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Spatial Displacement: Alienation and Unhomeliness in Jhumpa Lahiri's The Namesake

[1]S. Zainab Salman, [2]Dr.J. Ahamed Meeran

[1]Research Scholar (Full Time) Hajee Karutha Rowther Howdia College Uthamapalayam

[2]Research Supervisor Associate Professor & Head Hajee Karutha Rowther Howdia College Uthamapalayam Theni - 625533

Abstract: Jumpa Lahiri's The Namesake (2003) is a Novel offers a nuanced literary cartography of spatial displacement, mapping the psychological and existential fractures that emerge when immigrants are uprooted from their native geographies and thrust into unfamiliar cultural and landscapes. This paper examines how Lahiri constructs spatial displacement not merely as a physical relocation but as a condition of perpetual unhomeliness – the haunting inability to feel at home in any place, or within oneself. Drawing on Homibaba's postcolonial concepts of the "unhomely" and the "third space", the study traces how the Ganguli family – across two generations-inhabits an interstitial zone where neither India nor Americq offers complete belonging. The paper explores how alienation manifests differently along generational and gendered lines. The study argues that Lahiri presents spatial displacement as both a personal trauma and a socio-cultural condition of the South Asian diaspora in America, where in the immigrant body becomes a borderland –perpetually negotiating between origin and settlement, memory and assimilation. Ultimately,the novel gestures toward a fragile reconciliation through cultural hybridity, suggesting that unhomeliness, while painful, may become the very ground upon which new, hyphenated identities are forged.

Keywords: Spatial Displacement, Belonging, Nostalgia, Immigrants, Diaspora, Alienation.

Introduction:

The term Diaspora is derived from 'diasperio' the Greek word, means spreading or scattering of a group of people to an alienation or New land and cherish fond memories of their motherland, recall their near and dearest ones, their friends and family and also associations. Writers of Indian Diaspora constitute an important part in Indian-English Literature. The diasporic writers are often pre-occupied with the elements of nostalgia as they try to adjust themselves in new culture. Although their language and culture is transformed with the contact of new culture but these writers write in relation with the culture that belongs to their homeland. Diasporic literature helps us to understand the multi-cultural relationships and in this way this literature breaks the boundaries among countries and cultures. The important Indian diasporic writers are V.S Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, Rohinton Mistry, Bharati Mukherjee, Amitav Ghosh, Jhumpa Lahiri, Anita Desai, M.G Vassanji, Shyam Selva Durai and Kiran Desai. Traditionally, diaspora as a translocation identity relies on the concept of home that has been left behind or lies elsewhere (Jigna Desai,19). The diasporic communities breaking the barriers and boundaries and moving on for personal progress and development have been termed by Fanon as Individuals without an anchor without horizon colorless, stateless and rootless…(Fanon,176). Jhumpa Lahiri's The Namesake serves as a quintessential text of diasporic literature, exploring the immigrant narratives across two generations of the Bengali Ganguli family in America. The novel's introduction lays the groundwork for a detailed examination of cultural displacement, the quest for identity, and the powerful, often haunting, role of diasporic memory. (Nishat, 2026)

Overviews on Diaspora:

In the world of literature, the concept of Diaspora is taken as loss of identity and has been e-connected to great extent assimilating various cultures. The Diaspora writers turn their homeland for various reasons. Many of them are illegal migrants and they feel insecure and unrecognized as decent human beings and negative adjectives such as illegal , insecure, unrecognized , etc., Diaspora writers see the Diaspora population in two lights; first, living happily with the socio-political and cultural arrangements of the new land, it is the Diaspora which follows "cultural assimilation"(3). Many of the peoples are teased for their occupation, their colour, their behavior and for their accented English. However this process of assimilation is also complex. As pointed out by John W Berry et al, assimilation "is the way where there is a little interest in the cultural maintenance combined with a preference for interacting with the larger society". It can be argued that assimilation process is often adopted by the second generation diaspora or the children of diaspora community or by the people from the subaltern group in their homeland. (Dewangan et al. 2024)

There are two types of migrated population that can be traced in the foreign land. Some of the diasporic people attempt to lead their lives interacting with the mainstream society of the foreign land but their attempts usually gets failed due to cultural indifferences. When the diaspora people settle in the new land, their culture begins to get transformed. The culture of the host country is hegemonic and it dominates the culture of the homeland. Therefore, the displaced people usually start to discard their ethnic culture and assimilate with the hegemonic culture of the society "in –between (7) the spaces. Hence the "lived culture (8)" of the diaspora is different from both, the ethnic culture of the original homeland and the hegemonic culture of the host country. This lived culture can be compared to Raymond Williams' analysis of culture in Culture and Society (9) (1958) where he says that "culture is a record of our reactions in thought and feeling, to the changed conditions of our common life". It can also be compared to William's idea of "eminent cultures" from Marxism and Literature (10) (1977). He argues that these cultures are oppositional to 'residual cultures' that encompasses "new meanings and values, new practices, new relationships and kinds of relationships [which] are constantly being created.

Indian Diaspora: Problems of Alienation:

Some of the most prominent Indian writers in English belongs to the diasporic literature are Salman Rushdie, V.S. Naipaul, Amitav Ghosh, Jhumpa Lahiri and Sashi Tharoor. In the discussion of Empire and debates over its aftermath, post colonial migration has been a most widely used topic of discussion. Migration is of course an old phenomenon. But post-colonial migration which established the link between the psyche of colonizer and the colonized is particularly tantalizing and pregnant with tremendous potential for academic exploration and research. In the last decade of twentieth century, very centres of Indian English literary culture appear to have migrated. Writers such as Salman Rushdie, Kiran Desai, Meera Syal, Bharati Mukherjee, Jhumpa Lahiri, M.G Vassanji, Rohinton Mistry, to name a few, have rapidly and increasingly come to dominate the international literary market. It the interesting to see how the writers have interrogated and exposed the diasporic spaces, how they inhabit and relate themselves to the Indian inheritance. William Safran applies the term 'Diaspora' to expatriate minority communities which have dispersed from an original 'centre' to two or more 'peripheral' or foreign regions to people who retain their myths about their homeland, and feel alienated in the new land (Safran 83-99).

The diasporic psyche is naturally marked by a double consciousness. Having known two worlds, it is the migrant's fate to never find concreate anchorage in anything. The characters in their stories are subject to a multiple experiences. The differences can be located in the reasons for migration, in linguistic and caste affiliation, in varied level of education, economic status, sexuality, age, employment considerate and also wide personal compulsions and sensibilities. All these factors seem to have their own ramifications on individual bicultural experience and double mindedness.

Exchanging one tradition for another, one nation for another, one home for another, immigrant writers create and inhabit alternative worlds. Hardly the twin worlds of Shelly 'one dead and the other powerless to be born' these worlds are vibrant, demanding, resisting any notion of annihilation. The opposition between the two may become the two many become a source of anguish to writers, for the existential dilemma of nothingness or of not belonging is an actual state of their mind. The cross –cultural position of an immigrant writer allows him to observe and comment upon his motherland as well as his adopted other-land rationally. His exile, many immigrant writers have acknowledged, provides him a better understanding of his homeland. The Bengali writer, Jhumpa Lahiri, confessed that she could

View Calcutta more sharply and clearly because her dwelling in New York provided her with the necessary culmination of distance and intimacy from her homeland. (Mandal 41)

According to Edward Said:

Despite being a native of the new nation it is precisely his out sidedness that equips the immigrant writer with self-consciousness critical of the imperial enterprise and its postcolonial effects. (Said 19-20).

The loss of one's homeland is invariably the result of having deliberately choosing another. The feeling of fractured self the expatriate writers suffer is due to in-betweenness or belonging to nowhere. The dislocation and frustration of homelessness experienced by them creates alienation. The trauma of exile, of not being misfit and a reject. The pangs of guilt behold their souls thus bringing them close to restlessness and mental agony.

Memories' play an important role in expatriate literature. The memories of old times, places and people as experienced by the writer but now faded away in the hustle bustle of new society. In the fictional world of diasporic writes we have, thus different worlds jostling against each other, the real and imagery world. The demonically separate lines are joint. The two separate worlds mix and merge so that they are intermeshed, the perspectives keep on shifting. There may be variety of reasons for the immigration which results in different orientation of these writers towards his motherland as well as adopted other land. Those who are underprivileged at home are forced to migrate by the fear of unemployment and starvation, for them return is the least possibility usually end up as expatriates. The expatriate builds a cocoon around herself/himself as a recluse from cultural dilemmas and from the experienced hostility in the new country. Faced with rejection, the newcomer clings to his ethic identity.

Spatial Displacement: Alienation and Unhomeliness in Jhumpa Lahiri's The Namesake

Jhumpa Lahiri, whose full name is Nilanjana Sudeshna Lahiri, born July 11,1967, London, England. She was an English born American novelist and short story writer whose works illuminate the Diasporic experience, in particular that of East Indian. She was born to Bengali parents from Calcutta. In 2003, Lahiri published her first novel, The Namesake, originally in The New Yorker. It is the story of Ganguli family and his parents who immigrated to the United States from Calcutta and with their children, Gogol and Sonia. The story follows the family of the course of 30 years in Calcutta, Boston, and New York. The namesake focuses on first generation Indian immigrants and the issues faced in the U.S. The Namesake contains themes of conflict in relationship between couples, families, and friends. Through these relationships she explores idea of isolation and identity, belonging both individuals and cultural. In this work The Namesake Gogol engages in a constant struggle to remain loyal to both worlds.

This novel also projects the subjection of gender, class, and caste along with the political and cultural complexities. The concept has many discipline-specific uses, and can refer both to a personal psychological state (subjectively) and to a type of social relationship (objectively). In sociology, the concept has been summed up as" the distance of people from experiencing a crystallized totally both in the social world and in the self" (Kalekin-Fishman, 1998:6). It was first the writings of Karl Marx in the 19th century and later the works of

particularly Melvin Seeman that popularized the concept in sociology, along with Emile Durkheim's anomie . The term alienation has been used over the ages with varied and sometimes contradictory meanings.

Alienation is not simply suffering – it generates creativity, self-reflection, and the construction of new hybrid identities. Diasporic works also comprise the element of alienation and immigrant caused by different factors and it has been vividly evident in Jhumpa Lahir's novels The Namesake. Home, in Lahiri;s world, is not a place one finds but a story one tells about where one has been. The terrible dilemma and tormenting feelings of divided identity, suppressed emotions and displacement of migrant characters in these creations lead them to a state of alienation from family, society and the world. Jhumpa Lahiri has emerged as a modern Indian English writer revealing the inner voice of the old and new generations of modern Indian immigrants.

The Namesake focuses on first-generation Indian immigrants and the issues they and their children face in the United States. The Namesake follows the Ganguli family over the course of thirty years. The Diasporic memory and alienation of the characters of the novel is the result of the odd and adverse circumstances faced by them such as dualness in identity, name-crisis, culture-conflict, generation gap, tensed personal relationships, longing for homeland. Thus they get alienated from family and society. The crisis of name and identity, always leading the characters to the state of alienation is introduced at the very beginning the novel, when Ashima calls out for her husband from the bathroom. She doesn't use his name when she calls for him, since "it s not the type of thing Bengali wives do (Jhumpa Lahiri, The Namesake: 15)

When Gogol is born, Ashima mourns the fact that her close family does not surround him. It means that his birth, "like most everything else in America, feels somehow haphazard, only half true" (The Namesake, 16). As a child he associates a new name with a new identity. By his fourteenth birthday, Gogol has come to hate his name and resents being asked about it. Ashima and Gogol also feels alienated, especially when he realizes that no one he knows in the world, in Russia or India or America or anywhere, shares his name. The relationship between Ashima and Ashoke and their own parents is also mentioned when they find out that their parents have died; Ashoke's parents both die of cancer, and Ashima's mother dies of Kidney disease. They learn about these deaths by phone calls. This decision points to the tension between life and death; "Today, his son's birthday, is a day to honour life, not brushes with death. And so, for now, Ashoke decides to keep the explanation of his name to himself" (The Namesake, 126).

Ashoke carries a prior trauma-the near fatal train accident in India-which already displaced him from a sense of settled existence before migration. His migration to America is thus a second displacement, layered onto psychological dislocation. He finds identity not in place but in intellectual pursuit and in naming Gogol, making language and literature a substitute homeland. Ashoke's death in Cleveland, away from family , literalizes the theme of dying in an unhomely, anonymous space.

The tension between Bengali culture and American culture is revealed in Ashoke's words to Gogol when Gogol tells him he wishes to change his name: "In America anything is possible. Do as you wish" (The Namesake, 169). He is resigned to the fact that his son is an American. Alienation and loneliness is evident with regard to Ashima. She is living alone in the house on Pemberton Road and she does not like it at all. She "feels too old to learn such a skill. She hates returning in the evenings to a dark, empty house, going to sleep on one side of the bed and waking up on another (The Namesake, 135).

The novel ultimately resists a binary of India vs. America, presenting a third space of diasporic identity –hybrid, unstable, but also generative. Characters are neither simply alienated nor successfully assimilated; they occupy shifting positions between cultures. Lahiri's own authorial position as a second generation immigrant inflects the text with an insider –outsider gaze that mirrors her character's condition.

Conclusion:

In the conclusion of Jhumpa Lahir's The Namesake, the immigrant narrative and diasporic memory culminate not in a tidy resolution, but in a profound acceptance of the Ganguli family's fractured, hybrid identity. Rather than choosing between American and Bengali cultures, the characters- particularly Gogol and Ashima- ultimately embrace a state of "nowhereness", understanding that their sense of home is defined by an ongoing synthesis of past, present and memory. The Namesake suggests that for the immigrant and the second generation , spatial displacement is not a temporary problem to be solved but a constitutive of identity. The difference between Bengali and American approaches to marriage is clear in Ashima's evaluation of Gogol's divorce from Moushumi. She thinks, "Fortunately they have not considered it their duty to stay married, as the Bengalis of Ashoke and Ashima's generation do".

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