

## Reclaiming Identity: The Predicament of Diaspora in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*

Dr. B. Pavithra

Assistant Professor of English,  
C. Kandaswami Naidu College for Women, Cuddalore.

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### ABSTRACT

A study of the "Diaspora Space" demonstrates how an individual's identity develops where disparity emerges and how physical, mental and social attitudes influence and shape identity. In recent decades, not only have personal identities shifted tremendously, but so have relationships with one's birthplace. It has lost its stability and immigrants are gaining global citizenship.

According to a comparative novel analysis, all protagonists strive to establish a strong presence in distant nations, but not all succeed. Everyone in the Diaspora attempts to carve themselves a niche in the host country, but each does so in their own unique way. Analysing diaspora space and other diaspora-related identity issues can help the people understand how and where identities emerge, as well as how and where disparities are created and recreated.

Keywords: Diaspora Literature, Indian Diaspora, Diaspora Enlightenment

### INTRODUCTION

Since the dawn of civilisation, humans have been migrating from one location to another in search of food, housing and other necessities of life. People in ancient times were known as wanderers or food gatherers because they rarely stayed in one place for lengthy periods of time. As time passed, the level of life rose, social institutions developed, the concept of states and borders established and individuals were bound to a single region and became citizens of that country.

Crossing national borders and settling in another country resulted in the emergence of various migrations known as Diasporas. The terms 'diaspora' and 'speirein' stem from the Greek roots 'dia' and 'speirein' respectively. 'Speirein' means to distribute, whereas 'dia' signifies through. Diaspora refers to the movement or migration of people from one location or country to another. National and transnational migration are both feasible. The term diaspora has taken on various meanings over

time, including Jewish migration, slavery and the migration of entrepreneurs and young professionals.

People move for a variety of reasons from all over the world and all states. Some wealthy countries, such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia receive more migrants than any other in the world. Some developing countries, including India, Pakistan, China, and other Asian nations are the primary destinations for large-scale migration. Although the topic of migration has been depicted in ancient and mediaeval literature, the term diaspora is commonly used in modern discourse.

Migration occurs for a variety of causes, including political, economic, social, religious and other factors. There may be political motives such as exile to another country; economic ones, such as a lack of prospects in one's home country; and hope and availability of opportunities in the host country. Diaspora can occur both intentionally and unintentionally. Migrations after the twentieth century were mostly motivated by economic motives, as contrast to migrations driven by political instability during the twentieth century.

Diasporic people can travel to their homeland more easily and quickly thanks to technological advancements such as the internet, mobile phones and air transportation and they can talk on the phone, chat on social media and even video chat with relatives in their homeland reducing the pain of diaspora. As a result, the

diaspora's grief and anguish have reduced greatly and are no longer as intense as they were a decade or two before. The definition of the term diaspora has evolved over time; it has not been tied to a single meaning for an extended period. However, it is increasingly applied to a wider group of people.

Although the term diaspora was first established to describe Jewish dispersal, it is now used to represent a wide range of events and phenomena. Academics have explained Diaspora in a variety of ways. Some of them have built on previous definitions, while others believe the term should be limited to best capture the phenomenon. First and foremost, this paper will give

explanations from numerous scholars who have already defined diaspora. Safran's idea of diaspora includes six crucial aspects.

He states that for something to be referred to as a diaspora, there must be a dispersal from one's home country into two or more foreign regions; those who are living abroad have a collective memory of their home country. They think that they will always be looked down upon in their host nation. They idealise their accepted ancestral home and there is a strong belief among the people living there that all of them should be dedicated to the upkeep or renewal of their home country. Cohen uses Safran's concept as a starting point and adds four other qualities that he feels should be there: diasporas should be described positively rather than negatively; they might be a powerful link to the past or a barrier to inclusion. Monika says in her essay, "Diasporas and Multiculturalism" has rightly observed: "Yet though diasporas may not want actually to return home, wherever the dispersal has left them, they retain a conscious or subconscious attachment to traditions, customs, values, religions, and languages of the ancestral home" (215).

The people consider the Indian diaspora, they think about both ancient and current diasporas and our goal is not to separate populations. The former diaspora has blended with the current and undergone further transformation as a result of remigration. This classification points to a final, earlier stage of migration. Both the ancient and modern Indian diasporas point to a complicated diasporic experience that has given rise to vibrant, remarkably sophisticated literary voices. *Cane is Bitter* (1957) by Samuel Selvan and *House of Biswas* (1969) by V.S. Naipaul both depict the Indian diaspora in great detail.

Indian English literary writers in the diaspora can be divided into two categories: first and second-generation immigrants. First-generation immigrant writers are immigrants who have been in their new country for some time and are attempting to adjust to their new surroundings. Conversely, the writers who are immigrants by second generation are the offspring of immigrants by first generation. Well-known authors of diasporic Indian English literature include Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, Anita Desai, Kiran Desai, Barati Mukherjee, Chitra Banerjee Divakarini, Alabind

Aditya, Neil Muk, Harikuntz, Snetra Gupta, Meena Alexander, Vikram Seth, and Anita Desai. Fiction written by diasporic female Indian writers is believed to depict Indian immigrants in a more nuanced and sympathetic manner.

Indians are familiar with the phenomena of migration and immigration from recent times. Furthermore, a lot of people are aware of cultural diversity and migration due to globalisation and technological innovation. English education which started during the colonial era and continued during the post-colonial era in India is now valued by the majority of Indians. Thus, diasporic Indian English literature is crucial in communicating to English literary readers the experiences and mindsets of the Indian diaspora.

Moreover, conferences and associations for Indian English authors living abroad offer a wealth of chances for discussion, criticism and artistic development. Diasporic Indian English literature captures the common experiences of the Indian diaspora including difficulties adjusting, discrimination, identity crisis, hybridity, nostalgia and alienation.

The Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible is where the term 'diaspora' originates. Greek-speaking Jews in the Egyptian diaspora worked together to produce the Septuagint. Since the Septuagint was authored by Jews who left their own land and their translations capture that spirit, the entire text might be considered diaspora literature in the purest meaning of the word. Some of its literature like Judith and Tobit. However, it could be considered especially diasporic because of their themes and portrayals of Jewish characters living abroad or under foreign rule and they also ask questions about how Jews would respond to such circumstances.

The ancestral country is acknowledged in diasporic writing, but longing for its diminished.

Additionally, diasporic literature is part of the new location's potential. Lastly, Jews who made the decision to forgo returning after the Babylonian exile may have written it. Diasporic existence is not the same as integration because the community maintains its unique identity and status as a minority population. Adesh Pal says,

The first generation has strong attachment with the country of their origin. From these second generation onwards ties with the homeland gradually gets replaced by those with the adopted country. Food, clothes, language, religion, music, dance, myths, legends, customs of individual community etc. become the markers of identity.

These are retained, discarded or adopted differently at different times and places. (Pal 254)

An extensive analysis of Indian diaspora literature as well as other cultural works can be found in the book *Indian Diaspora Literature*. Furthermore, it makes a significant contribution to the subject of generic diaspora theory. The phrase 'immigrant identity' is used in this anthology to discuss trauma, viewers, identities, travel, translation and recognition, as well as melancholy and impossible misery. The work of well-known authors who currently reside in Canada, Denmark, the United States and the United Kingdom is examined in this collection. Salman Rushdie, Balachandra Rajan, M.G., Shiva Naipaul, Jhumpa Lahiri, Gautam Malkani, Tabish Khair and Shauna Singh Baldwin are examples of how the diaspora Indian writers' creative contributions are demonstrated. These authors have significantly enhanced English literature ". . . from the situation of conflict and uncertainty to the "metropolitan center" (Colonial 70).

Contemporary Indian writing in English frequently depicts the challenges brought about by the experience of migration and diaspora including dislocation, unfriendliness, rootlessness, fragmentation, racial discrimination, marginalisation, identity crisis, cultural clash and many other issues. But in the seventeenth century, there was a rise in Indian migration. The yearning and desires of such people, displaced due to forced work, to return to their homelands are depicted in V.

S. Naipaul's early writings like *The Mystic Masseur* and *The Mimic Men*. Many people were relocated to various parts of the world in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in order to work for the British Empire. The yearnings of these exiled people for their own countries indicated a desire for political independence. In the early twentieth century, a large number of Muslims, Hindus

and Sikhs, mostly from Punjab came to Canada in pursuit of employment as lumberjacks in sawmills.

This paper analyses diaspora in the aspects of Jhumpa Lahiri. Lahiri is the author of two collections of short stories, *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) and *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008), in addition to two novels, *The Namesake* (2003) and *The Lowland* (2008).

Jhumpa Lahiri whose real name is Nilanjana Sudeshna was raised in Rhode Island after being born in London in 1967. Additionally, she has two different names on her birth certificate and passport. She completed her M.A. at Boston University, her Ph.D. in Renaissance studies, and her graduation from Barnard College. The novel *Interpreter of Maladies* is her debut collection, was awarded the 2000 Pulitzer Prize for fiction. The *Namesake*, her debut book published in 2003, became a national bestseller and was chosen as the New York magazine book of the year.

The human condition of the Indian diaspora in the USA is a major theme in Jhumpa Lahiri's writings. Her areas of interest are the 'human predicament' and 'mindscape of characters' from a broader standpoint. Lahiri goes into great detail to illuminate the complicated relationships between her characters and to explain the mazes that surround them. This is especially true for a group of individuals who are Westerners but whose parents are Indian natives. They appeared to be a close-knit ethnic minority that had not altered their behaviours while being a long way from being integrated into the broader society. They were as far away as the Indian current. They created their own haven and stood poised between two realms, unable to enter either just like the mythical ruler Trishanku. Gogol is similar to this circumstance.

The book tells the tale of an Indian family's two generations and their efforts to adapt to life in the West. Lahiri recounts the tale of Gogol Ganguli, the American-born son of Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli who immigrated to Massachusetts from Calcutta in the late 1960s, in his autobiographical book *The Namesake*.

The birth of a boy by Bengali couple Ashoke & Ashima Ganguli, who had settled in Boston, marks the start of the story in 1968. The reader is transported back to 1961 when Ashoke nearly

perished in a train derailment while Ashima is giving birth. The only thing that disclosed him to the rescuers was the book he was holding, A Collection of Nikolai Gogol's Short Stories. The Ganguli family must decide what to call their newborn son while keeping this tale in mind. He requires a 'daknam', or Bengali pet name to uphold Bengali customs, as well as a 'bhalanam', or respectable name for the outside world. However, Ashima's grandmother in Calcutta never sends the letter bearing the excellent name, so he begins his life with merely Gogol gets accepted into the school under the name Nikhil, but the administrator informs the students that Gogol will be called Gogol inschool because that is their son's preference. The Ganguli family is prepared with the name Sonia when Gogol's sister is born.

Gogol's father gives him the book "The Short Stories of Nikolai Gogo" on his fourteenth birthday, but he keeps him in the dark about the train disaster. Afterwards, his father reveals to him the real reason behind his name. It leaves a lasting impression on Gogol. Gogol was unable to blend in with American society. He is in love with Ruth, a white American buddy from college, albeit their bond did not last long. White American Maxine is the next woman he falls in love with. Their connection ends as a result of Gogol's emotional struggles following the death of his father.

Following this, his mother advises Gogol to become friends with Moushumi, their friend's daughter, since they have similar backgrounds and cultures. However, Moushumi's love for Dimitri causes their marriage to fail.

. . . dumps the letters onto her bed and goes through them, devoting an entire day to her parents' words, allowing herself a good cry. She revisits their affection and concern, conveyed weekly, faithfully, across continent- 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. (JL160)

Following her husband's death, Ashima chooses to spend six months living in India and

another six months in the United States. Gogol discovers the unopened book, his father gave him

for his fourteenth birthday at a Christmas Eve party. He picks up the first story, "The Overcoat", to read. Gogol's thoughts at the book's conclusion.

Gogol is a victim of the vile spectacle that Lahiri depicts racism, prejudice and exclusion from the accepting society. This is seen in the current student exodus to industrialised nations such as Canada, Australia and others. Gogol flees the customs of the Indian immigrant society to which his family belongs in an attempt to change himself. He is an American Born Conjimd Desi, or ABCD. The ABCDs are shown by Lahiri as being unable to respond to the query, 'Where are you from?'. Through a collision of cultures, the novel delves into the inner minds of its protagonists and presents a compelling and provocative concept of identity. The restrained grace and dignity of a family forced to reconcile their allegiance to America and India is abundant throughout the book.

In Indian perspective, honourable names are symbols of wisdom and dignity. Sometimes petnames are absurd and have no real meaning. The battle Gogol Ganguli faces in trying to come to terms with his odd name is depicted in the title *The Namesake*. Lahiri says in an interview regarding the controversy around Gogol's name. However, the issue facing immigrant children those with close ties to their home country is that they experience conflicting emotions. Either way, this is my own experience. For instance, I'm never sure how to respond to the inquiry

Fiction from today embraces hybridity. Almost all books being published today depict the terrifying delusions and social upheavals of the modern era. These books have a timeless appeal that transcends cultural and temporal boundaries. Because we all originate from diverse cultural origins and are raised in various communities, the people are all socialised in different ways.

However, the uploading of fundamental human values continues to be at the heart of all cultures. Today's globalised culture must contend with a world of diverse societies that are unwilling to let go of the historical details that make them special. Food, clothing, language retention, religion, music, dance, myths, legends, rituals, particular communities, rites of passage and other factors all serve as markers of identity. A sense of unity and a pulling towards one's origins endures even after

years or even centuries, despite the fact that these are kept, abandoned, or accepted in different ways at different eras and places.

The author of Lahiri's book *The Namesake* frequently and skilfully makes use of memory's role in a process of change. The second generation discovers information about the country from the first generation of settlers. Language, familial relationships, and a network of support are all lost as a result of cultural dislocation. Lahiri emphasises, from a humanist perspective, the significance of culture in the experiences of immigrants. When she describes her experience as an immigrant in America, she purposefully highlights the advantages of her own culture as well as the mysteries of the foreign society that she most likely encountered during her own process of self-acculturation.

The three most significant components of the concept of what it means to be a human being are the loss of one's roots, language and social standards. The identity dilemma is a complex one for the second generation. Indian culture and values are upheld at home, while the American code of behaviour is observed in public. Every parent of first-generation settlers wants the best for their kids, including good jobs. They see the American dream in front of them and they want their kids to take advantage of the circumstances and get as much as they can for themselves, but they still expect them to uphold Indian moral and cultural values at home.

. . .for thirty-three years she missed her life in India. Now she will miss her job at the library, with whom she's worked. She will miss throwing parties. She will miss living with her daughter, the surprising companionship they have formed, going into Cambridge together to see old movies...she will miss the country in which she had grown to know and love her husband...[I]t is here, in this house and in this town, that she will continue to dwell in her mind. (JL 279)

Ashima and Ashoke make a concerted effort to preserve their Indian identity and culture in spite of the overwhelming influence of American culture. They attend the memorial hall's Sitar recital or the Kathakali dance show. Every other Saturday when Gogol is in the third grade, they send him to classes on Bengali language and culture, which are held at a friend's house. However,

Gogol, Sonia and Moushumi, wish to design their own lives. The second generation of immigrants actually finds it simpler to accept the hybrid culture of America and is not at all tied to their cultural heritage. Growing up in suburban New York, Gogol and Sonia both reject their Bengali culture in favour of American culture, much to their parents' disapproval. The family travels to Calcutta as they enter India after Gogol graduates.

#### 1. Conclusion

Throughout history, questions about identity have continued to fuel conflict and spark wars.

However, it is more enduring for people who have grown up in two different environments at the same time. To put it briefly, the book is about a reference manual of experiences for the South East Asian diaspora's immigrant community. Simply altering the name on file will not address the name problem. In this multicultural and globalised society, the various and varied orders the people currently live in have caused us a great deal of troubles. In terms of disagreements as well as cooperation, the globalisation process has not only uprooted individuals and cultures but also given rise to new identities and connections. While physical boundaries may have been eliminated by globalisation, intellectual and psychological frontiers have been established.

The conflicts between the two distinct worlds that the Ganguli family concurrently lives in are the subject of the book. The world of Ivy League America, into which the Ganguli family tries to merge, and the world of Bengali immigrants, who battle to blend into mainstream North American culture while preserving the traditions of their native land. Lahiri emphasises how 'home' is a very nebulous notion for diasporic individuals, changing meaning in tandem with an individual's dominant attitude.

In the parent-child connection, which is a diasporic text, we observe that one generation is rootless while the other is harbouring an essence of dislocation. One must learn about their identity by a process of introspection and compromises. Identity is something that society constantly shapes. Lahiri delivers a very clear message to those in the third world who are eager to move to the first

world with high hopes for a better future, but they fail to realise that this relocation necessitates a larger degree of climate and cultural adaptation.

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