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CULTURAL ALIENATION OF DIASPORA IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S 'THE NAMESAKE'

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Abstract: Identity crisis, racial and cultural conflicts, ethnicity, sense of belongingness, loneliness and alienation are commonly experienced by the Indian Diaspora. The issues of alienation, dislocation and problems faced by immigrants are widely discussed in post-colonial narratives and these topics have been explored by post-colonial writers. This paper presents the conflicts of the immigrants towards the homeland and also the cultural alienation they face. It throws light on the experiences of first and second generations of immigrants in Jhumpa Lahiri's 'The Namesake'. The paper is an attempt to focus on the need to strike a balance between the two cultures and take efforts to blend the cultures to escape from the cultural alienation.

. *Index Terms* - diaspora, first and second generation immigrants, dislocation

INTRODUCTION

The term 'Diaspora' is derived from the Greek word *Diaspeirein* which means "to scatter about, to disperse". While defining the term "diaspora" William Safran's in his essay *On Diaspora* (1991) mentioned that, diaspora are those who live "outside the homeland" and who are said to "retain a collective memory, vision, or myth about their original homeland" The term refers to people of a particular country who have immigrated to another country.

The Indian diaspora refer to the people who migrated from India to America Canada and the colonial states in Europe. The writers of the Indian Diaspora have explored the identity crisis, racial and cultural conflicts, ethnicity, sense of belongingness, loneliness and alienation among the immigrants in their writings. The writings deal with stories of the Indian diasporas mainly settled in the U.K., North America and Europe, their life, the social, cultural, religious, racial and ideological conflicts faced by them in the host country etc. These are the recurrent themes in the diasporic writings of the post-colonial writers like V. S. Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, Bharti Mukherjee, Jhumpa Lahiri, Kiran Desai and many others. The protagonist in Post-colonial literature is portrayed as a person caught between culture of the country where he is born, his home country and the host country. They are in a dilemma as to whether they should follow values of the home culture or break the barriers and get assimilated with the new culture. Issues related to gap between two generations, cultures and locations are also depicted in these writings.

Conflict of Cultures in Post-Colonial Literature:

‘Postcolonial’ refers to all the cultures affected by the imperial process from the moment Colonial powers came to foreign states. The imperialists not only ruled the people of the land but also replaced their native tradition and culture with their own ones. However, this often leads to conflicts when countries became independent and suddenly faced the challenge of developing a new nationwide identity and self-confidence.

This conflict is reflected in postcolonial literary texts which reflect and explore the different customs, forms, practices and also problems of displacement and dislocation. Identity motif and cultural alienation faced by the diaspora are the key themes of postcolonial literature. Conflicts of identity and cultural belonging, hybridity social disparity, racism, marginalization ethnicity, etc are the issues discussed in writings on diaspora

Adaptation to the culture of the host country helps the immigrants to assimilate with the culture and traditions of the nation he has immigrated to. However, despite acquiring the citizenship of the host country, they have the liberty to retain their culture as a result of which their attachment to the country of origin remains. This culture is different from the ‘melting pot’ concept prevalent in America. In the ‘melting pot’ of American culture, immigrants of different nations and creeds abandon their individual identities and assimilate into the grand stew of American culture. The acceptance of diaspora into the host society doesn’t indicate that they feel at home in the adopted country. In his book *Social Theory and the Politics of Identity* Craig Calhoun states:

...national identity and cultural identity are interrelated, because nation refers to the cultural bonds that give a sense of shared identity to a group of people who occupy or aspire to occupy the same geographic territory. (Calhoun 343).

In his article “Introducing Identity” David Buckingham states:

Identity is not merely a matter of playful experimentation or personal growth; it is also about the life-or-death struggles for self-determination that are currently being waged in so many parts of the world. Globalization, the decline of the welfare state, increasing social mobility, greater flexibility in employment, in personal relationships—all these developments are contributing to a sense of fragmentation and uncertainty the world around (Buckingham 2).

Dilemma and Alienation in “The Namesake”:

In the novel “The Namesake” Jhumpa Lahiri focuses on the contrasting experiences of the two generations of expatriates who immigrate to USA to experience life of the American Dream which they longed to live. ‘The novel is the story of two generations of an Indian family from Bengal and their struggle to acculturate themselves in the west. The Bengali couple Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli, arrive in Massachusetts from Calcutta in the late 1960s. Though settled in America they are not inclined towards getting Americanized. However, their American born children Gogol and Sonia, are very much inclined towards the new adopted culture. The story is about the emotional and cultural dislocation experienced by them. The dilemma is differs generation wise. Adesh Pal in *Theorizing and Critiquing Indian Diaspora*, has said, “The first generation has strong attachment with the country of their origin. From the second generation onwards ties with the homeland gradually gets replaced by those with the adopted country. Food, clothes, language, religion, music, dance, myths, legends, customs of individual community etc.become the markers of identity.”

In this novel, Lahiri has explored the state of mind of the first generation immigrants, Ashima and Ashok and the second generation immigrants, Gogol, Sonia and Moushumi.. Aashima, who represents the first generation immigrants, finds it very difficult to adapt to the culture of the host country. Her sense of being at home is connected with India, her first homeland Ashima’s immigrant experience, identity problems, the gap between two generations are the issues dealt by Lehiri in the novel. In addition to the portrayal of the experiences of two generations of expatriates, the novel also deals with the clashes between the two different worlds that Ganguli family simultaneously inhabits. The characters are caught between two cultures -- culture of homeland and the culture of host country leading to Cultural alienation from the culture of both countries. They are in a dilemma as to whether they should remain in a ghetto of old values, or break the barriers and get assimilated with the new culture.

It is here that the question of identity arises, especially with the second generation settlers. While They follow the Indian culture and adhere to values inculcated by their home country while at home. However, in society they are compelled to follow and adopt the culture and conduct of the host country which they look up as their home country. Expectations from home and from society deepens the dilemma of the second generation immigrants leading to identity crisis. They find themselves unacceptable neither at home nor in society –leading to cultural alienation. Attitude of parents, the first generation settlers, is to see that their children adopt both cultures equally well and excel and exploit the situation . They expect their children to derive maximum benefit for themselves, but and at the same time follow the Indian moral and cultural code at home adds to the dilemma of the second generation. Ashima and Ashoke try hard to hold on to their Indian-ness, their culture despite surrounded by the American culture all around. Every weekend Gogol is compelled to take classes and take lessons in Bengali language and culture right from childhood. They themselves go at the Kathakali dance performance or a Sitar recital at memorial hall.. In spite of the efforts of the parents to bind the children to their home culture, Gogol, Sonia, and Moushumi want to chart their own lives. Having grown up in suburban New York both Gogol and Sonia choose American over their Bengali culture, which is not liked by their parents. The second generation immigrants are not attached to their cultural past, infact; they find it easier to accept America's hybrid culture. They seem to be sandwiched between the cultures- the culture of the home country of their parents and the culture of the country of their birth. This cross cultural conflict and the sufferings of the second generation immigrants is depicted in the novel by Lahiri.

The title of the novel. “The Namesake” also speaks of the identity issue where in Gogol seeks wipe and shake off his native identity so much so that he hesitates to introduce his parents to Maxine and Ruth, his American friends. But, a time comes when he find himself in a no man’s land when he finds himself swaying between two cultures and comfortable in neither, leading to a cultural identity.

With the passage of time, Gogol accepts the strength of his hybrid identity and takes pride in assimilating his Indian identity with American by choosing to call himself Nikhil Gogol Ganguly after the death of his father. He learns to strike a balance between the two cultures and takes efforts to blend the cultures which is depicted by the writer as a way to escape from the dilemma.

Need to Strike a balance between two cultures:

The novel deals with the clashes between the two different worlds inhabited by the Ganguli family-the world of Bengali immigrants who struggle to integrate into main stream American culture while maintaining the customs of their homeland, and the world of America into which the Ganguli's try to integrate. Lahiri stresses the fact that for diaspora 'home' is a concept which changes its meaning from person belonging to different generations and the circumstances and location they are born in. The dilemmas of the first-generation and second generation Bengali immigrants, their vain endeavors to tie with the particular tradition and to carry the pure identity are combined with the vain attempt of creating the true home elsewhere. The second generation immigrants usually adhere to their birth land. The national identities get eroded and replaced by the hybrid identities in which both the first and the second generation immigrants are wavered. A need to strike a balance between the two cultures and takes efforts to blend the cultures which is depicted by the writer as a way to escape from the cultural alienation.

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