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### Displaced Protagonists in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*

Ms. J. Sheela <sup>a1</sup>, Dr. N. Geethanjali <sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Ph.D., Research Scholar (Part Time), PG and Research Department of English, Periyar EVR College (Autonomous),  
(Affiliated to Bharathidasan University, Tiruchirappalli-620 023), Tamil Nadu, India

<sup>b</sup> Associate Professor, PG and Research Department of English, Periyar EVR College (Autonomous),  
(Affiliated to Bharathidasan University, Tiruchirappalli-620 023), Tamil Nadu, India

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#### Abstract

As a diasporic writer, Jhumpa Lahiri deals with multicultural society – partly from inside and partly from outside. She strives for her native identity and simultaneously endeavours to evolve a new identity in an adopted Anglo-American cultural landscape. However, in this clash of cultures, she faces an immigrant's dislocation and displacement. She regards dislocation as a permanent condition of human existence. Hence the sense of belonging to a particular place and culture and at the same time being an outsider to it creates tension in her characters.

The basic problem of diasporic writings is the feeling of dislocation without roots. The Diasporas feel homeless and alienated in the foreign land. Dispersal of roots involves pain, alienation, identity crisis and other feelings to the acculturated ones. The Indo-American Diasporas Jhumpa Lahiri document the trauma of her protagonists in different contexts. The former in *The Namesake* describes the struggles and hardships of a Bengali couple who immigrants to the United States of America. Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* located in America, brings her character's struggle in assimilation.

*Keywords: Protagonist, Jhumpa Lahiri, The Namesake & Diasporic.*

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#### 1. Introduction

Immigrants with a desire to explore new opportunities leave their home, and settle in a foreign land, where they undergo cultural shocks, experience lack of sense of belongingness, where they are deprived of their real identity, experience alienation, and suffer from homesickness, etc. According to Homi K Bhabha the identity of such immigrants is not a fixed identity, but is an impure identity. The duality and hybridity leads to a split between their identities. Second-generation immigrants face this situation more than the first generation immigrants because the first generation immigrants though changed politically can somehow relate themselves to their original homeland culturally, linguistically and ethnically, whereas, the second-generation immigrants find it difficult to adhere to the identity of the parental land due to minimal interactions. This widespread immigration has also accompanied with

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<sup>1</sup> Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [sheelarajkumar28@gmail.com](mailto:sheelarajkumar28@gmail.com)

it problems, such as lack of sense of belongingness, nostalgia, isolation, depression, etc. These issues have thus become the recurrent themes in the diasporic writings of the post-colonial writers like: V. S. Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, Agha Shahid Ali, Jhumpa Lahiri, Bharti Mukherjee, Kiran Desai and many others.

The U.S Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 liberalized America's immigration laws by replacing quotas based on national origin with a greater emphasis on family relationships and the need for highly skilled immigrants. These changes helped accelerate the pace of Indian immigration to the U.S. Today, Indian Americans are the country's third-largest population of Asian ancestry, after Chinese Americans and Filipino Americans. In 2010 nearly three million Indian immigrants lived in the U.S.

Indian immigrants who come to the U.S. for higher wages and broader career options also expect their children to take full advantage of American education. A 1992 – 96 study in California demonstrated that Indian – American students excel academically, outperforming most other immigrant groups. But many young Indian Americans also report some degree “American-Born Confused Desi,” to describe themselves and their experience.

An Indian immigrant family arriving in the U.S. in 1970 would have had many more reasons to feel isolated than a family arriving today. The first Hindu temple in the U.S., built in Flushing, New York, didn't open until 1970. Today there are hundreds throughout the country, in big cities like Chicago and also in smaller population centers. “Bollywood” films, Hindu-language movies created in Bombay's thriving film industry, often play in theaters dedicated exclusively to south-Indian films; the United States is by far the largest export market for these movies. The Internet and more accessible telecommunications tools have made it possible for families to stay in touch across long distances and many time zones, and the same technologies have exposed millions of Americans to Indian cuisine, dress, architecture, and societal customs.

Most of the novels written by the Indian diasporic community have an Indian setting. Either the setting or the subject matter will be Indian. The imagery also is Indian, for it stems from the novelists' Indian heritage. Diasporic communities are created out of the merging of narratives about journeys from native country to Western country. Diasporic writing across the world is framed with landscapes and travels. As Diaspora involves a change of places this is the self-evident literary theme. The loss of individual freedom is always accompanied by the gain of new one and displacement is followed by relocation.

The main themes of diasporic literature are memory, imaginary homelands, hybridities and new identities designed by globalization. Promod K Nayar discussed diasporic literature are: The sense of alienation, a new society, culture, new land, reclamation of history of the homeland and childhood spaces, ethnic identity, assimilation in the new culture and individual or communal home. Alienation describes in the novels of diasporic writers. The alienation of the diasporic novelist is mainly since both of them belong to the world that is not touched with the people. Alienation occurs due to cultural displacement, disorder and dismemberment. And the diasporic community is caught between two different sensibilities and emotions. In try to inculcate their adapted culture to forget their identity and culture. Social and cultural identity leads to an identity crisis.

The diasporic fiction tries to capture the sense of displacement of the diasporic. It provides immigrants' perception of the new homeland against the backdrop of his memory of the lost homeland. Loss and nostalgia are, therefore, key characteristics of diasporic writing. To start with, they are led into the field of experience not of Ashoke but of Ashima who arrives in America as his newly – wed wife. The first shock in store for her is the chilly weather. She is uninitiated into the ways of American society. By and by, she gets used to things here. After her husband gives her directions in this regard, she learns to go out independently to nearby departmental stores to do shopping.

Lahiri's first novel *The Namesake* was published in 2003. It deals with the life of an Indian immigrant family over the period 1968 to 2000 A.D. It begins with the traditional scene in Indian families where the family of the prospective groom is invited to the girl's home to negotiate the matrimonial alliance. The ritual bears fruit and Ashoke and Ashima are tied in wedlock. For the young couple, life starts in Cambridge, U.S.A. where Ashok is doing research at MIT. Soon the couple is blessed with their first baby – a boy named Gogol. Years ago in India, Ashoke's life was saved following a nasty train accident simply because the rescue party noticed him through the movement of a few pages of the book – a collection of stories by the famous Russian writer Nikolai Gogol – held in the hands of a semi-conscious Ashoke. So, the writer Gogol's name got impressed on Ashoke's mind as his saviour.

*The Namesake*, Jhumpa Lahiri's first novel is autobiographical and frequently draws upon her experiences as well as those of her parents, friends, acquaintances and others in the Bengali communities with which she is familiar. Jhumpa Lahiri's familiarity with the difficulties faced by immigrant Bengali issues related to identity, the pain of assimilation, nostalgia, loneliness, isolation and cross-cultural issues are remarkably well. She has lived in America. The story has an American setting – New England and New York. But characters are placed in the Indian setting and India is highlighted in the memories of her characters.

The opening chapter of *The Namesake* introduces the characters and presents a character delineation of Ashoke and Ashima and their son Gogol with terseness and clarity. Jhumpa Lahiri's characters are struggling between two opposite cultures – American and Indian. Ashima and Ashoke Ganguli are first-generation immigrants in America. Immigrants face different crises related to their identities and also wide cultural gaps between their homeland and the land, which they have emigrated.

A father and mother, a son and daughter; two generations of a archetypal Bengali-American family, balanced uneasily atop the complex and bewildering fault lines common to the immigrant experience. Jhumpa Lahiri's novel *The Namesake* deftly demonstrates how the familiar struggles between new and old, absorption and cultural preservation, determined toward the future and longing for the past, play out in one particular set of foreign-born parents and their American-born children. In the novel's opening pages, Ashima Ganguli, who left India to join her husband Ashoke in America, is about to deliver their first child, a son. Following Bengali custom, the child is to have two names- a pet name for use only by family and close friends, and a "good" name, to be used everywhere Gogol, named for his father's favourite Russian author. In a disturbing flashback, the reason for Ashoke's attachment to the Russian writer is revealed.

Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Interpreter of Maladies* established the presence of the Indian women writers on the international scene. Jhumpa Lahiri explores the sense of exile, alienation and assimilation experienced by the immigrants in her novel *The Namesake*. It brings out rather successfully the predicament of the Indians who trapeze between and across two traditions. One is inherited and one left behind, and another one the other encountered but not necessarily assimilated. She has emerged as an interpreter of exile in its varying nuances and manifestations. Monica Ali through her fiction, she explores brilliantly the complex issues of colonialism and immigration and illuminates the pangs of exile and displacement. She has extended the migrant voice in British fiction, particularly through her representation of gender and focus on history and dislocation.

Jhumpa Lahiri is a second-generation expatriate writer whose family had migrated to the United States of America from England in the 1970s. Daughter of Bengali Immigrant parents, preoccupation with language had been an integral part of her bi-cultural identity. Jhumpa Lahiri has been described as the postcolonial writer, an Indian American author and writer of diasporic fiction. She is comfortable with these multiple labels. It is interesting to note that very recently Jhumpa Lahiri has been appointed a member of Barack Obama's Committee on Arts and Humanities. She is pointing to the important roles given to South Asian intellectuals in the United States. A distinguishing feature of Jhumpa Lahiri's writing is never eroticized or ethicized her landscape. But she writes about the lived experiences of diasporic Indians negotiating life in an in-between space. "Lahiri writes in the polyphony of voices from

the perspective of a second-generation Indian American writer, and her fiction highlights the loss of communication in immigrant families.”

Ashoke and Ashima celebrated all the Bengali festivals and observed all religious rituals and rites with the ethnic community. When Gogol was six months old, they invited all of them for “Annaprasan” ceremony, the rice ceremony. The occasion: “Gogol’s Annaprasan, his rice ceremony” (N 38). Ashoke wore transparent white Punjabi top over bellbottom trousers and Ashima wore Silvery Saree. The first generation of diaspora’s adjustments and changes are expedient. They accommodate and adjust to create space and identity in a foreign country. The sense of rootedness is disturbing to them, more so in the case of new immigrants. These new immigrants seek advice and suggestion from the ethnic group. “They all come from Calcutta, and for this reason alone they are friends. Most of them live within walking distance of one another in Cambridge” (N 38). These immigrants have to construct sense of community, culture and nation in a country where they see themselves as different. They have to define both their historical legacies and their present geographic and social realities.

The first generation Diaspora wants to retain their homeland culture and transfer it to the second generation. It is through the eyes of the older generation that the younger generation perceives and learns about homeland culture. Ashoke and Ashima sent Gogol to Bengali classes and culture classes every Saturday. It held in the home of one of the Bengali friends, Even though they do face some conflict with their children in this endeavour. But the older generation makes certain compromises to maintain inter-generational relation. Ashoke and Ashima learn to celebrate some of the main festivals of the dominant culture. “For the sake of Gogol and Sonia, they celebrate, with progressively increasing fanfare, the birth of Christ, an event the children look forward to far more than the worship of Durga and Saraswati” (N 64).

Ashoke and Ashima adjusted with food habits of Gogol and Sonia. It is Bengali food, that Ashima and Ashoke relished and preferred but for Gogol and Sonia. “At his insistence, she conceded and made an American dinner once a week as a treat, Shake in Bake Chicken or Hamburger Helper prepared with the ground lamb” (N 65). They are in many ways but it was only to peripheral values. For example, food, a dress which were negotiable but not the core values such as their cultural and religious traditions. The fact, the first generation maintains a tangible link with the homeland by continuing tradition an outwards manifestation of its cultural tradition.

Ashoke and Ashima’s reaction towards Gogol’s friendship with a young girl Ruth is typical of all first-generation Diaspora. They disapprove and reject all such relationship,

His relationship with her is one accomplishment in his life about which they are not in the least bit proud or pleased. Ruth tells him . . . ‘you’re too young to get involved this way,’ Ashoke and Ashima tell him. They’ve even gone so far as to point out examples of Bengali men they know who’ve married Americans, marriages that have ended in divorce. (N 116-117)

For the second-generation Diaspora, Gogol and Sonia identity and problem are rather different. They have a sense of pride and affinity to India. But it is America that is perceived as home. In America, they are born and educated. They want to be accepted on their terms. They face a sense of alienation in the sense of insider and outsider. On one of the occasions in school, Gogol and his classmates are assigned a project to rub the surfaces of the gravestones. They find out the name of the dead person, the feeling of alienation and aloofness was doubly intensified. Because Gogol was old enough to know that there is no Ganguly. “He is old enough to know that he will be burned, not buried, that his body will occupy no plot of earth, that no stone in this country will bear his name beyond life” (N 69).

Gogol, a second-generation immigrant Jhumpa Lahiri could never assimilate. He became an exile in the country of his birth that is what haunts him again and again. He is frustrated effort to make

reasonable contact with any one of the cultures in which he finds himself, Indian by birth, American by education, he remains unable to relate to anyone culture. He is constantly moving about in search of an identity. It is a victim of a sense of loss, disintegration and displacement. He is, “haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back.”

The second-generation immigrants, claim of identity is not affirmed or validated either by other Indians or by the host country. Gogol is born in America but an Indian family who keeps the Indianness alive in language, clothing, food and values. And although he may aspire for American identity, he is never given that. He is constantly reminded of his Indian identity. When Maxine’s relative makes fun of his Indian identity, he accepts that without much defence. He remembers their visits to India as

He looks over at Maxine, trying to catch her eye, but she’s speaking intently with her neighbour. ‘We get sick all the time. We have to get shots before we go. My parents devote the better part of a suitcase to medicine’ (N 157).

Gogol realizes the otherness in him Maxine has no interest in his identity. But Gogol cannot ignore or separate his identity. However much he may want to, from his parents and his experiences of both being an Indian and seen as an Indian. Maxine’s unhyphenated American identity provides her freedom and luxury which fascinates Gogol. While living with Maxine’s family, he realizes how different Maxine’s American family is from his Indian family which is traditional in values.

Nothing is locked, not the main house, of the cabin that he and Maxine sleep in. Anyone could walk in. He thinks of the alarm system now installed in his parents’ house, wonders why they cannot relax about their physical surroundings in the same . . . . It is a place that has been good to them, as much a part of them as a member of the family. . . . They would have felt lonely in this setting, remarking that they were only Indians (N 155).

Gogol enjoys the American lifestyle and consciously tries to ignore his Indian identity. Maxine’s completes ignorance of the emotional and psychic conflicts faced by Gogol. Due to his father’s death makes him move away from her and turn to another immigrant Bengali girl, Moushumi. Their relationship could not work out. They broke up because they were not able to complement each other’s hyphenated identities as Indian Americans. Their experiences as Indian Americans are quite similar. They see themselves as neither quite Indian nor quite American. But their reaction to their experiences is different. Gogol finally accepts his identity as Indian American and realizes the worth of his name Gogol given by his father. But Moushumi at the same time tries to establish herself as an American. She leaves her husband Gogol for her boyfriend: Moushumi’s journey in search of her identity continues.

Gogol’s father embraces their new life, while his mother longs for her mother country. As Gogol enters school, they attempt to convert his unusual name to a more archetypal one, become, as he thinks of it, “someone he doesn’t know.” Soon he regrets his choice, as the name he’s held onto seems increasingly out of place. The novels finely wrought descriptions of Bengali food, language, family customs, and Hindu rituals draw us deep inside the culture that Gogol’s parents treasure while becomes an architect, falls in love more than once, and eventually marries, without ever fully embracing his heritage. His decades – long unease with his name is the perfect ancestral – experienced by first-generation Americans at the novel’s climax, when loss compounds loss and Gogol’s family least in part, his parents’ longing for the past, and the sacrifices they made to help him be what he is- truly American.

Jhumpa Lahiri remarked, “Naming is everything, a way to claim the identity, to pass on notions of love, tradition and hope.” She empathizes with Gogol in his homecoming. Despite the physical and psychic struggle involved in being dislocated and relocated across the two continents, the ultimate feeling Gogol gets is positive to move forward. His homecoming signifies the relationship of an individual to a community how family or community coheres through social rituals and practices. Jhumpa Lahiri can present and reflect the twinge through Gogol’s predicament, the agony and inadaptability particularly of the second-generation immigrants to adjust in an alien environment. This twin identity Jhumpa Lahiri encountered is reminiscent of the emotions of children born in an alien land.

## 2. Conclusion

Jhumpa Lahiri explored in several ways the difficulty of reconciling cross-cultural rituals around death and dying. The novel is narrated about the assimilation of Indian Bengali family from Calcutta (present Kolkata), the Ganguli's into America from 1968 to 2000. The cultural dilemmas experienced by them and their America born children in different ways; the spatial, cultural and emotional dislocations suffered by them in their efforts to settle home in the new land. How different the experiences of Indian immigrants to the United States are from those of their American-born children, Jhumpa Lahiri says identity is always a difficult one for those who are culturally displaced, as immigrants are or those who grow up in two worlds simultaneously, as is the case for their children.

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