distant and doesn’t fit in American.

Ashama was suffering the isolated from the first day of her journey to American, until the end after her husband’s death. She decided to go back to her own country and live there for 6 mouths per year and stay in America with her children for another six month.

“She feels overwhelmed by the thought of the moving she is about to make, to the city that was once home and is now its own way foreign. She feels both impatience and difference for all the days she still must live, for something tell her she will not go quickly as her husband did. For thirty-three years she missed her life in India. Now she will miss her job at the library.” (Lahiri, 2003, p. 278)

From the last chapter of the book shows that she was taking a shower before the party, suddenly she feels lonely, horribly, permanently alone. By this she realize she is neither belong to the country she has left for 30 years nor the country she has spent 30 years with her husband, at the end, she knows actually she is belong to nowhere. She just exhausted and overwhelmed with her husband. She lost her job also lost all the time she spends in America. She feels isolated by both countries; she couldn’t get will with Indian or American. She comes to America for her husband, but now, her husband died; she couldn’t find more reason to stay in the country she never likes before. Instead of saying that she never likes the country is better to say she never feels America to be her home. A place that she feels kind of sense of security. “True to the meaning of her name, she is without border, without a home of her own, a resident everywhere and nowhere” (Lahiri, 2003, p. 264)

Not only Ashima but Gogol also feels alienated, he feels alienated from several ways. In his marriage with Moushumi, when they go to Paris together, he wishes it were her first time there, so they can feel the same feeling and share the same experience. He didn’t feel nice when he knows that his wife feels so obviously comfortable in Paris. at the other hand, from beginning he try to away from his parents and the Bengali culture until the end he return back to Ashima, he has spent a lot time to find out who really he wants to be.

“The namesake” also focuses on the issue of the self-identity “the name” as the way to discover Gogol’s true self. Erik Erikson (1959) defines identity as a signature mark and asserts “the self is the individual” as known to the individual in a socially determined frame of reference. Where is he come from and where does he really belong. Name defines who you are and who you will be, most of the name not only a name, it was a good wish from parents. However Gogol as the main characters his name is a Russia writer’s name. As Gogol grow up, he discover that his name meant nothing. He feels unhappy and disappointed. Until the end, he knows that he is his father life’s continuing. He presents his family and Bengali culture.

“Go on. Gogol, take something,” Dilip Nandi says, drawing the plate close, Gogol frown, and his lower lip trembles. Only then, forced at six months to confront his destiny, does he begin to cry.” (Lahiri, 2003, p. 40)

When Gogol six months. Gogol is already refusing to participate in fractional Indian rituals. He doesn’t know what is happening and he was not willing to do anything asked by his parents and Bengali friends, although he has no idea what is happening around him, hence he knows there is something that’s he doesn’t like. He use cry to express his feeling inside. Later when he grows up, he discovers that his name is not from Indian nor American name, he couldn’t find the meaning of his name. Then he decide change his name to Nikhil. Changing his name is also a way shield himself from his own culture, family and past.

“Without people in the world to call him Gogol, no matter how long he himself lives, Gogol Gauguli will, once and for all, vanish from the lips of loved ones, and so, cease to exist, yet the thought of the eventual demise provides no sense of victory, no victory, no solace, it provides no solace at all” (Lahiri, 2003, p. 287)

IV. DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSION

From trying to find a new identity to develop a high-esteem to his father’s death, Gogol has through the long way from unhappy with the name to accept the name. He realizes changing a name doesn’t mean he can really away from his past and culture. Nobody really care what his name is. All the time only his family members will be around and call him “Gogol” He was struggling between two countries, trying to stay away from his own culture only because he want be involved by American culture. Hence, later on he found out that people without culture and special name is rootless. “He leans back against the headboard, adjusting a pillow behind his back. In a few minutes he will go downstairs, join the part, his family. But ...For now, he starts to read. (Lahiri, 2003, p. 291) he went back to his family as a adult man, he find his root is no matter he is Indian or American by the name Gogol also understand his parents more than he used

to be. He finally learned to find his own identity is not abandon or attempt either culture, but to mix the two cultures together.

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