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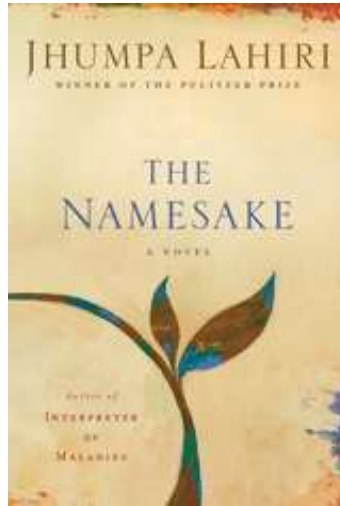
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## Quest for the Past in an Alien Land: A Study of Jhumpa Lahiri's *Namesake* and Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*

Monica Balyan Dahiya, Ph.D. Scholar



### Abstract

An analysis of the experiences of the immigrants in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Namesake* and Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*, reveals that the migrants are searching for *Home* in an alien land to find

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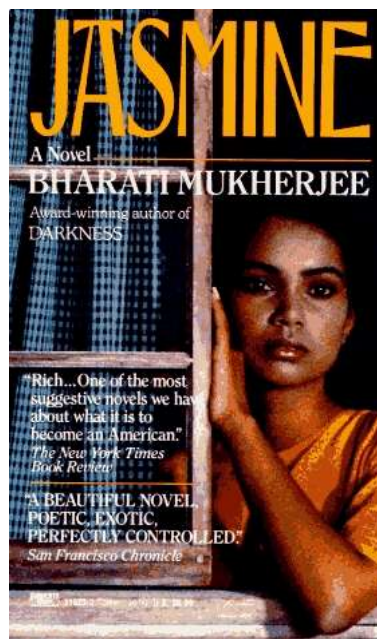
meaning and a belonging in their diasporic situation, with an amalgamation of their Indian roots and the alien culture. The works of the authors create a kaleidoscopic view of these migrants' lives which unfolds various issues related to cultural transformations in their identities, new possibilities, new ways of thinking and complex experiences faced in the process of their assimilation in a new country.

Regardless of location, ethnic origin, age or gender, immigrants in Europe and the world overall have to struggle with the tension between alien/native culture and identity. They keep journeying between the land of their roots/origin and the land of adoption for their existence.

Lahiri's *Namesake* narrates the assimilation of an Indian Bengali family from Calcutta, the Gangulis, into American culture, the cultural dilemmas experienced by them, and their American born children in different ways; the spatial, cultural and emotional dislocations suffered by them in their efforts to settle "home" in the new land. This shows the juxtaposition of conventional thinking, and unconventional desires, their fruitless effort to satisfy a traditional lifestyle, while trying to comprehend the open western culture.

Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*, the story of a widowed Punjabi peasant who is re-exploring herself in America is another example of search for an identity in an alien land. She does this through several transformations during her journey of quest in America, from Jyoti to Jasmine to Jane. The objective of the paper is to study the efforts of immigrants assimilating two cultures, while seeking to find a place in the mainstream life in the adopted country.

**KEY WORDS:** Identity, Loss, Roots, Assimilation, Alien/Native Culture, Multicultural, Homeland, Host land, Recollection, Uprooting, Loneliness, Negotiation.



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## **The Focus of This Paper – Why Diasporic Longing?**

The present paper proposes to study the reasons that draw immigrants back to their roots and analyze the causes and consequences of the alienation, as well as the Diaspora writers' longing for homeland that figures in their writing. These immigrants are haunted by some sense of loss and agonize over the home left behind; and they create their writings with elements of imagination. The impact of diasporic experiences on their psyche depends on their level of belonging in a foreign land. When these experiences are expressed in literature, there emerge writers who search for their roots in the lands of their ancestors. The diasporic writing depicts the experience of encountering a different mode of living strange to them, and the cultural adaptation is the only solution; and this brings in cultural shock.

Immigrants are expected to embrace the culture and language of the host land. The attempt is further complicated by the multicultural confusion where immigrants wish to stay as permanent residents, but there is failure on the emotional front. Thus the migrant caught between two or more separate cultures, lives on a borderland. They carry their essential strangeness within. They can neither forget the culture they have come from, nor can they fully assimilate into the culture they have adopted because they cannot erase their identities totally. They start searching for roots in an alien land to find meaning and they aspire to belong to something in their diasporic situation. Regardless of location, ethnic origin, age or gender, immigrants in Europe and the world overall have to struggle with the tension between alien/native culture and identity.

### **The Root**

The term 'root' implies an original homeland from which the people are dispersed. Geographical displacement rarely makes an immigrant fail to remember emotional bonding with native land or original home. The psyche plays an important role for immigrants that reconsolidate the past into the present. The elements of recollection reduce the distance between the host land and the homeland. Through the recollection, the past incidents of the native land are reflected in an immigrant's mind. Salman Rushdie's comment on memory is mentionable:

*...we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost ... create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind (Rushdie1991 :4).*

### **The Element of Nostalgia**

The element of nostalgia also plays an important role for reflections upon their identity. This clearly shows their desire to go back and celebrate their past, and it denotes homesickness, a yearning for home.

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In *The Namesake* (2003), nostalgia about a train accident in India helps Ashok to decide his new born babe's name: "He remembers the page crumpled tightly in his fingers, the sudden shock of the lantern's glare in his eyes... but with gratitude" (Lahiri 2003:28). The name Gogol is the production of nostalgic exploration. Again we can see Ashima's aspiration to return to India in spite of permanent settlement after marriage in Massachusetts in *The Namesake* (2003).

### **The Meeting Point**

The meeting point of the past and the present too are illuminated by the writers through the nostalgic representations of the characters' efforts. In foreign countries, lack of adaptability, lack of assimilation, and the multiple identities of the immigrants make them feel lonely and unsociable.

### **Alienation**

Alienation is also one of the significant ingredients that indicate an immigrant's transportation, exile, uprooting and sense of loneliness in a new atmosphere. This sense of loneliness and isolation is mirrored in the characters of Ashima, Gogol, Moushumi and Sonia in *The Namesake* (2003). Ashima's understanding of the vast gap between home and the host culture and the generation gap between her, and her son Gogol and daughter Sonia causes Ashima's separation from the new society. On the other hand, Gogol and Sonia, who are born and brought up totally in the West, find their parents' spiritual leanings increasing their confusions. Their self-fashioning as Westerners receives a push-back each time they encounter aspects of their ancestry either outwardly or inwardly.

Sometimes the second-generation migrants revolt against their perplexed position. The Gangulis celebrate "with progressively increasing fanfare, the birth of Christ, an event the children look forward to far more than the worship of Durga and Saraswati" (Lahiri, *Namesake* 64). But once Sonia, in one of her growing-up years, refused her Christmas gifts after taking a Hinduism class in college, "protesting that they weren't Christians" (Lahiri 2003: 285).

### **Consequences of Migration**

Through migration, immigrants have lost their material relationship to the land of origin, but they can still preserve their cultural or spiritual relationship through memory. The novel opens with Ashima recalling her homeland fondly. She is in an advanced state of pregnancy, admitted in a hospital for her delivery. "...nothing feels normal to Ashima. For the past eighteen months, ever since she's arrived in Cambridge, nothing has felt normal at all. It's not so much the pain, which she knows, somehow, she will survive. It's the consequence: Motherhood in a foreign land. .... It was happening so far from home, unmonitored and unobserved by those she loved." (Lahiri 2003:6) Ashima tries to settle in and adjust herself to her surroundings, but she feels strange and lost in this country and spends hours remembering her parents and family, and reading the same five Bengali novels time and again. While waiting for the child to be born, she relives the past

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until the point of her departure for Boston. The thought of bringing up a baby in an alien land terrifies her.

“...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.” (Lahiri 2003:6)

Gradually Ashoke and Ashima's circle of Bengali acquaintances grow and the cultural spirit of Bengal is recreated whenever the friends meet. This is because of their shared history. The first generation wants to preserve their culture and customs in the foreign land. They are clinging to their culture through tokenism. It is significant that every other Saturday Ashoke and Ashima send Gogol for Bengali language and culture classes at the home of one of their Bengali friends. But the children in the class study without interest, wishing they could be at a ballet or softball practice instead. (Lahiri 2003:66)

They are truly caught between two worlds, one is powerfully alive, the other powerless to be born.

### **The Second Generation**

The second generation lives a better life than the parents whose roots still do not allow them to embrace the foreign land but their identity always reflects their parents' past migrant history.

After graduating Gogol gets a job in a firm and is posted in New York. He meets Maxine and is invited by her for dinner. While eating dinner with Maxine's parents, he recalls his mother's hospitable nature and how, “she would never have served so few dishes to a guest.” (Lahiri 2003:133).

In this way, Food in the novel is an object, an encouraging fragment of the homeland, which these immigrants want to stick on to. Spices and flavor waft through like themes in a piece of music as evidenced by the following passage. “...with the samosas, there are breaded chicken, cutlets, chickpeas with tamarind sauce, lamb biriyani, chutney made them to create their native kitchen on foreign land.” (Lahiri 2003: 150)

Ashoke, Ashima and all first generation settlers want their children to do well and get good jobs. The American dream looms in front of their eyes and they want their children to exploit the situation and derive the maximum benefit for themselves; but they must follow the Indian moral and cultural code at home. This is the only way these immigrants keep searching for their homelands through different levels of existence, physical, as well as material.

### **Jasmine History and Memories**

In Bharati Mukherjee's novel *Jasmine*, Jasmine traces the story of the heroine in her American odyssey. Here starts her transformation from a village girl under the shelter of her father and brothers, to a wife of an American traditional husband who gives her all liberties. She is

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widowed and returns to India to her family. She has to now choose between the rigid traditions of her family and perform *Sati*, or continue to live the life of Jasmine in America. Jasmine sways between the past and the present attempting to come to terms with the two worlds, one of "native culture" and the other that of "immigration." She keeps the baggage of her past all through her life. The village girl from Hasnapur survives in America and does not sacrifice herself. After landing on the Gulf Coast of Florida she is raped, and in turn she murders her rapist. This defiles her mission and death is denied her:

*Lord Yama, who had wanted me, and whom I'd flirted with on the long trip over,  
had now deserted me* (Mukherjee 1989:120).

The pain that she feels and the scar always remind her of that moment in her life, when she tried to run away from her fate. And she tells this to her sisters: "It's my third eye [...] now I'm a sage" (Mukherjee 1989: 5).

When Jasmine runs to her sisters at the river, she swims a while in it and suddenly sees a rotten dog's body. The stench she smells and the pictures follow her for the rest of her life. Later in life she still remembers the stench whenever she drinks a glass of water: "I know what I don't want to become" (Mukherjee 1989:5).

### **Stages of Diasporic Condition**

Jasmine's journey from Punjab, through Florida, New York, and Iowa, to California depicts the various stages of her diasporic condition. But these dislocations are also the representations of her mental condition. Jasmine assumes different mythological avatars in her various journeys of life: She shuttles between identities: "Jyoti [was] the Sati-Goddess, Jasmine lives for the future" (Mukherjee 1989:176).

Jasmine releases herself from being an illegal immigrant into a self-assured American woman but her spiritual call comes from India: "I am caught between the promise of America and old-world dutifulness" (Mukherjee 1989:240). The "old-world dutifulness" forms the mental make-up of Indian migrants to the West. Uprooted from her native land India, Jyoti does her best to introduce herself into the new and alien society as an immigrant; the culmination is finally indicated in Jasmine's pregnancy with the child of a white man, Bud.

### **Past Life and Transformation**

Jasmine's past life played an important role in her present life and the inescapability of memory. Jasmine feels unable to express herself. Due to the simultaneous existence of the past and present, memories of India and her current life in America, Jasmine is forced to view herself from the perspectives of "Jasmine,"

"Jase," and "Jassy" all at once. Her past life crawls upon her once again appearing in the form of

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Sukhwinder, the murderer of her husband in the disguise of a Hot dog vendor.

The transformation of Jasmine from a semi-educated Punjabi rustic to an American is not psychologically possible. It is not easy to overcome the disunity of migrants from the roots and traditions of the culture that one comes from. No doubt the liberated Jyoti, Jasmine, Jase and Jane, who make a life time for every name, look like a possibility for every enthusiastic immigrant. Jasmine starts her journey from India, uproots, re-roots herself and survives in all odd circumstances. Mukherjee introduces Jasmine's existence as two opposite poles: her beginnings as Jyoti, in an Indian village, and her life as Jane Ripplemeyer, in Iowa. Thus, she is caught between the two cultures of the east and west, past and present, old and new in an alien land. She explores the encounter between the mainstream American culture and the new one formed by her spirit of a migrant being. Thus Jasmine, Ashima, Ashoke , Gogol , Soniya have lost their Indian identities in one way or another; and they try to struggle to find in a determined way to survive in an alien background in which many are at least partially successful.

Jasmine has had to reinvent herself to survive which represents a strategy of negotiation between East and West, and an approach of assimilation which neither privileges the dominant nor leaves any regret for the marginal. In this way the immigrants attempt to assimilate two cultures and to find a place in the mainstream life of the adopted country. This is done only through different mediums. These mediums are geographical, material as well as psychological. This is the kind of attempt of immigrants that helps them survive in an alien land which they have embraced any way.

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