

CULTURAL ALIENATION AND THE LOSS OF IDENTITY IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S - THE NAMESAKE

Ms.A.G.S.Abishmathi

II MA English

Sourashtra College, Madurai



Abstract

*Jhumpa Lahiri, the Pulitzer winner of the year 2000, is a prominent writer of the Indian diaspora. This paper is based on Lahiri's first novel 'The Namesake' was adapted into the popular film under the same name. The novel develops the themes of **Cultural alienation and Loss of identity**. The novel revolves around the life of an Indian immigrant couple Ashima and Ashok Ganguli, who immigrate to the United States to form a new life. The initial part of the novel revolves around how Ashima has been struggling to fit herself in the American society and culture. The pregnant Ashima delivers her child in a country filled with strangers. Motherhood for Ashima does not bring any happiness or cheerfulness but the fear of raising the child alone in a strange land. As the years pass on, Ashima prepares herself to be fit in the American style of living, but the thought of returning to her motherland has been bottled up in the border of her heart. In the meantime, Ashima gives birth to a baby girl to whom they named Sonia. Ashima feels sad as her children are going to grow in a strange country without knowing the privilege and the values of their land, **India**. As a whole, the novel shows us the struggles and problems of immigrants who have been settled in different countries leaving their lands.*

Keywords: Cultural alienation, Loss of identity and roots

The novel *The Namesake* describes the struggles and hardships of a Bengali couple who immigrate to the United States to form a better standard of living. Lahiri herself had experienced the hardships as an immigrant who has to struggle with her surrounding, atmosphere problems and to find her real identity. The novel begins with the pathetic description of psychological problems such as loneliness, longing, rootlessness, the quest for identity, isolation, schizophrenia experienced by Ashima. Ashima and Ashok Ganguli settled together in Massachusetts, following their arranged Bengali wedding. At a very earlier age, Ashima had migrated to a country where she has no relations. Ashima struggles through language and cultural barriers to which she is entirely new. Ashima cannot be able to fit herself in the American way of living. She spends the most of her time alone in her apartment.

Motherhood of Ashima does not bring any happiness or cheerfulness but the fear of raising the child alone in a strange land. The child's birth was a meaningless celebration without her family members who are living in India.

Being an Indian woman, Ashima had learned to hide her own needs, feelings and her desires to satisfy her husband and family. So, she hides her feelings, pain, longing for going back to her homeland as she would not want to make her family and her husband worry. She spends most of her time reading English novels.

The second part of the novel shows the struggles experienced by Gogol Ganguli because of his unusual name. The name does not give him an identity but puts him in a dilemma, and it becomes a burden to him. As a child of an immigrant couple, he has to fight with his schoolmates regarding his origin and loss of identity.

Most of the incidents in the novel are autobiographical elements as the author Lahiri herself is a child of an immigrant couple. Lahiri too faced a lot of hardships to find her own identity in the foreign land.

Being children to the immigrant couple, Gogol and Sonia start growing without knowing their real origin, culture, and identity. They used to prefer American foods to Indian dishes while their visits to their homeland Calcutta. They love to celebrate Christmas than Durga and Saraswati puja. Both Sonia and Gogol revolve around two different cultures. They do not know which culture to follow and preserve.

Most of the writers have centered only about the life of present immigrants. But Lahiri one step ahead, portrayed the problems and the hardships of the upcoming generation, who have no place to be called us their own. They are living in a country, which they own by birth, but do not belong to the country because of being an alien and stranger. Even in India, people who are migrating from one state to another state to earn a better style of life, they are facing the same cultural and identity problems. "Myself is a perfect example of the above-mentioned phenomenon. I am a Sourashtrian by birth and growing up in a stranger state, Tamil Nadu. Tamil Nadu is a state, which I own by birth, but does not belong to that state because of being an alien to that state. Though my ancestors have settled for thousands of years, still my language and culture is a stranger one to the place where I am living. My language and culture are entirely different from my living place, which put me in a state of dilemma whether to follow my own culture or my living land's. While talking in my mother tongue in any public place, people used to stare me like an alien. There I experience a type of cultural alienation and loss of my real identity".

Gogol and Sonia are hovering between two cultures. Throughout the novel and through the characters, we get an elaborated view of the Diasporic situations experienced by the immigrants. The sudden death of Gogol's father makes him, to turn back towards his family and to take the responsibility of an elder son, unknowingly, as he would have done if he had lived in India. Gogol's quest for his real and true identity is never going to end. He was not able to fully reject the Indian values and cannot even fully accept American values.

Lahiri herself a child of an immigrant couple has clearly expressed the struggles and hardships of the immigrants. She expressed her cultural dilemma and fear of losing her true identity in an interview as "As a young child, I felt that the Indian part of me was unacknowledged and therefore somehow negated, by my American atmosphere and surrounding: I felt that I led two different and isolated lives."

Gogol brought up in a western culture. He loved to visit parties and drinking alcohol. He brought up without knowing the culture and values of his homeland. As a result, he had broken affairs with many girls. After the death of his father, he got to know about the real meaning of responsibility and the Indian values and heritage.

The novel has been adapted into a film version and was released in English , Bengali and Hindi. Through the characters and incidents, Lahiri records her own experiences which she faced as an immigrant. Thus the novel "The Namesake "dealt with the themes of immigration, alienation, and displacement of human relationships.