

RESEARCH ARTICLE



INTERNATIONAL  
STANDARD  
SERIAL  
NUMBER  
INDIA

2395-2636 (Print); 2321-3108 (online)

## CULTURAL DISLOCATION AND IDENTITY CRISIS IN EXILE: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF JHUMPA LAHIRI'S "THE NAMESAKE" AND BHARATI MUKHARJEE'S "JASMINE"

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### ABSTRACT

While globalization brings the world closer, people have migrated different countries across the world for the sake of better fortunes. This makes them geographical, cultural and emotional displacement. This displacement divides their souls in foreign countries. They begin to feel identity crisis there. The feeling of Nationalism becomes strong within them. Wherever they go, they carry with them a profound sense of nationalism. They always miss their homeland and own rich cultural heritages. They learn to live lonely in foreign countries in a strange atmosphere. This gives birth to multiple identities and solidarities. But their sweet memories in homeland still take them in the fiery land. They become nostalgic. The powerful ethics and value system of the native countries make them conscious about "self". The immigrants Indians do not break their relationship with the homeland. The homeland or the native country is more imaginary and imagined than the real. Settlement in alien land makes them experience dislocation. They experience the sense of loneliness in an alien land and quest of identity. They attempt to assimilate, adapt and amalgamate with the society of their host country. But their attempts of adaptation and adjustment are not without their concern to maintain their original culture and identity. Their efforts for assimilation and failure to do so dishearten them. They feel rootlessness and isolation in their dream land. Their psyche are broken "--- one physical alienation from India at almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of redeeming precisely the thing that was lost, that will, in short, create fictions not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indians of mind." (Rushdie, 1991:10) The problem of adjustment and rejection makes the immigrants feel homelessness. Therefore the sense of loneliness and identity crisis is one of the burning problems for the immigrants in foreign countries. Jhumpa Lahiri's "The Namesake" and Bharati Mukharjee's "Jasmine" bring out these disturbing issues in the US. Actually alienation is a part of the experience of the Indian Diaspora in the US.

KEY WORDS: globalization, displacement, immigrants, adjustment, nationalism, homeland, identity, memory, rootlessness, loneliness and alienation.

**Introduction**

Meena Alexander in her "The Shock Arrival" wrote:

"Coming to America, I have felt on my own heart what W.E.B. Dubois invoked: 'two souls, two thoughts... in one dark body.' But now, at the tail end of the century, perhaps there are many souls, many voices in one dark body." (Lines: 1-2)

Jhumpa Lahiri's "The Namesake" and Bharati Mukherjee "Jasmine" explore the migrant experience in UK and USA. Immigrants almost inevitably face immense challenges in new country and new culture. Geographical dislocation leads people to Cultural dislocation. This makes them feel loneliness. The sense of loneliness is a psychological state. The sense of loneliness is more than a sense of having company of another person. It is a feeling of being detached, disconnected, and/or cut off from other people so that it feels difficult or even often feel empty or depressed inside. The immigrants experience a strong sense of loneliness in their host countries. Diasporic sensibility is not something permanent; it keeps on changing as time and place changes. But the sense of loneliness always keeps the immigrants upset in exile. They feel identity crisis and try to assimilate themselves by changing their names and typical dress code. But the construction of new identities is never easy. Jhumpa Lahiri's "The Namesake" and Bharati Mukherjee "Jasmine" highlight cultural crisis in foreign countries and ultimate search for Identity. There are cultural conflict between the East and the West.

Jhumpa Lahiri's "The Namesake" deals with the way people shape and change their identities over time in their dreamland. The novel is the life story of a Bengali family, who recently immigrate to the United States from Calcutta. Ashoke Ganguli and Ashima Ganguli first met in Calcutta; Ashoke, an engineering student in far-away Boston. Their marriage was arranged by their parents in a highly formal Bengali ceremony in Calcutta. Though Ashima barely knew Ashoke, she accepted him as her husband. Soon after their marriage Ashoke decided to move abroad. Ashima was afraid to move across the world but she did so to satisfy her family's wishes. They went in Cambridge where they settled.

There Ashima was pregnant with her first child. She began to feel loneliness there. She thought that if she were in Calcutta, she would get care and affection from both her parents and parents in laws. She was homesick for India. This thought psychologically made her weak and helpless. She began to feel contractions, and called out to her husband in the next room. She was admitted in the hospital in Cambridge. Ashoke waited for the birth of his first child. There she gave birth to a boy. Ashoke touched his rib, a tic he had developed during his recuperation, and which occurred when he thought on the train-wreck and his brush with death. Both Ashoke and Ashima were lovers of literature, Ashima of English poets, Ashoke of Russian authors, especially Nikolai Gogol. Ashoke decided that the boy's nickname, or pet name, should be Gogol, after Nikolai Gogol, the Russian writer. Ashima and Ashoke agreed to register the boy's legal name as "Gogol. Nikolai Gogol was Ashoke's favorite author. Ashoke recalled the most violent, and jarring, moment of his young life: October 20, 1961, a train ride from Calcutta to Jamshedpur, where his grandfather lived. On the trip, Ashoke read Gogol, especially the story "The Overcoat," about the luckless and impoverished low-level clerk, Akaky Akakyevich. Ashoke read as his cabin-mates fall asleep. Suddenly, the train derailed, killing Ghosh and dozens of others. But Ashoke survived, and was identified by rescuers by the fluttering page of his Gogol volume, which Ashoke dropped when the rescuers were nearby: *"He remembers the page crumpled tightly in his fingers, the sudden shock of the lantern's glare in his eyes. But for the first time he thinks of that moment not with terror, but with gratitude."* (Chapter 2) It was a memory that became infused with his parental love for the young Gogol. Later Ashima and Ashoke had another child, a girl named Sonia. Her parents decided to combine her "pet" and "good" names, calling her, officially, Sonali. Years pass, and the family settled into the modest house in the suburbs, on Pemberton Road. Gogol is a name of family intimacy and love but for friends at school, the name Gogol was fun to say. In high school, Gogol found his name strange and confusing. Gogol notices that children in school occasionally make fun

of his name. So, Gogol officially changed his name to Nikhil before going to Yale. *"He is aware that his parents, and their friends, and the children of their friends, and all his own friends from high school, will never call him anything but Gogol."* (Chapter 5) Gogol did not understand the story of his name, nor its relation to his father's life when he changed his name. He saw it only as an embarrassment. He met a girl there named Ruth, and they fell in love, dating for over a year. This change of name shocked Ashoke. One holiday weekend, Ashoke told his son about the train-wreck that nearly had killed him, and that gave Gogol his name. Gogol was unaware of the story until this point. It was a psychological trauma to Ashoke. In this way Gogol changed his identity over time in vain. Loss, betrayal duty and Nostalgia were the foundations of such experience. Later Ruth went away to Oxford to study for a semester. After this, their relationship becomes strained, and they part. He met a young woman in New York named Maxine, who led a cosmopolitan life with her parents' downtown and shares their intellectual, cosmopolitan life. Gogol and Maxine fell in love with each other. After Ashoke's death, the family is stunned. Ashoke was everything for Ashima. She left Calcutta only loving her husband. But the death of her husband was a great shock to her. She began to feel lonely and helpless. Gogol fled to Cleveland and cleaned out his father's apartment. The family observed traditional Bengali mourning practices, from which Maxine felt excluded. Maxine did not always understand Gogol's family's traditions. Soon after this period was over, Maxine and Gogol broke up. This was the result of disintegration of culture. Gogol continued his life in New York, though he visited his mother and sister in Boston more frequently. Ashima sets Gogol up with Moushumi, a family friend from Pemberton Road, who now studied for a French-literature PhD in New York. Gogol and Moushumi initially resisted this blind date, but find that they liked and understood one another. They continued dating and soon fell in love. After about a year, they married in a large Bengali ceremony. But their marriage didn't last long. By the end of their first year of marriage, Moushumi became restless. She felt tied down by marriage and began to regret it. He also felt like a poor substitute

for Graham. Finally they were separated and Moushumi married with Graham. Gogol became once again alone. Gogol realized the hard reality of life. Thus the life of Gogol was troubled by a series of events. Throughout the story, Gogol fought an internal battle to find himself. He struggled trying to balance between American versus Indian culture and appreciating friendship more than family. Gogol recognized that his mother was in need of this kind of "distraction," of the company of friends and family. Gogol found a kind of distraction for himself and quested for identity.

The Ganguli family, bound by geographic, linguistic, and religious ties to Calcutta tried to assimilate, adapt and amalgamate with the society of their host country. The Gangulis' life in America appeared more and more disconnected from the realities of their families' lives in India. This "distance" between American and Indian experience would only deepen, as Gogol and his sister grew and ignored their Bengali heritage and adopted the way of American daily lives. They came to realize that they had been living in America for ten years. They began following more and more American customs, like buying a barbeque and celebrating secular versions of Christian holidays. They began to eat American food, wear ready-made American clothes, and bought other American products, like disposable razors and pens. Compare and contrast between the native country and the 'foreign country' are frequently come into existence in their daily life, which rise consciousness about their native culture in abroad. Native country and own culture are thus more imaginary and imagined than "the dreamland" and foreign culture. Exile tends to hold on to their traditions in an almost desperate effort to preserve own culture. This results in a concerted effort at reclamation.

Jhumpa Lahiri's "The Namesake" is not the simple story of a man and his family, of his life and hopes, loves and sorrows. It is a novel that explores the concepts of cultural identity, of rootlessness, and of tradition and familial expectation. Though the new place gave the Ganguli family a new identity, the true identity was insecure in the process of cultural acceptance. The memory of 'Home', lineage, tradition and own cultural value

always made the family nostalgic. Thus 'Home' became a myth place to the Ganguli family. Such a 'Home' is reconstructed out of memories from childhood, newspaper accounts, and fragments, what Salman Rusdie described as reflections made 'in broken mirrors, some of whose fragments have been irretrievably lost.' (1991:11)

Bharati Mukherjee in her novel "Jasmine" deals with adventure, risk, transformation and the memory of cultural dislocation in foreign country. She looked back the past which could be returned to only memory. So, she looked forward at what new belonging could be constructed in new place and new society. Actually it is a process of transformation of identity not self. You might lose a home but never gain one because a new home in a new place always treats you as a foreigner. Therefore there is a conflict between two worlds- the real and the imaginary. The novel begins with Jasmine retelling a story from her childhood about an astrologer who predicts her future as a widower living in exile. Jyoti/Jasmine/Jane/Jase, the protagonist of the novel is called different names throughout her journey from India to Iowa, each name signifying pivotal moments in her life. She was compelled to change her name in order to fit herself in new and changed circumstances. She was born and brought up in India and later left her country to fulfill her wishes. She felt the need of love which is a natural need for every man and woman. She extended the scope of her identity and suggested her deep connection with own root.

Jasmine describes the rural reality that exists in Darrel Lutz's character, and the element of language that helps shape people's identities. Darrel's mode of speech reveals him for who he is— a struggling Iowan farmer who revels in exotic escapisms:

"He comes from a place where the language you speak is what you are" (Chapter 2, pg. 10).

Jasmine never gave up her childhood memories of her motherland. She always remembered those memories when she was in USA. In fact, her childhood memories became the instrument in her fight against fate and her search for self-identity in her later life. In spite of strong

determination and courage, Jasmine was threatened by dangers, challenges and many barriers in her quest for identity. She struggled hard to survive against all the hardships of life. She is molded with Indian ethos. She possesses an admirable strength to face the calamities of life and capacity of compromise and adjustment wisely.

Though Jhumpa Lahiri's "The Namesake" and Bharati Mukherjee "Jasmine" are written in two different backgrounds the novels deal with NRIs attempt to keep India within the individual and collective intellectual and emotional imaginaries. It becomes a survival device to retain own culture and own community while seeking legal citizenship within the nation. Both the novels present sordid personal experience of the writers. The frequent changes of name each correspond to a distinct period and person who had great influence in the lead character's life, for good or for bad. The characters frequently reinvent themselves in order to try to fit into new place and new society. This change undergoes life transformations of the characters. They search for own identity and own people in order to determine their own identities in a foreign, alien culture. The hardship and rude reality of life in abroad make them feel dislocation and displacement, though they try to assimilate themselves within the mainstream in their dreamlands. Finally with broken hearts they dream for 'Home'. The novels point out the psychological levels of the characters which reflect the impulse of Indians. Thus the novels wake double consciousness which makes an interesting condition- the two cultures are neither assimilating nor combining; and the characters stand at the border of two cultures.

### **Conclusion**

Both the novels Jhumpa Lahiri's "The Namesake" and Bharati Mukherjee "Jasmine" have recorded the sense of cultural dislocation and identity crisis in exile. Deeply cherishing Indian values the immigrants often miss their own heritage, culture and above all 'Home'. Though the novels set in UK and USA, they talk of the cultural vibrancy and sentiments of Indians. It is the native culture they encounter every now and then. They become nostalgia and feel poor in their dreamland. Their sentiments search for geo-national and socio-

linguistic identity in their 'heartland'. They cry out for identity constructions. They have their own valid versions of national Identity.

### **Methodology**

This work is mainly based on secondary source of information, such as published documents, books, literary reviews, autobiography, journals, critiques etc.

### **Acknowledgement**

I convey my deep sense of gratitude to all the Teachers, P.G.Department of English & Research, Magadh University, Bodh-Gaya, India for suggesting the way I may find suitable for the development of my research paper, valuable guidance, & constant help & continuous encouragement in the preparation of this manuscript. I owe to them in every sense for providing me with the facilities throughout the course of investigation. I am grateful to all my friends & classmates for their co-operation.

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