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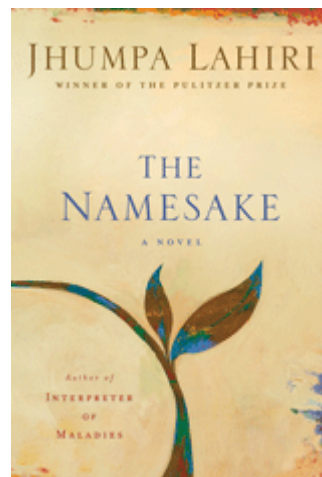
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The Diaspora: From Enculturation to Acculturation in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*

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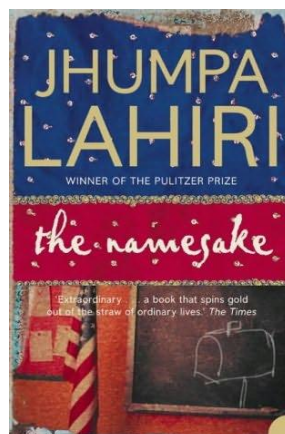
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Introduction: Disruption and Disintegration

‘Diaspora’ is a word which is derived from Greek, which means ‘to disperse’. In cultural theory, the term is used to cover territorial displacements which may be forced and voluntary immigration. ‘Diaspora’ thus lives in one country as a community but looks across time and space to another. The Diasporas and their descendents experience social, cultural, emotional, spatial displacements and dislocation.

According to Salman Rushdie, the immigrants suffer “a triple disruption, comprising the loss of roots both the linguistic and social dislocation”(279). So, in case of the immigrants, first they go through disruption and then they face discrimination in the country to which they migrate. They have to adjust or adapt to the culture of the adopted land where they meet with contempt and segregation. The migrants in fact have to face multi- faceted and multi dimensional problems and experiences and they are confronted with moral and ethical dilemmas. They migrated to these countries for a better and bright future and to spend a happy and luxurious life. They feel fascinated by the glamour of the alien culture and lured by the dazzling beauty of the adopted culture around which many fairy tales are woven but they are shocked by the racial discrimination when their dreams are shattered and they become nostalgic and suffer from native culture syndrome.

The Indian Diaspora



The Indian Diaspora is the largest and it has been estimated that about 20 million Indians have settled in different parts of the world. The Diaspora communities live in multiple cultural environments and the immigrants undergo a process of reconstructing of a new identity in an alien environment. This creation of a new identity has to be according to the different norms of different societies. Indians, who have migrated to Canada and America, or for that matter to other countries, especially to the West, were essentially people who either who looked forward to better education or economic advancements or those who lacked means and went in search of resources. The West is no doubt a land of opportunities where dreams come true but it is also a land where Indian immigrants faced all kinds of discrimination. Fanon has rightly said, “The Diasporic community is the community of individuals without an anchor, without horizon, colorless, stateless, rootless...” (176).

Enculturation

Enculturation according to *Concise Oxford Dictionary* “is the acquisition of the norms of a cultural group.” It is like the first language acquisition where acculturation is assimilation in different culture. It is a process whereby one group of people becomes more like another group or people in behavior, customs, etc., usually because of living near them for a long time. It is like second language learning. Acculturation is psychological and social phenomenon and is often defined as a two-way process of change, but it is mainly used with a focus on the adjustment made by immigrants and other minority groups because of their close contact with the dominant majority.

Hybridization vs. Syncretization

If enculturation is first cultural learning, acculturation is second cultural learning in which the culture of the minorities is displaced by the culture of the dominants groups through a process of osmosis leading to complete acclimatization. In fact, instead of adopting the norms of the ‘host’ culture completely the immigrants pass through a stage of in-betweenness and sometimes they ride two cultural horses at the same time leading to what is called hybridity in cultural theory, i.e., mixing up the features of the native and the host cultures. As Salman

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Rushdie has said, “migrants straddle two cultures... falls between two stools.”(5) Thus straddling two cultures at the same time results in hybridization instead of syncretisation and fluidity rather than fixity. Most societies today are multi-cultural and the writer living and writing in such a society is affected at multiple levels by both the cultures. The writer analyses and criticizes that particular environment and the world around him even when he does not become a part of it, belonging and not belonging.

The Namesake

Jumpa Lahiri's debut novel 'The Namesake' narrates the cultural dilemmas and dislocations experienced by an Indian Bengali family and their American born children in different ways. Being an Indian by ancestry, British by birth and American by immigration, Lahiri is well versed in both old world and the new world cultural traditions and value systems. Lahiri dwells on immigrant's experience in America and foregrounds the merits of the native culture as well as those of the host culture, probably experienced in the process of her own acculturation. During their brief visits to Calcutta the Ganguli's perhaps enjoyed their cultural past as enculturation. They find the native culture essential for their moral development. Both Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli have enculturated themselves in the native culture and both of them are firmly grounded in their Bengali culture inspite of adopting some of the norms of the host culture they try to retain their ethnic identity as far as possible.

Enculturation

The Namesake moves in chronological mode. It is about a Bengali Hindu couple Ashima and Ashoke who migrates to Cambridge from Calcutta after their marriage. Ashoke looked forward to fulfilling his ambition in the land of promise as he is pursuing his PhD in fiber optics in Boston. Ashoke's immigration is for professional growth and economic gain but Ashima is not ready to accept the American culture, she creates a close knit web of immigrants, who shares common language and culture. As it is their enculturation and rooting for India that provide them peace in host land. Adesh Pal says,

The first generation has strong attachment with the country of their origin. From the second generation onwards, ties with the homeland gradually get 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, 2004).

In a State of Dilemma

An immigrant is always confused and in a state of dilemma, he has many choices in front of him. But he always has a sense of affinity and belonging to his own native community, traditions, language and culture only. While living in America Ashoke and Ashima also has an inclination to their community and culture. They did their best to maintain their cultural practices alive in host land. Whenever they have to take any decision they move according to Indian values and traditions.

The first generation immigrants always try to create that space where they do not feel any interference of the host culture. The first generation immigrants have a cultural disruption and a ‘double consciousness’. Ashima and Ashoke try hard to hold onto their ethnicity, Indianness and their culture. They keep their culture alive in ‘host land’ also.

Ashoke and Ashima left India for America, but carried the baggages of Indian cultural values with them. This attachment to customs of ‘home land’ is typical feature of the diaspora. As is said by Ramraj: “Yet though Diasporans 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).

Naming a New Born – Complexity of Choice

In every society naming a new born is a part of their culture and in Bengali tradition the child is given a name by the grandparents or the elder members of the family. It is a matter of

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privilege for the parents. It is a norm and considered as auspicious in Indian Bengali tradition. Ashoke and Ashima wants to follow the same tradition in America also but the hospital authorities are not ready to discharge without an official name of the child. They try to make them understand the concept of two names in their Bengali tradition, ie. one is a pet name (*daknam*) and other is a good name (*bhalonam*): “Every pet name is paired with a good name, a *bhalonam*, for identification in the outside world. Consequently good names appear on envelopes, on diplomas, in telephone directories, and in all other public places” (NS 26).

The first generation immigrants, Ashima and Ashoke want to retain and preserve their native culture and language in ‘host land’ and want to transfer it to the second generation, since it is through the eyes of the first generation that the second generation will learn about the native culture. They make their children to learn Bengali language and sent Gogol for Bengali classes and culture classes every Saturday. They try to retain their ethnicity,

They make a point of driving into Cambridge with the children when the Apu Trilogy plays at the Orson Welles, or when there is a Kathakali dance performance or a sitar recital at Memorial Hall. When Gogol is in third grade, they send him to Bengali language and culture lessons every other Saturday, held in the home of one of their friends... In Bengali class, Gogol is taught to read and write his ancestral alphabet(NS 65)

The Bengalis are a marginal community in America but then also they enjoy their festivals and cultural activities. They try to enculturate by the get-togethers. It gives them a sense of belonging to each other. Ashima use to throw parties for their Bengali friends.

Annaprasan

Annaprasan is an important Bengali tradition. It is through this ritual that Ashima tries to preserve her cultural practice. It is a ceremony when the infant is introduced to the solid food. They did an elaborate rice ceremony for Gogol and observed all the rituals. In America their friend Dilip Nandi play the part of Ashima’s brother and feed Gogol for the first time.

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Gogol is dressed as an infant Bengali groom, in a pale yellow pajama-punjabi from his grandmother in Calcutta. The fragrance of cumin seeds, sent in the package along with the pajamas, lingers in the weave. A headpiece that Ashima cut out of paper, decorated with piece of aluminum foil, is tied around Gogol's head with string. He wears a thin fourteen-karat gold chain around his neck (NS 39).

While living in America Ashima is still following her tradition, whenever she has to call Ashoke, she never utters his name, as it is considered as a sin rather she uses the interrogative for it, "Are you listening to me?" (2)

She still wears sari, like Bata shoes, likes Indian food to eat, likes gold jewellery, practice their native culture customs on birth and death days, pujos. She uses vermilion in parting of her hair. The friends of Ganguli family are mostly the Bengali immigrants. By following these customs in 'host land' in this way they remain intact with Indian culture.

Acculturation

The first generation immigrants living in a host country continues to live in a 'sandwich world'. They are not ready to give up their cultural roots and customs. As Safran observes in 'Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return', "They continue to relate personally or vicariously to the homeland in one way or another, and their ethno-communal consciousness and solidarity are importantly defined by the existence of such a relationship". (85)

Clothing and Food

Ashoke and Ashima make adjustments which are absolutely necessary. As a university professor Ashoke is accepted into the academic community- but at home he continues to be the typical Indian male, fastidious about his clothing and his food:

He is fastidious about his clothing; their first argument has been over a sweater shrunk in the washing machine. As soon as he comes home from the university the first thing he does is hang up his shirt and trousers, donning a pair of draw- string pajamas and a pullover if it is cold. On Sundays he spends an hour occupied with his tins of shoe polish and his three pairs of shoes, two black and one brown. (NS 10)

A Slow Process of Achievement

Ashima and Ashoke Ganguli strictly observe cultural traditions and customs but after a long stay in America there is a slow process of adjustment. For the sake of her children she starts accepting the American ways of living but Indianess in her is kept intact. Ashima and Ashoke are not very much inclined to American way of living but still they try to adjust. The second generation feels more at home in 'host land', they took less interest in their native cultural traditions and festivals. For them Durga Puja is less exciting than Christmas.

Ashima begins to assimilate slowly and in minor ways after the birth of Gogol, she started moving out of her apartment.

On her first trip out of the house with baby Gogol, she pushes him through the balmy streets of Cambridge, to Purity Supreme, to buy a bag of white long-grain rice. The errand takes longer than usual; for now she is repeatedly stopped on the street, and in the aisles of the supermarket, by perfect strangers, all Americans, suddenly taking notice of her, smiling, congratulating her for what she's done. They look curiously, appreciatively, into the pram. "How old?" they ask. "Boy or girl?" "What's his name?" (NS 34)

Moving toward the Host Land Culture

After a long stay in America and for their children Ashima and Ashoke slowly and gradually move towards the 'host land' culture. The process of adjusting and assimilation started at a slow pace and they started adapting to their new surroundings. They started celebrating Thanksgiving and Christmas for their children.

They learn to roast turkeys, albeit rubbed with garlic and cumin and cayenne, at Thanksgiving, to nail a wreath to their door in December, to wrap woolen scarves around snowmen, to colour boiled eggs violet and pin at Easter and hide them around the house. For the sake of Gogol and Sonia they celebrate, with progressively increasing fan fare, the birth of Christ, an event the children look forward to more than the worship of Durga and Saraswati (NS 64).

The Ganguli couple tries to adjust with their food habits and their children food habits. Gogol and Sonia love American food and for them she prepares American dinner once a week as a treat.

There are other ways in which Ashoke and Ashima give in... In the supermarket they let Gogol fill the cart with items that he and Sonia, but not they, consume; individually wrapped slices of cheese, mayonnaise, tuna fish, hotdogs. For Gogol's lunches they stand at the deli to buy cold cuts and, in the mornings Ashima makes sandwiches with bologna or roast beef. At his insistence she concedes and makes him an American dinner once a week as a treat, Shake'n Bake Chicken or Hamburger Helper prepared with ground lamb. (NS 65)

The Second Generation

The second generation has less difficulty in adapting to the new surroundings. They consider 'host land' as their own whereas the first generation immigrants find it very difficult to adjust. Gogol and Sonia refer new Haven as their home and Ashima, after such a long stay is unable to call it home, she says: "Only three months and listen to you,...even after twenty years in America,...still cannot bring herself to refer to Pemberton Road as home (NS 108).

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Gogol is an acculturated character. He is accustomed to the American way not only in preferring American food but in friendship and love affairs also. He keeps his relations with Maxine, Lydia and Ruth and openly flirts with them. He started to live with Maxine family and adopt and accept her lifestyle.

Gogol parents tried to keep him “Indianized”, but Gogol is influenced by the America culture. He started mimicking his American friends in rustiness and aping them in every aspect. He started secretly smoking with his friends, or going to late night parties without the knowledge of his parents. He kisses a girl during a party for the first time in his life.

It’s the first time he’s kissed anyone, the first time he’s felt a girl’s face and body and breath so close to his own. “I can’t believe you kissed her, Gogol”. His friends exclaim as they drive home from the party. He shakes his head in a daze, as astonished as they are, elation still welling inside him. “It wasn’t me”, he nearly says. But he doesn’t tell them that it hadn’t been Gogol who’d kissed Kim. That Gogol had had nothing to do with it. (NS 96)

Sonia assimilates the bits and pieces of American culture, and adapts herself to ‘American common sense’ without much of hiccups and setbacks.

Changes in the First Generation According to the Situation

Towards the end of the novel Ashima’s change has been summarized in the following way:

She has learned to do things on her own, and though she still wears saris, still puts her long hair in a bun, she is not the same Ashima who had once lived in Calcutta. She will return to India with an American passport. In her wallet will remain her Massachusetts driver’s license, her social security card (NS 276).

Ashima has changed according to the situation. She did not completely give up her culture but she is now no more rigid in accepting the new culture. She changed according to the need of the hour. She has learned to drive and do things on her own.

Conclusion

So, Jhumpa Lahiri has narrated the struggle of the first generation immigrants to assimilate and adapt the host culture and in the process of assimilation they give up the rigid hold of their past and change their behavior with the need of the situation. They are attached to their Indian past, to the native people, culture, gods, goddesses and rituals like Durga Puja and Diwali. They even follow their native attire; language and literature which make them feel at home in a foreign land. Gangulis 'get-together' with Bengali families in America at the time of naming and *annaprasan* ceremonies, birthdays, marriages, and deaths reveal their wish to preserve the 'home culture' there. Thus their 'adherence to a diasporic community is demonstrated by an acceptance of an inescapable link with their past migration history", says Robert Cohen (1997: ix). It also reveals that first generation migrant Bengalis carry with them their 'beliefs, traditions, customs, behaviours and values" along with their "professions and belongings to new places," as remarked by John McLeod (2000:211). At the same time they are assimilated in a new culture and Bengali families in the U.S. Celebrate the festivals of the dominating culture such as Christmas, Thanksgiving and Halloween that reveal their adjustment and acculturation.

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