

# A Delineation: Diaspora to Multiculturalism in Jhumpa Lahiri's 'The Namesake'

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*Abstract— In the global world of today everyone is a migrant, dislocating from the place of origin due to market forces, political conflicts, disasters and so on. The dispersal of people from their homeland to various parts of the world resulted in enhancing the cultural diversity. Multiculturalism and Diaspora have given a significant contribution in increasing the proximity among the peoples in the world. It is due to the effect of Diaspora and multiculturalism that new concepts like transnationalism, cosmopolitanism and globalization have emerged. The differences and distances embedded with various myths about varied cultural diversities came to end which provided a space for cultural relativism, cultural tolerance, hybridity and assimilation. The term multiculturalism is often compared with 'salad bowl' due to the coexistence of culturally varied groups of people in terms of social structure, religions, languages, race, foods, customs and rituals. In the present scenario US can be considered as a best paragon of cultural diversity where people from all parts of the world have accumulated with their cultural bag-gages. India and China which are the most populous countries in the world have set their imprints in America. The phrases like 'Little India' and 'Chinatown' can be easily heard on American streets. Asians have consolidated their feet on American soil in every possible zone – food, clothing, health, literature, entertainment, film and drama. In the midst of this diversity Asian writers emerged with a plethora of colorful Asian culture. In 'The Namesake' Jhumpa Lahiri has portrayed South Asian cultural diversity in customary behaviors, cultural assumptions and values, patterns of thinking, and communicative styles in contact with west.*

**Keywords— Multiculturalism, Diaspora, Jhumpa Lahiri, The Namesake.**

Peace and prosperity in the world depends upon the mutual understanding and respect along with the space for the diverse groups of people. People seem to have taken lessons from the past which was full of racial intolerance, skirmishes and conflicts. It is the effect of these lessons that a kind of 'give and take' relation has set up in the contemporary world where every group of people or community has an equal right. These groups have succeeded in establishing a congenial ambience in the world which endorses mutual coexistence. The credit goes to Diasporas for transforming the racially rigid and unmoving world into a flexible and compromising one.

Earlier the meaning of the term 'Diaspora' was limited to some specific words like spread, scatter, disperse and it was significantly associated to the exile of Jews from Israel. With the passage of time the meaning of the term expanded due to the inclusion of a variety of Diasporas – Victim (Jews, Africans, Armenians), Labor (indentured Indians, Chinese, Japanese, Turks, Italians, North Africans), Imperial (British settlers), Trade (Lebanese, Chinese, business and professional Indians, Chinese, Japanese), Deterritorialised (Caribbean people, Sindhi's, Parsi's). As a result, the meaning of the term is

no more restricted to the forceful and involuntary expulsion; rather, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the range of its meaning has increased to such an extent that it is applicable to the migrants of all kind.

In the global world of today, the world has shrunk; countries and people have come closer with the development of a better understanding of the differences and the respect for each other. Transnationalism and multiculturalism seems to have become a part of life and their influence is so strong that it is starkly visible in metropolitan cities. One can observe different temples, cultural centers, ethnic restaurants, charities and businesses carrying both linguistic signs and official language. For example: Little Italy, Chinatown or Little India. This shows people belong to two places, their connection with native nation and adoption of the host nation provides them with two homelands. They belong to both 'here and there'; they are free to incline toward 'this or that', which results in creating their own transnational identities.

In the past western powers had suffused their language and culture in the rest of the world by forming colonies. But with the rise of decolonization and globalization the rest of the world has scattered and

implanted its communities and cultures in the west through Diasporas. Among this flux of diasporas, South Asians have migrated to west in millions and have played a crucial role in widening the horizons of opportunities for the people worldwide. South Asia has a unique and recognizable culture which is heterogeneous in form. The diversity of South Asia is remarkable in terms of ethnicity, languages and religions. It is divided into six nations: India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal and Bhutan. Among them, India is the most pluralistic and diverse.

The continuous flow of diasporas from South Asia has established its communities worldwide which has contributed significantly in the global phenomenon. Various exchange programs in the field of education, trade and business, industrialization, science and technology etc., have been initiated. For example, the exchange of ideas is quite visible in education sector; where Indians have brought in the pattern of 'student centered education system' and 'grading system' from the west; the west has replaced punishment with meditation. Another example can be taken from the phrase 'multinational companies'; it reflects the idea that corporate world is not limited to one particular national company rather it has become an amalgamation of various nations; here as well, there is a big demand for Indian labor force because they are known for giving outstanding outputs at low wages and are also considered as more efficient. In the west, teaching has become a complex and herculean task as teachers are responsible for every tiny move of their students; therefore people in west generally avoid getting into such professions. As a result, the importance of South Asians is further asserted by regular advertisements for teachers, engineers, nurses and so on. In terms of food also, Indian beverages like 'mango delight', food packages like *Haldiram* and various Indian spices have become prominent at food corners in the west.

Decades ago English ruled most of the world but today it seems the two major South Asian countries, India and China are all set to take over the role of English by ruling the world indirectly as it is evident from their increasing impact upon world economy and rising importance upon various global issues. Today, they have grown to such an extent that it won't be imprecise to call them 'the fastest developing Asian giants'. They are also crucial for the economy of today's world leader, America. The population of both the countries provides huge market to American imported goods and cheap labor for American companies.

The Indian and Hong Kong film industries proved to be the main sources for bringing the noticeable change in Hollywood. Indian films are well known for its musical

romances as its favorite genre. Its impact could be seen when Director Baz Luhrmann recycled American Pop for his Bollywood homage, "Moulin Rouge". In 1990s, Hong Kong style action film reached its zenith. Hong Kong action choreographers were hired for the blockbusters like 'The Matrix' and 'Charlie's Angles'

The impact and influence of South Asians is evident in the field of religion and philosophy also. 'Iskon Temple' in Varndavan, UP (India) is known for captivating Krishna hymns sung by the British. The same influence could be seen in England where the British are seen dressed in saffron or red colored robes and visiting Indian Temples or dancing and chanting *Hare Ram*. Foreigners in abundance are driven toward India in search of peace and spiritualism. History is full of instances presenting South Asians as people with substance. Swami Vivekanand was the first Indian who received a standing ovation in America during a Religious Conference. In the contemporary world, eminent writer like Jhumpa Lahiri has received the highest award-'Pulitzer Prize' for 'Interpreter of Maldies'. Consequently, South Asians have succeeded in crafting opportunities for themselves and for saving a place for their existence in the global race.

In the realm of literature South Asian writers have made their presence felt on the global front by presenting varied and vivid themes like cultural adaptation, religion, socio-cultural institutions, hybridization and assimilation. Jhumpa Lahiri, who is a South Asian writer by origin, has justly presented the impact of west upon east and vice-versa which has drawn a trail for cultural relativism, cultural tolerance and transnationalism to follow. In her novel 'The Namesake', there are four characters, each presenting a different aspect of Diasporas. Ashoke can be seen as a representative of 'English modeled Indian,' his character presents the impact of west upon Indians. Ashima, Ashoke's wife, is seen upholding the theme of 'cultural isolation' and 'ethno-consciousness'. Gogol, their son, presents the example of assimilation and hybridization. But Sonia, their daughter, displays transnationalism predominantly through her character.

After the dawn of independence in India, its fresh youth started taking journeys to foreign lands in search of better opportunities and with a dream of improving the conditions of loved ones back in homeland. In 'The Namesake', we find Ashoke in the similar context; he goes to America in search of a bright future. We see him striving hard for making his respectable place in America. And he does achieve his dream, becomes a professor and owns a well furnished house, has an obedient Indian wife. The impact of west upon Ashoke is clearly apparent in the novel. Ashoke has always been careful regarding his

outfits. He takes care that he is well dressed with a tie and formal pair of shirt and pants while going to the university or boarding a flight. Like his grandfather, he shows great admiration for English writers. He had read all the possible English novels at an early age. Another example of his foreign taste can be seen when Ashima was admitted in the hospital, unlike Ashima who has read *Desh* numberless times, the only Bengali magazine that she brought on her way to America, Ashoke preferred American *Boston Globe*.

The character of Ashima on the other hand is in stark contrast with that of Ashoke. She purely represents Indian cultural identity and cultural isolation. Throughout the novel, we see her in Indian saris, cooking Indian food, making attempts to celebrate Indian ceremonies as ritually as possible, pining to visit homeland. Unlike Ashoke, Ashim is deep rooted in her culture, in the legacy which has been passed down to her by her elders.

Out of the four characters in 'The Namesake', Gogol's character is the most complex one. We see Ashima's clear inclination towards her land, Ashoke remains in a kind of neutral zone, almost unaffected, Sonia is more of a transnational kind. The position of the three of them is clear; they make it simply by opting one of the ends. Contrary to them Gogol hangs in the middle of two nations and two cultures. His character sets an example of assimilation. He is neither completely Indian nor American. He is not loyal to any of the sides. In spite of the fact that he does not like Indian culture over American, in spite of the reality that he cannot put his privacy and individualism on stake for the sake of his family, still there are few delicate threads which survive inside him to keep him connected with his family and this connection does matter to Gogol.

Contrary to her brother Gogol, Sonia's character is a simple one, far above from the complexities of borders and cultures. Her acceptance of New England without any dilemma becomes clear right on her *annaparsanam* ceremony when she was an infant. "She plays with the dirt they've dug up from the yard and threatens to put the dollar bill into her mouth. 'This one, one of the guests remarks, 'this one is the true American'." (Lahiri 63)

She appears to be a transnational because she is balanced and unaffected by both the nations and their cultures and succeeds in assembling their characteristics equally in her personality. We never find her confused or having a conflict upon adopting this or that. She gets happily married to a Jewish American without ending up with a conflict or divorce which is shown as very common in the novel. We never see her drifting away from the family the way Gogol does. She is equally concerned

about her job and her mother for whom she decides to get an apartment near the city where her mother resides. "Sonia is staying on with Ashima, thinking of getting an apartment in Boston or Cambridge so that she will be nearby." (Lahiri 183, 184) She also sets a perfect example of mingling of two cultures without friction in between. We see her both in Indian and western outfits, celebrating both Christmas and taking part in Bengali *pujo*

In 'The Namesake' through first and second generation immigrants Jhumpa Lahiri has depicted the shifts that have taken place in the concept called 'Diaspora'. All these four characters narrate four different tales from four different perspectives presenting a contribution by South Asians in developing and maintaining peace and prosperity in the world. Nations under south Asia are considered as developing or underdeveloped countries. Major part of Asia was once ruled by British and they have always taken it as backward, uncivilized, barbarous and devoid of any culture. The character of Ashoke has proved them wrong. He succeeded in raising and establishing himself as a distinguished and accomplished professor who taught the English on their very own land. Ashima had contributed in enhancing the multiculturalism by keeping alive her original identity; her character has maintained the sanctity of Indian culture. Whichever place was colonized by British by English, they tried to generate English modeled natives to help them running the administration. But contrary to this nature of West, Gogol's character has shown the quality of assimilation, adapting and adjusting; which consolidates the point that Asians are flexible and compromising one when it comes to promote mutual understanding. The role of a transnational played by Sonia further strengthens the idea that humans should not be restricted by boundaries. To tie the world with peace and prosperity, they should go beyond the boundaries and that is what South Asians have been seen doing in the novel.

Struggle accompanied with hard work has established South Asians in the foreign regions. They have succeeded in creating opportunities for themselves and in proving their mettle in every possible zone. The changing roles of Diasporas from immigrants to multicultural communities to transnational's have contributed significantly in keeping their South Asian identity alive in foreign regions while simultaneously collaborating in creating a space for mutual understanding and transnational identities.

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