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**Roots and Routes: Diasporic Challenges in Jhumpa Lahiri's
'The Namesake'**

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ABSTRACT:

Diaspora is a phenomenon that has existed since the earliest days of civilization. The term 'diaspora' describes communities of people who reside away from their perceived homelands. Diaspora literature focuses on depicting the experience of diaspora in forms such as novels, poems, short stories, and more. This genre gained prominence particularly in the latter half of the 20th century. Jhumpa Lahiri, an acclaimed diasporic author, has established herself among Indo-American writers. As a diasporic writer, Lahiri delves into themes of cultural and personal isolation and identity in her works. Her migrant diaspora characters endure displacement, fragmentation, marginalization, and discontinuity within the cultural contexts of their host countries. In her novel 'The Namesake,' characters are portrayed against the backdrop of both their native and foreign cultures. This paper aims to analyze 'The Namesake' as a diasporic novel, examining the cultural dilemmas and displacement the characters encounter in a foreign land.

Keywords: Diaspora literature, Cultural Dilemma, Jhumpa Lahiri

Introduction:

The term 'diaspora' indicates communities of people residing outside their perceived homelands due to migration, immigration, exile, or as a result of colonial expansion, imperialism, trade, business, better opportunities, the desire for improved prospects, or globalization. This phenomenon has been present since the dawn of civilization. Diaspora literature focuses on portraying the experience of diaspora in various forms such as novels, poems, and short stories. Diaspora writing became particularly notable in the latter half of the 20th century. This genre is crafted by authors who are separated from their native countries. Essentially, diaspora literature is produced by exiles, expatriates, or immigrants who have encountered displacement at multiple levels.

Indian Diaspora Literature:

Numerous Indian literary figures have skillfully depicted the diverse cultural experiences of both their homeland and their adopted countries. Noteworthy contributors to Indian diaspora literature in English include Bharati Mukherjee, Kiran Desai, Salman Rushdie, Arvind Adiga, Anita Desai, V.S. Naipaul, and Jhumpa Lahiri, among others. These authors have immortalized and popularized their homeland through their writings, even while residing abroad. Their works often explore themes such as nostalgia, rootlessness,



homelessness, dislocation, and displacement.

Jhumpa Lahiri:

Jhumpa Lahiri, a British-born writer of Indian heritage, is a leading figure in the realm of diasporic literature, firmly positioning herself among Indo-American authors. In her narratives, Lahiri explores themes of cultural and individual alienation and identity. Her characters in the diaspora frequently experience displacement, fragmentation, marginalization, and discontinuity within the cultural narratives of their adopted countries. Among her significant works are the short story collections *Interpreter of Maladies* and *Unaccustomed Earth*, as well as the novels *The Namesake* and *The Lowland*. Her characters of Indian origin often find themselves away from their homeland, primarily in the United States. In her novel *The Namesake* (2003), characters are portrayed through the dual perspectives of their native and foreign cultures, facing diasporic challenges of routes and roots. This paper will examine *The Namesake* as a diasporic novel, investigating the cultural conflicts and displacement its characters face in a foreign setting.

The Today Newspaper has provided a remark on the book:

“The Namesake is more than a book about a name; it is about finding an identity in a country that will treat you as an alien even if you were born there but more than that, it is about rediscovering your roots, and the accidents of the universe that caused you to be and that is something all of us can identify with.” (Book Review in The Week)

Roots and Routes: Diasporic Challenges in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*

The Namesake narrates the tale of a Bengali couple, Ashoke and Ashima, along with their children, Gogol and Sonia. After departing from India, the family moves to Cambridge, Massachusetts. Ashoke tries to assimilate into the new culture, whereas Ashima grapples with cultural conflicts of routes and roots and frequently feels lonely. Firmly anchored in her Indian heritage, Ashima finds it challenging to sever ties completely from her native customs (roots) and traditions, ultimately struggling to adapt to the new surroundings (routes).

From the moment she sets foot in Cambridge, Ashima experiences a profound sense of displacement. This is evident in her attempts to recreate spicy Bengali dishes using American ingredients, her continual reading of Bengali short stories and poems from magazines, and her search for solace in the letters they receive from



home. She strives to impart to her children the native language, literature, and history, while also guiding them in religious customs, traditions, beliefs, dietary practices, and social etiquettes. These actions expose her homesickness and feeling of being uprooted, driving her to retreat into a world of nostalgia. Emotionally and psychologically, she clings to her roots, that is to Kolkata and Indian culture, perpetually feeling out of place in America. She struggles to accept the notion of motherhood in an unfamiliar country. Lahiri movingly portrays Ashima's transitional existence in America. Ashima is starting to understand that being a foreigner is like an unending pregnancy—a perpetual wait, a constant burden, and a continuous feeling of being out of place.

Ashima is seen constantly comparing her route, i.e. American culture with that of her root, i.e. Indian and finding the American a humiliating one. Gradually, she develops a kind of aversion to everything that opposes her Indian roots. She regards the land with apprehension, unwilling to consider it her home.

For the past eighteen months, ever since she's arrived in the Cambridge, nothing has felt normal at all.... 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 to be so tentative and spare. [TNS:5-6]

Although Ashima attempts to adapt to her routes, i.e. the American way of life, her diasporic existence is marked by ongoing cultural dilemmas. Her efforts to navigate the new environment do not alter her deep-seated Indian values and traditions. Her strong attachment to her native culture leaves her feeling uncomfortable in her adopted country. Her disappointment stems from her isolation and reserved nature, which prevent her from fully embracing American culture. Not wanting to upset Ashoke or worry her parents, she has kept her disappointment hidden. In her letters home, she instead talks about 'the powerful cooking gas that flares up from the four burners on the stove at any time of day or night', 'the hot tap water strong enough to scald her skin, and the cold water that is safe to drink'.

In contrast to Ashima, Ashoke possesses a resilient spirit and embraces his immigrant status with a forward-looking perspective. He does not experience the loneliness often associated with living in a foreign land. Instead, he is intrigued by the new ways of life, demonstrating his adaptability. Ashoke is portrayed as a post-colonial, post-modern individual who believes in breaking down barriers to foster personal growth. He effectively manages the emotional challenges that can induce homesickness. Ashoke's decision to encourage his son to hold a pen rather than money during the annaprasan ceremony illustrates his broad-minded



approach beyond narrow ethnic boundaries. Naming his son Gogol, after the Russian writer Nikolai Gogol, further reflects his efforts to adapt to changing times and places.

Although Ashima perpetually feels like a stranger in a foreign land, her sense of alienation diminishes over time. She begins to feel a connection to Cambridge after the incident in which she recovered her lost bags. From this point, her prejudice against the country starts to dissolve. Her previously narrow perspective on other countries and cultures expands. The novelist illustrates this transformation in Ashima with the following words:

'Somehow, this small miracle causes Ashima to feel connected to Cambridge in a way she has not previously thought possible, affiliated with its exceptions as well as its rules.' (43)

Nevertheless, Ashima occasionally vacillates between two cultures. For her children's happiness, she learns to make sandwiches with bologna or roast beef and even celebrates American holidays like Christmas and Thanksgiving. Yet, certain aspects of American life still perplex her.

Lahiri also emphasizes Gogol's dual awareness, as he finds himself trapped between Indian ethics (roots) and Western liberalism (routes). His relationship with Maxine, an American girl who values love and sexuality based on different moral principles, unsettles the Indian moralist within Gogol. Though Ashima too cannot approve her son's affair with Maxine, she tries to accept the manners and behaviors of American culture. Sadly, it is the cultural difference that proves to be the reason that Gogol and Maxine cannot sustain their relationship any longer and ends abruptly.

Lahiri introduces Moushumi, a spirited Bengali woman who fearlessly reinvents herself without reservations or guilt. Her marriage to Graham proves unsuccessful, leading to their separation. Similarly, her arranged marriage with Gogol ends in failure, highlighting a cultural mismatch in the American context. It is ironic that while Indian immigrants strive to uphold their moral values, they find themselves crossing ethical boundaries in matters of love and intimacy. Both Gogol and Moushumi have engaged in premarital sexual relationships, which becomes a point of contention, particularly Moushumi's candid discussions about her past. The novel's title, named after Gogol, reflects his dual cultural identity, yet he struggles to connect with the name 'Gogol'. His discomfort with his name prompts him to change it to Nikhil, creating further inner conflict.



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Part of the problem is that the people who now know him as Nikhil have no idea that he used to be Gogol. They know him only in the present, not at all in the past. But after eighteen years of Gogol, two months of Nikhil feel scant, inconsequential. At times he feels as if he's cast himself in a play, acting the part of twins, indistinguishable to the naked eye yet fundamentally different. [TNS: 105]

Experiencing two distinct cultures prompts Gogol to keenly observe various aspects. He begins to analyze and compare the differences between the two cultures. The novel eloquently depicts how the younger generation of immigrants embodies a fusion of Eastern and Western influences. Ashoke's sudden death serves as a catalyst for Gogol to reconnect with his Indian heritage. Despite being devastated by the loss, Gogol emerges as a more mature and responsible individual, showing heightened dedication both to himself and to his mother.

Conclusion:

In her novel 'The Namesake', Jhumpa Lahiri adeptly portrays the anguish, uncertainties, and tensions between origins (roots) and journeys (routes), between estrangement and integration. At its core, the book explores immigrants' wistful longing for their native land and their feelings of alienation in their adopted homeland. Certain characters wrestle with the pull of their homeland versus the allure of their new surroundings. Lahiri effectively examines issues of cultural disparities and the consequent hurdles. The characters navigate a path between their traditional roots and newly forged national identities amidst global transformations. Ultimately, Lahiri focuses on the diasporic journey and the settlement challenges confronted by characters who relocate to various countries, particularly the United States.



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