

Alienation and loneliness in Jhumpa Lahiri's 'The Namesake' and 'The Lowland'

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Abstract:

Alienation, rootlessness, isolation, and loss of identity are some of the predicaments from which immigrants suffer. Jhumpa Lahiri, a child of immigrants, has experienced the feeling of alienation at a very early age. Born in London and brought up at Rhodes Island, United States of America, she has been torn between two cultures. Lahiri has illustrated the theme of alienation and loneliness through different characters who find themselves cut-off from their cultural and historical roots. The theme of alienation is manifested in 'The Namesake' and 'The Lowland' by Jhumpa Lahiri.

Keywords: Alienation, loneliness, experience, rootlessness, isolation

Jhumpa Lahiri has carved a niche for herself by dint of her literary works among the Indian diasporic writers. Jhumpa Lahiri belongs to second generation of immigrants. Her works describe immigrant's problems such as alienation, displacement, rootlessness and the problem of acculturation in the host land. The writers who have migrated to other countries illustrate their experiences of the harsh realities of the foreign land. Migration seems to be quite promising to the people who intend to move to other countries. The truth is that it is pleasant for them who assimilate themselves with the culture, psychological aspects and geographical environment of the host land. But it remains painful for the them who do not succeed in the process of assimilation. They, all the time, have feelings of rootlessness and alienation. The alienation has been described in different ways by different scholars.

Arnold Kaufman mentions –“To claim that a person is alienated is to claim that his relation to something else has certain features which result in avoidable discontent or loss of satisfaction .” A dictionary of literary terms defines alienation in the following words,

“Alienation is the state of being alienated from something or somebody; it is condition of the mind”.

Encyclopedia Britannica describes alienation as “the state of feeling estranged or separated from ones milieu, work, products of work or self”.

The word alienation in English has originated from the Latin word '*alienato*' which is noun, its verb form '*alienare*' means to snatch, to avoid, to remove or to make things for others. The French words '*alienate*' and '*alienation*' are closure to English words '*alienate*' and '*alienation*'. The Greek words Anomia and Anomie which mean self-alienation and alienation from society respectively are regarded modern in their use. Anomia indicates personal disintegration from the society. About Anomia i.e. self-alienation G.H.Nettler writes-

“Anomia is personal disorganization, alienation is a psychological state of an individualand alienated is the person who has been estranged , made unfriendly towards his society and the culture it carries”. As a matter fact, Anomie, Anomia and Alienation can be used interchangeably. In English language Isolation, Estrangement and Separation are some of the other words, used for Alienation

In Jhumpa Lahiri's works alienation is the recurring theme .Her first novel ,the Namesake is a portrayal of the lives of two generations of the Gangulis in America. Ashima immigrates to America after getting married to Ashok. Here she is not comfortable, she finds the social milieu and geographical land very different from those of India . Her feelings of being a stranger take her towards alienation. Ashima's alienation is clearly visible throughout the novel. At every occasion, she misses her native land, Calcutta. At the time of her delivery, she laments that she is all alone here and nobody is here to take care of her newly born child. Had it been India, she would have been surrounded by relatives. In India, the birth of a child is a matter of celebrations. Here, the birth of a child has less significance and the meaning of the birth is half justifiable.

“Without a single grandparent and an uncle and aunt at her side, the baby's birth like most everything in America, feels haphazard, only half trueShe never knows of a person entering the world so alone, so deprived”. (Lahiri :25)

In American Medical System, it is mandatory for the couple to have the name of the child on the birth certificate. The mother and child are allowed to leave hospital when the birth certificate of the child has the

name on it. It also gives a shock to Ashima, as the name of the child is supposed to be given by her grandmother. A letter containing the names will reach to them in a month. So with mutual consent Ashok names the child Gogol, a name based on the famous Russian author Nikolai Gogol whom he adores. After getting discharged from the hospital, Ashima reaches home and shows her resentment,

“I don't want to raise Gogol alone in this country. It is not right. I want to go back.”

This entire incident enhances the feeling of alienation in the couple, especially in Ashima. The rules and the culture of America make her lonely. They are twice alienated; first, they are alienated for being away from the homeland. Secondly, they are alienated due to different culture. Next when she shifts to suburbs, she again feels alienated and then she compares this alienation to “a sort of lifelong pregnancy”.

Later their son named Gogol suffers from alienation because of his name, particularly when he realises that nobody takes this name now in the world. There is no clear basis or clarification of his name at least for namesake. He is a second generation of immigrants. His ties with the home land are not so strong as those of his parents. So, the nature of his alienation is different from that of his parents. As Nigamananda says, “Jhumpa Lahiri's first generation Indian-Americans cherish their past and its memories and an indispensable and integral part of their roots and their beings, her second generation Indian-Americans reflect both proximities and distancing from it; they seem to perceive and adopt new angles at which to enter this reality. More particularly.....they took forward to the concerns and modes of their hybridization and cross-cultural fertilization in the increasingly multicultural space of USA and not more absorption in the dominant culture.” This becomes the main reason for his alienation. His feeling of isolation further deepens when he tries to avoid his parents and keeps his friends away from them. In an attempt to assimilate with American culture, he tries to adopt American lifestyle. He feels embarrassed because his parents are different from the natives of America. He tries to avoid his parents and keeps his friends away from them. He tries to immerse in American culture. In this attempt he changes his name from Gogol to Nikhil and befriends with Kim and has fun with her. Next he tries to mix up with Maxine's family. He drinks expensive wine at her parents' cottage in the country. His conscience pricks him.

“At times.....another bottle of wine is opened and Gogol raises his glass to be filled, yet again, he is conscious of the fact that his immersion in Maxine's family is betrayal of his own.” (Lahiri 141) At this point he is torn with a psychological conflict, leading to alienation.

Sidney Finkelstein defines alienation as “a psychological phenomenon, an internal conflict, a hostility felt towards something seemingly outside oneself, a barrier erected which is actually no defense but an impoverishment of oneself”. (75)

After her husband's death while living all alone in her house, located on Pemberton Road, she hates darkness that permeates her house and her soul. Her obsession to live in a lonely house signifies her loneliness and alienation. Moushumi whom Ashima wants to be wife of his son, Gogol also experiences a type of existentialistic alienation. Sartre writes about this type of alienation in his book ‘Being and Nothingness’:

“In the shock that seizes me when apprehend the other's look, I experience a subtle alienation of all my possibilities which are associated with the object of the world far from me, in the midst of world.” (18)

Moushumi shares her past with Gogol. She has rejected all prospective grooms, selected by her parents. After the breakup with her fiancé, she decides that she will not accept anyone in her life. Moushumi's stresses on freedom and her connection with France can be considered as an existentialist alienation.

In Calcutta after the party, Ashima realises her ever- lasting loneliness. “She turns away from the mirror and sobs for her husband.....both impatient and indifference for all the days she still must sleep.” She loses interest in her family in Calcutta as well as children in America. She feels the pangs of separation for her husband. This accentuates her feeling of alienation.

‘The Lowland’ is the story of two brothers Subhash and Udayan, who have been nothing without each other, despite of being different in nature and attitude. Subhash goes to Rhodes Island, America for higher studies while Udayan prefers to be a part of Naxalbari movement in India. Udayan loneliness is well depicted when he writes a letter to his brother in America. “The days are dull without you.Will you hurry up with whatever it is you are doing? An embrace from your brother.” (Lahiri: 42-43).

In America, Subhash does not forget his family. He languishes for hearing their voice. Even when he is in the company of scientists and students he gets lost in his thoughts about his family. “For a year and a half, he has not seen his family. Not set down with them, at the end of the day.....he was learning to live without having their voices to receive news from them only in writing” (Lahiri: 63).

Away from the family, Subhash gets intimate with Holly, a married woman. While staying at Holly's house one day he notices the date which is going to be followed by 15th August. This fills him with nostalgia and again he experiences loneliness and sense of alienation.

"The following day was August 15, Indian independence. A holiday for the country, lights on government buildings, flag hoisting and parades. An ordinary day here" (Lahiri: 78).

Udayan, the younger brother of Subhash refuses to go abroad for higher studies and dedicates himself to the party that dreams of changing the society through revolution that can be brought through the barrel of a gun. At times he also feels isolated. His isolation and loneliness have been vividly painted. When he has been preparing an explosive, he meets with an accident and gets hurt.

"He had trouble in hearing, asking Gauri to repeat herself.he is worried that he might not be able to hear the buzzer.He complained of feeling alone even though they were together. Feeling isolated is the most basic way" (Lahiri: 108).

After Udayan's death Subhash marries Gauri to save her from alienation. But Gauri is haunted by her past all the time. She never proves to be a good wife and a good mother. As a matter of fact, Gauri has also been a sufferer in her own ways. Udayan marries her without the consent of his parents. So, Gauri in her in-laws' house is not accepted and remains alienated. After her husband's death she goes to Rhodes Island with Subhash and gives birth to a baby girl, called Bela. Being haunted by past, she alienates herself from Subhash and her daughter Bela. She remains restless. For her, isolation is the only remedy to get solace.

"Isolation offered it's own form of companionship. The reliable silence of her room, the steadfast tranquility of the evening" (Lahiri: 165)

Udayan's parents also feel alienated and lonely after their son's death. Their one son has been killed and other one is in America. And Gauri too moves to America. They have no choice except leading a lonely life and after sometimes Subhash's father also expires. Before his death he wanted to dispose of the house but could not because of the emotions and feeling, attached to the house. Subhash's mother also dies in loneliness. "She died on her own in a room with strangers denying him the opportunity to watch her pass" (Lahiri: 221).

To sum up, alienation happens when people are not successful in relating themselves to the place, they live in. Ashima and Ashok in 'The Namesake' suffer because they failed to connect themselves with the people and the culture of the host land and this results in alienation. Udayan, Subhash, Gauri suffer from loneliness and feel alienated in one way or the other because they fail to adapt to the new ways the life, offered to them.

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