



A Study on the Theme of Displacement in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*

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Abstract

This study explores images and ideas of displacement in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*. Almost all theories and articles about migration and displacement recognize that displacement as a defining feature of the contemporary world is not a statistical phenomenon but is likely to change its meaning according to new conditions and perspectives in the ever-changing transnational world of today. Naturally, where there is a theme of migration and related issues, there is also an automatic intention to explore the theme of displacement and similar consequences in literature.

Keywords: The Namesake, Displacement, Migration

1. Introduction

Jhumpa Lahiri is an internationally recognised master storyteller. She is a second generation immigrant of India. She has experienced her parents' acute sense of displacement and their "incessant struggle to remain attached to Bengali culture in the foreign land"(Jabbar) and has tried to portray the same in her works. This present study explores images and ideas of displacement in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*.

2. Discussion

In *The Namesake* young Gogol struggles to reconcile his beliefs with those of his traditional Bengalese parents. The beginning of the story itself summarizes and predicts the trauma and displacement. While giving birth to her child in a hospital in America, Ashima thinks that "it's strange that her child will be born in a place most people enter either to suffer or to die" (4).

Ashima, during this phase, thinks that she does not really belong to the American community and fancies the same destiny for her newborn child: "As she strokes and suckles and studies her son, she can't help but pity him. She has never known of a person entering the world so alone, so deprived" (25). The name Ashima in India implies "she who is limitless, without borders" (26).

Despite the contradiction between her name and her general description at the novel's beginning, she is the only character who assimilates to the American melting pot and adapts herself to a trans-cultural lifestyle at the end. The primary and critical explanation for the displacement of Ashima in American society is the disparity between two very distinct cultures: America and India. They have important

differences culturally. Although women and men in America seem to be equally autonomous, from the Indian perspective, there are some cultural peculiarities as to the role of the sexes in society.

The family's most spiritual and Indian figure is Ashima. Ashima is at the heart of the matter when there is a reminder of Indian and Indian customs. With the invited Indian families in America, the circle growing larger each year, she forms various parties to preserve Indian customs and create a surrogate India in America. India should be kept inside the home, for the outside is eventually America. This is what Ashima tries to do all the time: to protect the Indian culture of her ancestors. However, she gives birth to kids destined to be Americans, so she must transition to mainstream America. As the spiritual and domestic head of the family, it is time for her to make concessions: having Christmas ceremonies, Roasted Turkey on Thanksgiving and cooking American food once a week for the children. Instead of sitting with parents, socializing with them, or consuming traditional Indian cuisine, the children in the parties lead their own American teenage ways, watching TV or eating American fast food. As time passes, Ashima indulges more in the American way of life, which eventually gives her the kind of trust and freedom that a traditional American woman should have. As a librarian, she finds a career that leads to further interaction with the outside world and becomes friends with her American peers, a form of friendship she has never encountered. Eventually, she conducts her husband's duties, such as paying the bills, buying tickets, driving the car, and changing the house, which she never did before his death.

She discovers, over time, that her life in America exceeds her life in India: she is as American as she is Indian. Through the very practice of her life over the decades, she achieves cultural and geographical fluidity.

Alfonso-Forero stated that "Ashima's conception of what constitutes homeland has been altered to take into account the role the United States has played in shaping her family's identity, and by definition, her own" (857). She intends to split her time between India and America after her husband dies: living between her roots in India and her family in America. Thus Ashima transforms into a transnational figure, "[t]rue to the meaning of her name, she will be without borders, without a home of her own, a resident everywhere and nowhere" (276).

Ashoke, Gogol's father, moves to America as a young Indian man after a suggestion given to him by a stranger on the train in India who had the experience of living for a while in England: "Do yourself a favor[. . .] pack a pillow and a blanket and see as much of the world as you can. You will never regret it. One day it will be too late" (16). A few hours after their encounter, the man dies in a train crash, but the idea given to Ashoke stays with him until he finally travels to America. His escape from the train is a powerful and constant memory for him, holding a page of Nikolai Gogol's book and dropping it to attract the attention of the rescuers, which later prompted him to name his son after the Russian writer.

His act was an affectionate remnant of his personal life, told to the protagonist, Gogol, by the time he had already started to hate and change his name. Gogol breaks up with his American girlfriend Maxine after Ashoke's death and is more concerned with his family and retains some of his buried Indian side of identity, especially by taking advice from his mother to marry Moushumi, a family acquaintance of his parents' Indian network of friends in America.

The world of Ashima also shifts by losing Ashoke, her husband, and her family's only Indian expatriate; not only does she have to live alone, but she also has to limit her way of life to the family's American side (her children) and do the household duties that were previously Ashoke's. Despite Judith Caesar's claim that "Ashoke is the only character among the Indian- American characters of the novel who has found the balance in himself and is able to live comfortably in a foreign land" (108),

The first person in the novel who is displaced is Ashoke. This displacement started two years after the deadly train crash in India when he was in the hospital. He would like to leave India, resting on his bed and unable to move, not for an ambitious target, but to escape: "He imagined not only walking but walking away, as far as he could from the place in which he had nearly died" (20).

At the same time, he refuses to read the books written by foreign writers, especially Russian authors that his grandfather had given to him because he cannot imagine finding comfort outside of India: “Those books set in countries he had never seen, reminded him only of his confinement” (20). This carries over to the time that he is in America, and Ashima is in the hospital giving birth to Gogol: “Although it is Ashima who carries the child, he, too, feels heavy, with the thought of life, of his life and the life about to come from it” (21).

He takes refuge in America, and by this time, he is neither Indian nor American: “He was born twice in India, and then a third time in America” (21).

In India and Indian traditions, he has close relations with his family, which is evident by his complete cooperation with Ashima in keeping them within the house and establishing and sustaining their Indian network of friends in America until his death, his daily visits to India and even his sabbatical to India.

However, unlike Ashima, who wears saris until the end, in how he dresses, Ashoke’s appearance has changed to a full American academic. The train crash, however, even changed him ideologically: “He openly reveres Marx and quietly refuses religion[. . .] Instead of thanking God he thanks Gogol, the Russian writer who had saved his life” (21).

Ashoke waits for the name to come from India, conscious that his newborn son is an American. In this way, he observes the Indian tradition of the newborn’s name being selected by the oldest in the family: the family stretches from Boston to Calcutta. Also, Ashoke chooses a pet name “Gogol,” a reminder of his saviour in his big accident, according to their inside the home rule that is to establish a private India in the United States for their son while waiting for the good name to arrive in a letter from the grandmother in India. Caesar suggests that the choice of the name “Gogol” is also a connection to the family of Ashoke itself:

[T]o his grandfather who told him to read the Russian realists, and whom he is going to see at the time of the train wreck. There is an identity here that transcends culture, as generations of Indians (Ultimately, Gogol Ganguli becomes the fourth) find a sense of life’s essence in an English translation of Russian work. (109).

Never does the transmission of the letter happen. The grandma, meanwhile, dies, and a good name is never revealed. The meaning of the name “Ashoke” in Indian is “he who transcends grief” (26). The juxtaposition of cultures contributes to the recognition of the pet name as the good name that remains with Gogol and causes Gogol and, consequently, his family to have identity-related issues.

With his terrible history and never-ending nightmare passed on to his son by the name of Gogol, Ashoke’s immense sorrow binds him. He lives between two distinct identities, as an Indian and a husband to an Indian and a father to his American children. He later gives his son the name Nikhil, doubling his son’s identity into a transcultural identity he himself has. That is the end of the journey for Ashoke, as symbolized in his saying to Gogol that “[r]emember that you and I made this journey, that we went together to a place where there was nowhere left to go” (187).

He thinks he should be able to fulfil his commitments to everyone in the family. This quality makes him a character who appears to be content with the various facets of his life, but the fact is that he does not seem to have been able to come to terms with himself because, like Ashima, he did not have the opportunity to experience the loss of a loved one and feel lonely. The reader cannot see whether he understands the duality or multiplicity of his identity through Ashoke’s death.

One can see that he is never relieved of the experience of the train and Akaky Akakievich, the main character of the short story “The Overcoat” by Nikolai Gogol, who was both his saviour and his emblem of identification, irrationality and displacement fluidity: “Just as Akaky’s ghost haunted the final pages, so did it haunt a place deep in Ashoke’s soul, shedding light on all that was irrational, all that was inevitable about the world” (14).

The most complicated character in the novel regarding the idea of identity is Moushumi, Gogol's wife. Born in England, having Indian parents, having lived in England, America and France, and having many relationships with people from various backgrounds and nationalities, makes her an intricate personality who, without realizing it, is often searching for a defined identity.

Moushumi, because of her way of living, seems to be unwilling to embrace a set and established identity. To the degree that she breaks up with her former fiancé Graham because she can not bear him, she describes herself as an Indian. "reject[ing] her background, be[ing] critical of her family's heritage" (217). At the same time, she shows distaste and disrespect for the Indian ways that are around her: "She hated the way they would talk of the details of her wedding, the menu and the different colors of saris she would wear for the different ceremonies as if it were a fixed certainty in her life" (213).

She identifies herself as an English person for long after she had settled in America: "She speaks with nostalgia of the years her family had spent in England [. . .]She tells him [Gogol] that she had hated moving to America, that she had held on to her British accent for as long as she could" (212).

As an adolescent in America, she envies the American style of life (having boyfriends and dating), but she has to practice it elsewhere because her parents forbid her to lead that kind of life. She takes refuge in Paris:

"Immersing herself in a third language, a third culture, had been her refuge-she approached French, unlike things American or Indian, without guilt, or misgiving, or expectation of any kind. It was easier to turn her back on the two countries that could claim her in favor of one that had no claim whatsoever"(214).

Moushumi's multiplicity is not limited to her nationality or cultural identity, and this characteristic of hers does not let her stick to anything in life permanently: "[S]he feels unmoored [. . .]beyond the world that has defined and structured and limited her for so long" (253).

When she marries Gogol, she does not accept changing her last name to Ganguli and keeps her name. She loves the way she is and the sense of herself. Changing the name would suggest her acceptance of the sense of being somebody else, even if this person is Gogol: "[S]he tells him that for most of her life he was exactly the sort of person she had sought to avoid" (212).

In reality, for Moushumi, Gogol's marriage is another camp in the long line of camps she takes refuge in. Moushumi's previous relationship devastated her and although she tried to take refuge from it by moving back to Paris, she followed her mother's advice to date and eventually married Gogol.

This time of her life ended by taking refuge in having an affair with another man: "The affair causes her to feel strangely at peace, the complication of it calming her, structuring her day" (266). The juxtaposition of different nationalities creates tensions in displaced families. Although they live together and share much, they still have differences in their life orientations and their experiences with their identities, mostly related to their Indian-American lives.

The kaleidoscopic quality of the world geography, its conditional elasticity and flexibility, leave the contemporary subject at a loss, on shaky ground and struggling to find his or her bearings in a world where new territorialities have emerged at the crossroads between the actual and the virtual (Kral 75).

François Kral concludes by stressing that the difficulties faced by the characters in *The Namesake* concerning their displacement result from their psychological struggle with their identification as migrants of the first or second generation. He says that displacement is an in-between condition in which the displaced are nowhere to be found. The virtual other, although the virtual former, still has its effect and shadow. The displaced want emancipation, stuck between the two, looking everywhere for other options that ultimately end up nowhere. Kral argues that *The Namesake* is inviting "us to envisage the

long-term consequences of the virtual everywhere-ness [. . .]which may well result in a tragic nowhere-ness" (75).

There is more than one option for the displaced. Of many options, making one choice always leaves him/her uncertain. The dilemma does not arise from making the wrong choice, which is misplacement, but it is the realization of his/her identity's multi-sidedness and equally benefiting from all the choices. The others will compensate for any limitation in one selection. Alternatively, in this context, displacement may be called emancipation or liberty, and so on.

3. Conclusion

If there is displacement in today's world, it is not limited to immigrants and their subsequent generations. Everyone is liable to be displaced in whatever case, immigrant or not. The borderline between racial or cultural history and the present is dissipation. The consequences of a deep racial or cultural past are not likely to continue for a prolonged time. It is not an eccentric reality to have another history for immigrants who can easily adjust to their new lives in another country and those in that country who may have unique eccentricities and differences. In addition, a modern cosmopolitan identity has arisen from today's transitory lives, making ethnic identity less critical for people in countries like the United States and often more significant.

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