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Sujatha Girish

Ph. D Research Scholar

Reva University

Bengaluru, Karnataka, India

sujathagirish19@gmail.com

Dr. Payel Dutta Chowdhury

Director

Arts & Humanities Department, REVA University

Bengaluru, Karnataka, India

Dir.ah@reva.edu.in

Memory and Diaspora: Representation of Ashima in *The Namesake*, by Lahiri

Abstract

Jhumpa Lahiri, is an eminent diasporic writer who brilliantly narrates the voyage between two worlds of the immigrants. As a second generation immigrant, her works reflect autobiographical touch. As a writer belonging to ‘neo-class of immigrants’, Lahiri is a product of bicultural experiences. Therefore, her narratives are a saga of cross-cultural experiences and transcultural journeys. Her narrative, *The Namesake* (2003), is an iconic work which portrays the plight of the diasporic families. It highlights the significance of ‘memory’ in the life of diaspora. This paper attempts to analyze, representation of the protagonist Ashima, with respect to memory in the diasporic context. It discusses about the significance of ‘memory’ in Ashima’s life. It focuses on the way memory and nostalgia of Ashima’s homeland prompts her to decide her to return to Calcutta, after the demise of her

husband. The paper explains the term 'diaspora' and relates it to Ashima's immigrant life. It highlights Lahiri's portrayal of Ashima's association with memory under different circumstances in the beginning and towards the end of the narrative.

Key words: diaspora, diaspora identities, Jhumpa Lahiri, memory and transcultural

1. Introduction

The diasporic literature is gaining popularity in the literary world. Many diasporic writers are contributing to the arena of diaspora studies, depicting the cultural clashes and immigrant issues of diaspora. Jhumpa Lahiri is one of the significant diasporic writers. Many research papers and articles have been published about the various aspects of Lahiri's writings. This paper focuses on representation of Ashima with respect to memory in the diasporic context, which is hitherto unexplored. The paper provides brief introduction of the author and introduces the term diaspora. It explains the term transcultural, as the protagonist Ashima's experiences are based on her transcultural journey. The paper analyzes the representation of role of 'memory' in the life of Ashima, as a diaspora. It focuses on the nostalgia of Ashima, at different phases of her immigrant life and highlights the importance of memory in sustaining the sense of alienation experienced by her. The paper consolidates the analysis in the conclusion segment.

1.1 Information about the author

Nilanjana Sudeshna "Jhumpa" Lahiri, born on July 11, 1967, is an American author known for her short stories, novels and essays in English, and, more recently, in Italian. Lahiri's parents were Bengali Indian emigrants from the state of West Bengal. Though Lahiri was born in London, she completed her education in America, as her family moved to the United States when she was two years. Jhumpa Lahiri, is a transcultural author who has etched a prominent place for herself in literature, by creating works that span both Indian and

American cultures. She has authored of literary works of different genre and is a winner of many rewards. Her debut collection of short-stories *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and the PEN/Hemingway Award. *The Namesake* (2003), her first novel, was adapted into the popular film of the same name. Her second story collection *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008) won the Frank O'Connor International Short Story Award. Lahiri, being a diasporic writer explores the Indian-immigrant experiences in America and portrays the cultural clashes and identity issues of the immigrants. Lahiri has published two books of essays, and a novel, written in Italian. Her contributions to the literary field as a translator of her own writings and works of other authors from Italian into English is noteworthy. She was honoured with the National Humanities Medal, in 2014. She currently works as a professor of creative writing at Princeton University. Lahiri explores complex intersections of identity with such constructs as nation, gender, and race. She is an extraordinary diasporic writer, who eloquently writes about the cross-cultural clashes of the immigrants caught between the home culture and the host culture, their sense of alienation and rootlessness. *The Namesake*(2003) Lahiri's first novel, received world-wide appreciation for brilliant portrayal of the diasporic sensibilities experienced by the immigrant families.

1.2 Definition and meaning of 'Diaspora'

The term diaspora refers to people who have migrated from their native land to a foreign land under different circumstances. 'Diaspora' is derived from the Greek word, 'diaspeirein' which etymologically derives from dia- meaning 'through' or 'apart' and –speirein meaning 'to disperse' or 'to scatter'. Ashcroft et al. discuss the term diaspora in their book *Post-colonial Studies: The Key Concepts in* (2004) and assert, "Diasporas, the voluntary or forcible movements of peoples from their homelands into new regions, is a central historical fact of colonization" (70). R.S Malik and Jagdish Batra, while explaining the origin of the term 'dispora', in their work, *A New Approach to Literary Theory and Criticism*

(2014), state, “Going into the history of its usage, we find that it was first applied to the Jewish Community, which had been stateless since Biblical times and was spread all over the world, where it faced discrimination and oppression. The term ‘diaspora’ referred to these Jews” (150). Robin Cohen, in his book *Global Diasporas: An Introduction* (1997), describes diasporas as communities of people living together in one country who ‘acknowledge that “the old country”-a notion often buried deep in language, religion, custom or folklore-always has some claim on their loyalty and emotions’ (ix).

1.3 Meaning of ‘transcultural’

Understanding of the term ‘transcultural’ is extremely important in diaspora studies. The term ‘transcultural’ was coined in the year 1940, but it has gained relevance in this era of globalization. According to Merriam Webster dictionary, transcultural means, ‘encompassing or extending across two or more cultures’. It is characterized by cross cultural associations, fusions and convolution leading to the formulation of a novel cosmopolitan culture. In the diasporic context, instead of emphasizing the differences between cultures, transculturalism brings out the similarities and the common aspects that cultures share. The repercussion of globalisation is conspicuously visible in contemporary literary writings, with the rise of a new body of transcultural authors who no longer delimitate their creativity to their ethnic backgrounds, but take the readers in an intrepid journey to different countries and nationalities, thus creating a wider reading audience. Lahiri’s narrative, *The Namesake* impresses the readers as a transcultural narrative.

2. Memory and nostalgia in the diasporic context

In the novel *The Namesake*, Lahiri brings to foreground the experiences of Ganguly family in the diasporic context. This paper attempts to explore the element of ‘memory’ in the life of the protagonist, Ashima, an immigrant. ‘Nostalgia’ of Ashima is a part and parcel of

the narrative. Ashima moves to America after her marriage to Ashoke Ganguly. She suffers from a sense of alienation in America, as she is unable to detach herself completely from her roots and connect herself with the foreign culture in the beginning. Lahiri delineates Ashima's life and her state of mind, as she struggles to assimilate the alien culture and develops a diasporic identity which is a synthesis of her ethnic identity and the immigrant identity. Ashima gets nostalgic quite frequently, as she recollects the incidents of her life, prior to her marriage. 'Memory', assumes a significant role in Ashima's life as a diaspora. To counter her loneliness in the alien land, she revisits her past life of India, which is a predominant aspect of diaspora, due to dislocation. Pramod K. Nair in his book *A Guide for the Perplexed* (2010), discusses in detail about diaspora, displacement and space. According to him diaspora literature commonly includes the themes the relation between home and the periphery into which people disperse, diaspora consciousness with nostalgia for home, a sense of alienation in a new land of different culture, a desire to retain the features of 'homeland' and an anxiety over acculturation and also adaptation. (164-165).

The narrative begins with the description of pregnant Ashima, preparing a concoction of Rice Krispies, peanuts, chopped onions salt, lemon juice and slices of green chilli pepper, which is an approximation of 'jhalhuri', the snack sold on Calcutta sidewalks and the railway platforms. The very act of Ashima's preparation signifies her nostalgia. As she tastes the snack, her memory indicates, something in the snack is missing. Lahiri poignantly describes Ashima, remembering the routine at her parental home in Calcutta at the time of her hospitalization for her first child's birth. She calculates the Indian time on her hands and her mind travels across the geographical boundary, to reach Calcutta. Lahiri describes,

"In the kitchen of her parent's flat on Amherst Street, at this very moment, a servant is pouring after-dinner tea into steaming glasses, arranging Marie biscuits on a tray. Her mother, very soon to be a grandmother, is standing at the mirror of her

dressing table, untangling waist-length hair, still more black than gray, with her fingers” (4-5).

The memory of her parental home becomes her companion for Ashima in the hospital and it gives her great comfort. She does not keep the name for her child. She eagerly waits for the letter from her grandmother which carries the name of her child, as it was the tradition of their family. Ashima remembers the names proposed by her grandmother for the other children in the family. Letters are exchanged between Ashima and her parents, each telling the tales of their side. When a letter from her father mentions the news of grandmother's stroke, Ashima remembers her last meeting with grandmother, the way she had prepared special dishes for Ashima and she had fed sweets with her own hands. Ashima knew, the painful fact that she cannot visit her grandmother in her death bed. She compensates for it by remembering the good times spent with her grandmother. The idea of returning to India, back to her roots, constantly lingers in the mind of Ashima. Her life in Calcutta is permanently trapped in her memory. Her dislocation to America makes her more nostalgic of her parental home.

As the novel progresses, Lahiri, insightfully describes, Ashima's assimilation of the new culture. She successfully develops diasporic identity and absorbs the culture of America, without compromising on her ethnic identity. But at every stage, Ashima inevitably gets nostalgic. The author narrates the incident of Ashima making Christmas cards, which emblemizes her diasporic identity. R. Radhakrishnan while discussing about diaspora identities in his work *Diasporic Meditations: Between Home and Location* (1996), elucidates that the critical theories of diaspora identities which glorify hybridity and difference can be 'completely at odds with the actual experience of difference as undergone by diasporic peoples in their countries of residence' (174). Ashima exhibits hybridity, as she is a confluence of the home culture and the host culture. Her efforts to keep her country's culture

alive, is a way of connecting with India, through her memory. Events such as annaprashan and the naming ceremony of her child, enable her to follow the culture of her homeland as she recalls how these ceremonies are celebrated in her native land. She has assimilated the American culture. Her practice of sending Christmas cards every year to her relatives and friends is an indication of her multicultural identity. But the drawings chosen carefully by her symbolize her ethnic culture. The memory of her homeland underpins Ashima's ethnic identity. She tries to stay connected with her kith and kin through letters and here again memory plays a significant role. As she draws the picture of an elephant adorned with red and green jewels, suddenly she remembers that it is the replica of the elephant her father had drawn for her son Gogol over twenty-seven years ago. It is amazing to know that Ashima remembers the drawing of her father even after a long time. The pleasant experiences get embedded in her memory and surface at appropriate occasions. Lahiri narrates, Ashima's annual routine of reading through her parent's letters which she has preserved even after their death: "She revisits their affection and concern, conveyed weekly, faithfully, across continents—all the bits of news that had had nothing to do with her life in Cambridge but which had sustained her in those days nevertheless" (161). Reading letters is a way of recollecting the pages from the past, from the book of memory. Even after the demise of her parents, their memories provide warmth to Ashima. Jasbir Jain discusses about the phenomenon of dislocations in the introduction of collection of essays, *Dislocations and Multiculturalisms* (2004) edited by her. She elaborates that the immigrants have a tendency to look back in some way or the other. Their cultural memories of the past, surface repeatedly and establish a connection with the future and explains how 'multiculturalism' work at many levels. Lahiri's narrative justifies the aforementioned statement.

Towards the end of the story, Lahiri narrates Ashima's memory under a different circumstance. After living in America for thirty-three years, when Ashima decides to return to Calcutta and settle with her brother, she plans to dispose her home in America. Ashima hosts her last Christmas party for which she was popular, to her Bengali diasporic friends. Lahiri, insightfully paints the picture of Ashima remembering her husband who is no more. In her memory henceforth, it will be America, which will establish its place. Lahiri describes, "She will miss the country in which she had grown to know and love her husband. Though his ashes have been scattered into the Ganges, it is here, in this house and in this town, that he will continue to dwell in her mind" (279). There is a twist in the way her nostalgia works here. She remembers the life she lived with her husband in that house, in that town. Her memories revolve around the good times she had in America with her children, her job at the library and the joy of hosting parties. Lahiri describes, the way Ashima tries to gather her memories of her American life in the last Christmas party she hosts for her Bengali friends. Lahiri narrates, "'Gogol, the camera,' his mother calls out over the crowd. 'Take some pictures tonight, please? I want to remember this Christmas. Next year at this time I'll be so far away'" (287). The pictures become the source of her American memories, the way the letters were the source of Indian memories. The portrayal of Ashima's association with memory by Lahiri in the narrative is noteworthy. The novel begins with Ashima's memory of her homeland as she consumes the humble approximation of jhalmuri and it ends with Ashima's efforts of gathering memories of America, as she hosts Christmas party.

Gita Rajan, in her article "Ethical Responsibility in Intersubjective Spaces", explains the nature of Lahiri's works and comments that, "By weaving together familiar events with carefully selected memories in the stories, Lahiri animates certain myths and images that are embedded in national, popular culture" (127). The memories of Ashima in the beginning, reflect the culture of her nation. Towards the end, Ashima's memories of her husband reflect

her diasporic identity. For Ashima, nostalgia is a way of life. The idea of returning to India, back to her roots, constantly lingers in the mind of Ashima. Her life in Calcutta is permanently trapped in her memory. Her dislocation to America makes her more nostalgic of her homeland. Quite frequently, Ashima discusses about going back to India, with her husband. But, their family life and the progress of events do not make it happen. Finally, after thirty-three years of her stay in America, Ashima decides to return to India and stay with her brother, to relive the memories of her life in India, before her marriage.

3. Conclusion

Avtar Brah in his book, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* (1997), explains about the nature of diasporic communities. He points out that distinct diasporic communities are created out of the 'confluence of narratives' of different journeys from the 'old country' to the new which create the sense of a shared history (183). True to this statement, the narrator, portrays the journey of Ashima in India through her memory and her journey in America, the new country through her experiences. In fact, for Ashima, 'memory' works an anchor to settle herself in America. Through her nostalgia about her home and her country, Ashima draws strength to overcome her sense of alienation. And as she prepares to return to India, she tries to create and carry memories of America with her. 'Memories' play a major role in the narrative, throughout.

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