

A STUDY OF EXILE: A DIASPORIC EXPERIENCE IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S NOVEL THE NAMESAKE

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Abstract :

The notion of exile in modern Diasporic Literature is taken to be identical with self-alienation. The cause of exile generally evolves from the physical mobility of diasporic individual or Diasporic community that often heightens the spiritual or psychological sense of alienation between the home and foreign land. The aspect of exile in diasporic milieu has been the cause of emergence of a large number of diasporic writers who have given direction to the progress of Diasporic literature. The general overview of the aspect of Exile ranges from the interconnected memories from the homeland and also from the short-term memories from the current place of residence. This paper attempt to highlight the concept of exile depicted in the characters portrayed in Jhumpa Lahiri's novel The Namesake. The paper attempts to study the subject of exile as a 'cultural alienation' in the backdrop of diaspora with reference to the discursive actions of the characters in Jhumpa Lahiri's Novel, The Namesake. The paper tries to examine the responses of the exiles that are treated as the "Others" in the alien land triggered with the problems of belonging. An attempt has been made to find and analyze how the exiles struggle to fit in foreign land and how they find difficulty in assimilating to American culture and traditions.

Key Words: Exile, Nostalgia, Diasporic Experience, Cross-Continental, Displacement.

“Those who don't belong to any specific place can't, in fact, return anywhere. The concepts of exile and return imply a point of origin, a homeland. Without a homeland and without a true mother tongue, I wander the world, even at my desk. In the end I realize that it wasn't a true exile: far from it. I am exiled even from the definition of exile.”

— Jhumpa Lahiri, *In Other Words*

The above lines penned by Jhumpa Lahiri not only helped me to open my discussion but also served to project my chief motive behind preferring Lahiri as one of the novelists to pursue my research work. Lahiri's stories are documentation of exiled souls chained in muted boundaries of space and time. Jhumpa Lahiri is the doyen of second generation Indian diasporic writers. In nearly half a century of creative writing, she has unobtrusively built up a cosmos in Indian diasporic literature. Her writings in the sphere of Indian diaspora deals with simultaneous allegiance to the Western and Indian sensibilities which seems to acquire its specific uniqueness through an attempt to fuse the elements of home, identity, culture, human relationship and all that is related to Indian diasporic sense into a single whole.

John Simpson, an English lexicographer and was Chief Editor of the Oxford English Dictionary writes in The Oxford Book of Exile that exile “is the human condition; and the great upheavals of history have merely added physical expression to an inner fact” (Simpson “Introduction”). In the discourse of contemporary diasporic literature, exile and diaspora refer to various national, cultural, religious and political groups. The term ‘exile’ has resonant facets with the notion of forced emigration, displacement, social and political marginalization of an individual or a group. In the knowledge of common Western influence, the concept of exile is predominantly bound to the experience of Jewish people in the first millennium BCE. However, much of the observations in the contemporary diasporic literature reveal that the concept of exile has been resonant of a state of sojourn, estrangement and homesickness. The history and experiences of classical Jews, however, do not support such differentiations.

It must be noted that the representation of exile conditions is believed to date back even before the time of Pericles of Athens. The notion of Exile as per Edward Said’s words illustrates exile as “the unhealable rift forced between a human being and native place, between the self and its true home: Its essentials sadness can never be surmounted. (173).

The study of the aspect of exile from the perspective of the Indian diaspora in Jhumpa Lahiri’s novel, *The Namesake*, constitutes the major concern in the following section. The Novel addresses the problems of Indian Diasporas by highlighting the aspect of exile at a deeper level by analyzing the texts to find solutions that would contribute the writer’s creative adroitness to project Indian diasporic experience. Much of the works of old and modern Indian diasporic writers explore the inherent state of exile in their writings projecting the dislocated lives whether it is voluntary or involuntary migration.

The notion of exile has been set up as a concept beyond simply a forced removal from a given physical location. As a writer of diaspora, Jhumpa Lahiri explores the theme of exile from her diasporic experiences which can be observed from her extensive traveling from one place to another and the feeling that she never remained static to one particular physical location for a long period. Subsequently, she moved to the USA. Such frequent movements coupled with her parent’s ties to India, developed a lack of sense of belonging and created a sense of exile in Jhumpa Lahiri. Jhumpa Lahiri is a writer of exile irrespective of the geographical location. Moreover, the imaginary landscape of the home built in her mind tries to attach to the opposite pulls of her peers and parents. A close reading of Jhumpa Lahiri’s novel *The Namesake* makes fascinating study of the exploration of the theme of the exile with its multidimensional ramifications.

The novel *The Namesake* presents the theme of exile of the immigrants and also their children who form the second generation diaspora to which Jhumpa Lahiri herself belongs to and therefore she could sensibly explore the aspect of exile very coherently in her novel. In the novel, when Ashima is in Mount Auburn Hospital, she feels a sense of exile when “She wonders if she is the only Indian person in this hospital, but a gentle twitch from the baby reminds her that she is, technically speaking, not alone” (*The Namesake* 3).

The observation in the above text shows that the character Ashima feels the sense of

exile in the alien land. Thus, it can be traced that Jhumpa Lahiri's dealing with the theme of Exile of Indian diasporas which has been influenced from birth in London, upbringing in Rhode Island, Connecticut, and presently living in New York, brings a clear picture of her life leading to a life of exile owing to temporary connections with the places where she lived naturally remained a deep influence on her writing determined with the subjects of Exile.

A. K. Mukherjee's in his article, "Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies: A Study*" elucidates that "The Indians who have settled abroad feel themselves exiled, as they are in their consciousness unable to cut off completely their umbilical cords that still bind them in their emotional crisis" (108). Similarly, C. G. Karthikadevi's statement in her paper elucidates that "Lahiri's theme makes the readers to be aware of displacement by emphasizing the pain of exile" (121). From the observation of both the statements, it may be predicted that diaspora living is a kind of forced or voluntary exile which usually leads to severe identity confusion, problems of identification, alienation from the old and new cultures and homelands. Since the locale of the novel is America and India but there appears a cross-continental reference and the time limit is punctuated between 1968 and 2000. During this time, the Ganguli family experienced many changes in their Indian diasporic life. Their diasporic experiences in alien land are full of frustrations and consolations leading to the sense of exile to the diasporic individual.

The aspect of exile aptly correspond with Freudian perception of melancholy of the diasporas, which has been quoted by Paranjape in Vijay Mishra's book acknowledged by Jagdish Batra that "diaspora is like being ejected out of a mother's womb; you can't return to the womb, so you are concerned to a perpetual moving without arrival" (66). This statement very aptly resonates with Jhumpa Lahiri's formation and negation of exile aspect in her novels. Ashima feels that she is the only Indian in the hospital. The main reason for Ashima's sense of exile is looking back to the Indian dreams. The nostalgic sense or longing for home creates the reason for her exile situation. The exilic state in Ashima is so intense that even residing in America, she happens to calculate time according to Indian standards. "American seconds tick on top of her pulse point. For half a minute, a band of pain wraps around her stomach [...] She calculates the Indian tie on her hands" (TN 4). The reason for Ashima's dual situation makes us think that the immigrants feel the sense of exile in alien land due to her profound nostalgic affection towards their homeland.

Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* explores the notion of exile in the first generation diaspora through the character of Ashima who remains in exile to the host country even after spending several years of her life in that country. Ashima set an example of such diasporic individuals who have established deep roots with their homeland living outside the ancestral homeland. That is why Ashima finds herself less acculturated to the American way of life. In this regard, Ashima serves as an example of those Indian Diasporas who are called Sojourners as they are represented as temporary settlers in their homeland.

To understand more clearly the Exile situation of Diasporas, it is pertinent here to mention the statement of renowned Indian Diasporic writer Salman Rushdie who gives his statement from his personal experience. He asserts –

“Exiles or emigrants or expatriates are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt. If we do look back, we must also do so in the knowledge – which gives rise to profound uncertainties - that our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, India of the mind” (10).

The Exile situation of the character Ashima in Jhumpa Lahiri’s Novel, *The Namesake* finds correspondence with Salman Rushdie’s quotes mentioned above. This can be assessed from the character of Ashima in the beginning of the novel where Ashima’s state of exile is seen in the form of sojourner and therefore, her intensity of exile is found to be extreme in the beginning. The sense of Exile in Ashima can be found when we find in the novel that “she is terrified to raise a child in a country where she is related to no one, where she knows so little, where life seems so tentative and spare” (*The Namesake* 6). Further, the sense of exile is seen when “Ashima looks up from a tattered copy of ‘Desh’ magazine that she’d brought to read on her plane ride to Boston and still cannot bring herself to throw away” (*The Namesake* 6). The text finds that there is an intense complexity in the inner psyche of Ashima to remember Homeland *Desh* (in Hindi) against which all the other lands appear as foreign or *Videsh*. The sense of loss is seen when Ashima feels that she is not physically present in this ‘real’ *Desh* and therefore homeland exists as an illusion. This form of alienation from the homeland results in exile formation. Moreover, Lahiri presents the strategy of remembering home in Ashima’s character by the act of looking up from the tattered copy of *Desh* magazine to retain the native cultural identity and also to overcome this exilic situation. Lahiri’s idea of representing the trauma of exile in Indian diaspora aptly resonates with Nilufer Bharucha’s illustration of exile, who states:

Living in diaspora means living in forced or voluntary exile and living in exile usually leads to severe identity confusions and problems of identification with and alienation from the old and new cultures and homelands. Therefore, we find most diasporic writing suffused with identity consciousness and the continuing problems of living in alien societies. (29)

The state of exile in alien land is painful for diasporas and therefore the diasporas locate and establish the cultural nuances within the diasporic space to release themselves from the trauma of exile.

To stress the salutary value of separation from home, Edward Said cites the lines from Hugo of St. Victor, a twelfth century monk from Saxony who says: “The man who finds his homeland sweet it still a tender beginner; he to whom every soil is as his native one is already strong; but he is perfect to whom entire world is as a foreign land” (qtd. in *Reflections* 185). Jhumpa Lahiri’s fictional world has a unique narrative motion. Her central figures are travelers and diasporic exiles. Almost all his novels revolve around the theme of migration as it appears to be a dominant aspect of his novels. The novelist focuses on the exile situation of displaced migrants and points out the emotional trauma of the protagonists for their settlement

to a place with varied perceptions. The concept of Exile stands steadfast in its claims towards the inevitability of nostalgia.

Conclusion:

Jhumpa Lahiri stands supreme in exploring the exilic condition of expatriates as something to which every man would like to experience at first and then reject. From the exilic condition of Ashima as explored by Jhumpa Lahiri in the novel shows that despite peculiarities there is an inherent exilic state in the dislocated lives whether it is voluntary or involuntary migration. The exilic conditions in the characters portrayed by Jhumpa Lahiri in the set-up of Diaspora shows Jhumpa's vision of Exiles as a temporary state and the activities of the exiles rests with the territory and culture of their former home. The Exile condition of the characters depicted by Jhumpa probes that the emotions that are connected with the exilic experience are cross-cultural; There is a sense of loss, nostalgia, alienation, despair, and loneliness found in these exilic characters and they are often found struggling to understand who they are and where they belong.

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