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## DIASPORIC SENSIBILITY IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S NAMESAKE

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**Abstract:** The concept 'Diaspora' is a wide and large theme that refers to the emigration and settlement of people overseas. Indian Diaspora reflects the East and West encounter in many fields like culture, religion, language, tradition and so on. An assimilation of cultures is of course visible in Diaspora literature. This literature reveals the inner conflicts of the immigrants abroad. Through the sensible characters, the authors of diasporic literature unfold their own pains and penalties; hopes and anxieties; nostalgia and longings of life. This paper is an attempt to capture the diasporic sensibility of Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*.

**Keywords:** emigration, Colonial, firmament, Confrontation, nostalgia

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**Introduction:** 'Diaspora' is a much discussed subject these days. Indeed, 'Diaspora' originally used with the Jewish context where the persecution and expulsion led to the dispersal of Jews away from the home land carrying with them the fond memories and hope of returning to the motherland one day. It broadly speaks about the emigration and settlement of people beyond the boundaries of their homeland. Physical emigration along with the retention of socio-cultural heritage in the host country is the principal trait of Diaspora. A great transformation has been witnessed in the cultures of the migrating populations. Though their geographical position is de-stabilized, yet, their social and cultural position is still attached to the old memories of the culture from which their living patterns have emerged.

It is observed that Indian Diaspora, as a large and distinctive group has its origin in the Pre-British Colonial subjugation of the rural Indian population.

However, Indians' overseas emigration can broadly be categorized in three phases:

- Pre-Colonial Phase
- Colonial Phase
- Post-Colonial Phase

In Pre-Colonial era, indenture & kangni forms of laborers marked their way to foreign countries in search of their livelihood. In colonial phase the migration too continued. But the aim of the migratory people was different. Ill effects of wars, partition of India, opportunities abroad were probably the reasons for migration during colonial time. In post-colonial phase the effect of globalization, scientific and technological development, political understanding, scope for education and jobs are the encouraging factors for the migration of Indians to the foreign countries. Diaspora too refers to the study of ethnic and the racial communities living far away from their home lands. Indeed, the phenomenon of emigration took a new turn with the migration of the professionals to the developed nations; one such is the migration to the United States in the post colonial period.

Indeed, the Diaspora writers are emerging as significant players in the modern literary firmament. Indian Diaspora literature is of immense demand as it pertains to Indians' migration, their socio-economic and cultural experiences, experiences of adaptation and assimilation in the host societies. These days we come across the Asian, the African, the Indian, the British and the American Diaspora. The Indian Diaspora is used by many writers in the context of ethnicity of Indian emigrants overseas. Such Indians belong to the first generation expatriates who still see and consider India their homeland because of the emotional attachment and affinity with Indian religion, cultural heritage and socio-moral ethos.

However Salman Rushdie, Bharati Mukherjee, Amitav Ghosh, V.S. Naipaul, Hanif Kureishi, A.K. Ramanujan, Geeta Mehta, Rohinton Mistry, Jhumpa Lahiri, Himani Benerji, etc. are the authors having diasporic sensibility. Despite the differences in socio-cultural background and literary ancestries these authors have dealt with certain common themes like alienation cultural variation and assimilation, nostalgic sentiment, displacement, identity crisis, adoption, protest and so on and so forth. The significance of these writings doubly redoubles readers' response since they display the interrelatedness of linguistic, cultural, geo-political, socio-economic aspects, tradition and experiences.

**Diasporic Sensitivity in *The Namesake*:** Jhumpa Lahiri's first novel *The Namesake* comes as a whiff of fresh air with a unique flavor. Despite the name sake, well-nigh powerful emotion rushes forth with a torrential gush. A London born child to Indian parents in 1967 moves to the United States and gets settled. Her first collection of stories *Interpreter of Maladies* bears the themes of Indian-American identities and Diasporas. Ann Marie Alfonso-Forero states in his "Immigrant Motherhood and Transnationality in Jhumpa Lahiri's Fiction"-"... these stories deal with the lives of Indian immigrants in the United States, rendering the difficulties of making personal connections across cultural boundaries and

sometimes even within families-palpable to readers”(852)

The novel “The Namesake” deals with Indian immigrants in the United States as well. It seems to be autobiographical too. The author purports to establish the experience of displacement and the socio-cultural mix and contradiction of American and Bengali-Indian tradition in each step of life in America. In other words an internal dialogue and confrontation between the ethnic culture and the culture of the host country, America have been witnessed among the Indian immigrants involved in the novel. The plot of the novel displays all major actions in America. It begins with a projection of a happy conjugal life of two Bengali couple Ashoke Ganguly and Ashima Bhaduri of Kolkata, previously known as Calcutta. But the stark reality of death separated the couple. Ashoke died leaving his wife Ashima, son Gogol and daughter Sonia. Ashima felt lonely and lonely forever. Meanwhile their son and daughter had a short but unsuccessful married life, resulting in divorce. This is perhaps the American style of transitory relationship.

**Naming and its impact:** The story line is developed on another focal theme of the novel i.e. ‘naming’. While in India two or more names given leisurely to a child - one a pet name and another an official, in America the name has to be finalized at birth. Here the naming of Ashoke & Asima’s son rested on the final words of the eldest of the family, the grandmother who lived in Calcutta. But unfortunately it could not happen due to postal loss or, some other reason. So the father named him after his very favorite Russian author Nikolai Gogol. Thus he became Gogol Ganguly. But the son could not digest the name as he was teased by his school mates. Later he changed his name legally through a court decree and became Nikhil Ganguly. But for all practical purposes he remained Gogol to all old acquaintances, family circle and friends. However, the confrontation between the perception of the first and the second generation Indian- Americans shows the distinction.

Gogol, the name bears a lot of significance in the story as in the life of the author. Ashoke met with a very severe train accident while reading Gogol’s *The Overcoat*. He was rescued by the search team who found him among the debris with pages from the book “The Overcoat” in hand. In fact, he was presented the book of Russian writer by his grandfather and was inspired to read the book. Gogol, who disliked the book, *The short stories of Nikolai Gogol*, presented to him on his birth day, opened it to read with interest, long after the death of his father who died of cardiac arrest, just before his mother’s parting for Calcutta, while she was busy hosting her

last party from their Pembarton Road house which is now sold. This was also the first party thrown after the death of her husband.

However the naming episode matches with the author’s own naming. Jhumpa, like Gogol, is her pet name which her school authorities recorded for official use instead of relatively difficult names like Nilanjana or Sudeshna. But in India the good name is always recorded for any official purpose. Thus, Jhumpa Lahiri has shown the result of mixed culture in the second generation Bengali Americans. Most of the second generation Indian-Americans or Asian-Americans suffer from this cultural diversity. This leads them to suffer from identity Crisis. The confrontation between the cultures of the West is prominent in the story which is well depicted in “The Namesake”. Seeing the two of them curled up on the sofa in the evenings, Gerald’s head resting on Lydia’s shoulder, Gogol is reminded that in all his life he has never witnessed a single moment of physical affection between his parents. Whatever love exists between them is an utterly private uncelebrated thing. “That’s so depressing ...” (*Namesake* 138)

Another contrasting affair shown in the novel clearly distinguishes two cultures apart. The affairs are the scenes of two parties: one “They are an intelligent, attractive, well dressed crowd. Also a bit incestuous. The vast majority of them know each other from Brown, and Gogol can’t ever shake the feeling that half the people in the room have slept with one another. There is usual academic talk around the table, versions of the same conversation he can’t participate in, concerning conferences, job listings ungrateful undergraduates, proposal deadlines.” (*Namesake* 236) The other is “How different they are from his own parents’ parties, cheerfully unruly evenings to which there were never fewer than thirty people invited, small children in tow. Fish and meat served side by side, so many courses that people had to eat in shifts.... They sat where they could, in the different rooms of the house, half the people having finished before the other half began.” (*Namesake* 140)

With the passage of time and with the progress of the novel we find the young Gogol grows old, experienced and matured to realize the mundane complexities and nothingness surrounded over. Ashima, the alien wife who once lived in Calcutta with her husband and family fears to go back once again with a different identity of her own. “She will return to India with an American passport. In her wallet will remain Massachusetts driver’s license, her social security card” (*Namesake* 276)

Finally, the partying people are gone, the house stands sold, Gogol and Sonia are ready to live in their own apartments and she stands eventually to go back alone. The people and things she and her husband

rejoiced are no more. Ashima could not control her emotions and she burst out into tears. "Ashima feels lonely suddenly, horribly, permanently alone, and briefly turned away from the mirror she sobs for her husband. She feels overwhelmed by the thought of the move she is about to make, to the city that was once home and now in its own way foreign" (*Namesake* 278)

**Conclusion:** Alienation hunts all the major characters of the novel some way or other. At the end

of the novel we could see Gogol's nostalgia, obsession, loss and isolation in the society where he desperately searches for solace. "Without people in the world to call him Gogol no matter how long he himself lives, Gogol Ganguli will, once and for all, vanish from the lips of loved ones, and so, cease to exist. Yet the thought of this eventual demise provides no sense of victory, no solace. It provides no solace at all." (*Namesake* 289) Thus, Gogol's never ending quest for identity restarts in American dream.

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