DIASPORIC TRAUMA OR TRAUMATIC DIASPORA?: THE NAMESAKE BY JHUMPA LAHIRI RECONSIDERED

DİYASPORANIN NEDEN OLDUĞU TRAVMA MI YOKSA TRAVMANIN YARATTIĞI DIYASPORA MI? : JHUMPA LAHİRİ’NİN THE NAMESAKE (ADAŞ) ROMANININ YENİDEN İRDELENMESİ

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Abstract

Coptic or diaspora (Ancient Greek: διασπορά - "diaspora") has been described as living as a minority elsewhere, breaking away from the mainland of a people, nation, or belief for a long time. The word expresses both the act of breaking apart and the people who are living apart as a minority. As the journey of man over the world continues, the concept of diaspora will continue to be discussed. The terms ‘diaspora’ and ‘trauma’ are commonly used almost interchangeably especially in the literary products of Americans. Life in diaspora is considered to be one of the main reasons for cultural trauma or vice versa. Cultural trauma is a kind of diasporic result and a natural resource of diaspora, so it is believed that there is a mutual cause-and-effect between the two. Jeffrey C. Alexander claims that “Cultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been objected a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways” (VIII). This article reveals the intercultural conflicts, traumas, isolation, hopes and dilemmas and this mutual influence through semi-fictional characters in The Namesake by Jhumpa Lahiri, who find themselves between indigenous culture and home culture.

Keywords: Culture, Trauma, Diaspora, Jhumpa Lahiri, Namesake

Öz

Coptik ya da diyaspora (Eski Yunanca’dan διασπορά - "diaspora") uzun süre bir inancın, bir ulusun anavatanından uzaklaşmış başka bir yerde azınlık olarak varlığını sürdürmesi olarak tarife dönmüştür. Sözçük, hem uzaklaşma eylemini hem de azınlık ola-

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Introduction

Although the usage of the term diaspora emerges in the Greek civilization, the emergence of diaspora has a lifelong age. The roots of diaspora dates back to the tale of our first forefathers on this earth, that is, the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the gardens of Eden. This can be perceived as the starting point of mankind’s diaspora as from that point on humanity has been in a permanent quest in hope of establishing a better and more secure life on the earth (Puri, 2013: 190). Behind man’s movement from place to place lie a variety of motivations and different causes, either obligatory or purposefully, and its forms have been changed from one era to another. In the early communities, for instance, the major reason for tribal movements was either to seek food or shelter from natural catastrophes or human raids. Later on, in another stage of man development during the ancient civilizations, In addition to the above mentioned reasons, captives of war and slaves was another form of man’s obligatory movement from an area to another one. With the progress of life in the age of technology and globalization, however, human needs change, easier ways of reaching and contacting the world occur, the size of human beings’ migration arise thus further forms of diaspora emerge. Under most of diasporas, in effect, lie an social, economic, political, religious or scientific motive. As Ram Janam asserts, “migration may take place due to various reasons i.e. historical, political, economic and higher education,” also suggesting that there have been a huge range of migration in the world so far in which the experiences and sensations of immigrants have been described in a variety of forms. D. Nalini and M. Premavathy, on the other hand, argue that diasporic people are those ethnic communities who constitute of different people including “political and war refugees, (im) migrants, and ethnic and religious minorities that have maintained a sense of collective identity away from their homeland” (Nalini&Premavathy, 2015: 168).

As to the term diaspora, the forced or voluntary movement of any population that hold shared ethnicity or identity, thus becoming residents of a country usually far away
from their homeland is called ‘diaspora’. The etymology of the term ‘diaspora’ refers back to the Greek word ‘diaspeir’, meaning ‘to distribute’. It is a compound word of spear, which means ‘to sow’ or ‘to scatter’ as well as ‘dia’, connoting ‘from one destination to another’. Today the word diaspora, however, is relatively utilized to refer to any group of people regarded as transnational or live in a foreign land different and far away from the one they are originated; naturally their political, social and economic associations go beyond the boundaries of nation-states. Yet, in addition to the Jews’ dispersal amongst the Gentiles later than the time of their expel, the term diaspora stands for distribution (Nalini & Premavathy, 2015: 169).

As one of the essential facets of literature is the reflection and representation of human life, it has played a major role in dramatization of the man’s condition, including diaspora. While immigration is one of the world’s issues, diasporic literature, diasporic fiction in particular, has been a popular form of the literatures of the 21st century whose prominent mission has been demystifying the actual realities of expatriates’ life. Accordingly, many authors’ including biographers, poets, playwrights, and novelists tried to pen the agonies and trauma immigrants experienced through living in alien lands of diaspora. Indian Diaspora has been one of the most noticeable diasporas among others in which Indian immigrant writers, including women writers such as Jhumpa Lahiri, Meena Alexander, Bharati Mukherjee, Chitra Banerjee Divakuruni to mention only a few, acutely scrutinize the dilemma and confusion of expatriates in general and those of women in particular. Most diasporic authors share a common theme which is the duality of an inevitable dilemma the immigrants undergo; that is, the feeling of homesickness and alienation in host country mixed with the nostalgic memories and cultural, ethnic associations with the homeland, as embodied in Jhumpa Lahiri’s works.

Diasporic Trauma or Traumatic Diaspora? : The Namesake by Jhumpa Lahiri Reconsidered

Jhumpa Lahiri as one of the worldwide eminent Indian woman authors makes a major contribution in the formation of diasporic literature. Lahiri as a product of an Indian born and raised family, and who was born in diaspora (in London, 1967) and grew up in Rhode Island, “has been acclaimed a dominant diaspora writer depicting the complexities of immigrant experiences of people live in diaspora” (Nalini & Premavathy, 2015: 169), to quote Nalini and Premavathy. Being a diasporian, most of Lahiri’s works, particularly her collection of short stories titled “Interpreter of Maladies” (1999), The Namesake (2003), expose diasporic elements in which diaspora posits as the most essential theme, designating the harsh traumatic circumstances diasporians experience; therefore, partially regarded as autobiographical. This can be epitomized in her most renowned fiction The Namesake. Prior to be the story of a Bengali couple married and living together in a foreign land, The Namesake is the story of agony, isolation, homesickness, cultural clashes as well as identity crisis of an immigrant family. Lahiri’s work is not a mere story of a Bengali or Asian family facing cultural and psychological troubles in a foreign country, but rather it is a microcosm via which the psycho-socio conflicts are demystified that each emigrant might encounter. As a diasporian, she asserts that diasporic life has not such a utopian and serene image as commonly assumed, if, nonetheless, to some extent could be, then it is also a sort of agony, turmoil and misery, especially for those who are incapable of assimilating or adapting to the norms of the host country.

Jhumpa Lahiri’s The Namesake is one of the unique contemporary fictions giving a vivid realistic picture of life in diaspora. The
novel circles around the life of a Bengali family from Calcutta moving to Boston, U.S in pursuit of the institution of a further promising future. The story starts with an arranged marriage of a Bengali couple Ashoke and Ashima, who right after the marriage move to the U.S on the request of Ashoke. After their arrival in Boston, apart from his continuation in research, Ashoke manages to find a job as a university teacher. Far different from her husband’s job, Ashima remains at home and does the housework alone. There Ashima gives birth to a son named Gogol (later Nikhil) and a daughter Sonia. The novel concludes after an unexpected death of Ashoke as a result of which Ashima reluctantly comes to the decision to spend the rest of her life both in India and in the U.S, whereas their children stick to staying in the U.S.

Apart from the theme of cultural conflict and identity crisis, diasporic trauma is one of the principal themes of the novel around which almost all the events are circled. Basically, the novel presents the image of diasporic trauma on two forms: on the one hand, trauma is manifested through an atmosphere of homesickness, social alienation, nostalgia and loneliness epitomized by the character of Ashima (a symbol of first immigrant generation’s dilemmas). On the other hand, cultural conflict, identity crisis, dilemma between home and host land, and rootlessness are another representational form of trauma personified by Gogol (a representation of second immigrant generation). The similarity between Ashima and Gogol is the dilemmatic situation via which both are entangled as well as the parallel of their predestined predicament to the extent that no matter what the choice they might make, nothing changes in their callous, agonized reality.

While the novel starts with the marital ceremony thus supposed to be a blissful commencement for Ashima, paradoxically it turns to be the starting point for her unbroken dilemma. That is, she has to sacrifice to choose a life in diaspora far away from homeland for the sake of her husband, thus leaving her very parents, relatives, culture and heritage even dreams behind. Her tormented reality, actually, starts with her actual confrontation with the faceless mechanized society of the U.S during her critical time of birth giving in the hospital. Quite different from Bengali culture, far away from the familial warmth and parental caring, Ashima undergoes her very first birth giving in a lonely and mechanical society where neither human compassion nor maternal warmth work; only surrounded by some acquaintances (nurses) standing behind a curtain. If she were in Bengali, instead, she would be surrounded by her mother, grandmother, sisters, etc in order to give her a hand and show sympathy that could be a way of easing her pains. Quite contrary to this, now “without a single grandparent or parent or uncle or aunt at her side, the baby’s birth, like most like everything else in America, feels somehow haphazard” (Lahiri, 2003: 24). Therefore, Ashima’s sense of helplessness and displacement further rises when “she strokes and suckles and studies her son, she can’t help but pity him. She has never known a person entering the world so alone, so deprived” (Lahiri, 2003: 25). Commenting on this in an article titled Diasporic Elements in “JhumpaLahiri’s The Namesake”, Ram Janam points out that “through the traumatic labor pain, her acute feeling of isolation…Lahiri presents her at two levels: as a woman and as a mother”. Janam further argues that via the manifestation of Ashima’s struggle, the author highlights the melancholic and isolated condition of a woman residing a diasporic land where she has no acquaintance with its people, place, culture and even its norms.

Apart from the absence of her family members as well as the lack of human warmth during the most critical instances in her life, Ashima’s turmoil is further intensified by the haunted notion of bringing up a child in such a passionless and mechanized land. To put it another way, her pains are not only brought about momentary strokes of a
birth giving, but rather are a result of her revelations about the gloomy consequences awaiting her which is: “motherhood in a foreign land” and raising “a child in a country where she is related to no one, where she knows so little, and where life seems so tentative and spare” (Lahiri, 2003: 6). Lahiri underscores the dilemmatic circumstances of women in diaspora on two levels. She raises the question of motherhood in diaspora where she is doomed to stay at home on her won, feed children and do the housework. This is in a stark contrast with Ashima’s husband Ashoke that he spends most of his time outside either at university or in doing research. Unlike her husband, Ashima spends most of the time at home away from real engagement to the society she resides. While conventionally home symbolizes a place for rest, harmony, and peace, ironically here in diaspora home could be a substitute for prison in the case of Ashima as it deprives her engagement from the very society she lives in. Instead, she is haunted with her reminiscence or a vision of an imaginary life in homeland; at times in order to avoid loneliness, she keeps writing letters for her parents, (re)reading Bengali magazines or books; ironically, instead of easing her lamentations such habits further intensify her sense of homesickness and loneliness. Ashima’s dilemma more deepens when she visualizes that the same gloomy destiny awaits her children; hence, she persistently states “I do not want to raise Gogol alone in this country. It’s not right” (Lahiri, 2003: 33).

Through the character of Ashima, Lahiri illustrates how intricate and suffering life in a foreign country for a woman can be! The question whether it is diasporic trauma or traumatic diaspora is elusive in that the situation is different from a gender to another, a class to another and a generation to another. For instance, unlike Ashoke, who is by and large outside either teaching at university or seeking academic research and enjoying him-
Ashima’s weeping stands for the sorrows of emigrated women who live in a land where they find no roots, no sense of belonging, no peace, and even no glimpses of hope. Her tears are indicative of an endless deep inner lamentation caused by her unbearable isolation. While Ashima’s characterizations typifies first immigrant generation, Gogol, on the other hands, is an archetypal representation of diasporic trauma of second immigrant generation. One of the essential dilemmas Gogol experiences throughout the novel is identity crisis. The roots of Gogol’s dilemma cultivate even prior to his very birth i.e. to be predestined to bear in a foreign land. His dilemma is not only epitomized through the duality of his identity, but even with his own names, particularly when he realizes both his classmates and children from neighborhood reflect on his name as an odd name. After his birth, the infant’s parents are not permitted to discharge hospital until recording a name for their son. Ashoke, accordingly, suggests naming him after a Russian writer Nikolai Gogol, the author of The Overcoat by which Ashoke was saved in a bad train accident. The starting point of Gogol’s conflict emerges with his first involvement with the society outside his family—the time when he enters the school as a pupil for the first time. This point can be regarded as Gogol’s concrete confrontation with the society, hence with his very name. His name is recorded as Nikhil at school whereas he has been called Gogol so far. Gogol, in fact, faces troubles with his old name in that it is regarded as an odd name by his classmates together with children from neighborhood. Forwarding more than a name for the protagonist of the novel as well as the disconnection between them is symbolic, signifying the dual identity and the conflicting, disharmonized status quo of an expatriate faces. Gogol’s first name is the embodiment of the Bengali identity while his second one Nikhil is the representation of his American one both typify two different modes of life, culture, heritage and values. Thus, if having two names via which each personifying a different identity, where can Gogol stand?

One of the major conflicts of Gogol is the lack of the ability to make a choice between his dual identities. For choosing each would be at the expense of the other, and each leads to a zero point destination. If he chooses host country’s identity, for example, it means throwing away his origins, culture and ethnicity leading to rootlessness and no sense of belonging. If his choice were Bengali identity, however, he would remain completely isolated and displaced in the very society he resides, consequently bringing him loneliness and alienation the same as her mother. As such, he suffers from an unvarying dilemma brought about the clash between not only different but two utterly opposing cultures that eventually leave him unsecure and homeless. In an article entitled “A Thematic Study of Jhumpa Lahiri’s The Namesake,” Rajendrakumar D. Suthar reflects how to “get home” is “one question Gogol can’t seem to answer. He is never quite at home—not at Maxine’s, not at his house on Pemberton Road, and not in Calcutta, either” (13). Suthar writes that Gogol is not the only character facing predicament in finding a place to reside but all the characters seek to establish a home where they can find peace and accord indeed. The conflicts Gogol undergo as a diasporan are similar to those of his sister Sonia, his wife Moushumi, his parents too through which each confronts a question that is beyond their reach to answer: “Should I assimilate into American culture? If so, how much? Will I be betraying my roots if I do?” (Suthar, 2014: 12). Unable to answer such questions, the characters are left both emotionally and mentally helpless.

The Namesake portrays that the characters do not only suffer from homesickness and nostalgic memories of past life in their homeland, but also from the host land in that even in the eyes of the present society they live in are looked upon as foreigners. As a result, they can neither belong to the homeland nor
the host country. This notion is quite evident in the characters of Ashima and Gogol. As formerly mentioned, Gogol’s major dilemma is not the difficulty of making a choice between India and America, but rather the lack of belonging to each. Nirmal Sharma suggests that the lack of sense of belonging renders the characters find themselves entangled with a contemplation of confusion, nostalgia and homesickness; for they can neither belong to the homeland nor the country settle down on (Sharma, 2012: 111). Similar to Sonia, though seeking to adapt to the American cultural norms and modes of life, Gogol is still a foreigner in the eyes of the American society. Not only this, but while going back to Calcutta with their parents, yet again both Gogol and Sonia are counted as Americans as they are completely unfamiliar with almost all the natural, social, political, religious environment of Bengali. Suthar discloses “to the children of Indian immigrants, though, their parents’ homeland often appears backward and unfamiliar (,) the United States is an uneasy no-man’s land for the Indian and Indian-American characters (Suthar, 2014: 13). This struggle consequently reflects the family ties of the immigrants.

The Namesake is not only the dramatization of the diasporic conflicts immigrants go through due to their confrontation with an all new foreign culture, but also an examination of a dilemmatic clash between two different generations within an migrated family. It is a microcosm exposing how both the first and second immigrant generation entangle in a helpless conflict owing to their dissimilar outlooks about identity, culture, ethnicity, family, and even about life. This is epitomized through the struggle of the Ganguli family via which the parents (Ashoke and Ashima), representing first immigrant generation, have a complete diverse perspective about life from that of their children (Gogol and Sonia) who stand for second immigrant generation: a conflict maintains throughout the novel. For while parents stick to homeland, the children prefer host land; while first immigrant generation find their existence in keeping ties with their roots, original culture and heritage, the second immigrant generation find themselves through their adaptation and harmonization with those of the present society they make a living in; the former are haunted with nostalgia, old dreams, memory, and orientalization whereas the latter live with the existent reality, enjoy themselves, entertainment, artificial life and Americanization. In brief, the first wants to be more Indian, whilst the second intend to be more American. The existence of two different world outlooks each of which including two opposing attitudes towards family orientation, religious faith, cultural rituals, and ethnic community within a single family that is already suffering from isolation and displacement, make their situation further traumatic and tormented. Lahiri highlights such a gloomy pain in the character of Ashima when she sees how her children prefer to be independence as a result of which how they are disoriented with Bengali roots. Gogol’s dilemmatic condition, however, is not easier than that of his mother because what his parents expect from him stands as an obstacle in front of him. For what his parents expect from him not only does go nowhere but also measured strange and taboo in the eyes of his fellow American individuals, hence infecting him with mental and psychological conflict. Commenting on this Lakshmi emphasizes that it is crystal clear that Gogol undergoes “a state of mental trauma endowed with cultural idiosyncrasy. The loss of bequest ancient culture at the cost of accession of new culture makes (him) to lose (his) entire moralist, sociological and psychological pedigree of life which is eventually left in wilderness (Lakshmi & Baskaran, 2014: 27). Through the course of the novel, Gogol experiences various affairs with a number of girls none of which is successful. Though the basis of his affairs virtually reconcile with the
American culture, almost none of the relationships base on true love and mutual understanding; the unsettledness and lack of commitment of Gogol’s relationships exemplify his mental, psychological instability. In addition, in most his affairs he sees as a kind of humiliation to introduce himself as Gogol, but Nikhil, namely with Maxine, Ruth, Gerald and Lydia Ratliff (Lakshmi&Baskaran, 2014: 26). Though supposed to be an ideal marriage due to making the choice of a Bengali girl, Gogol’s marriage with Moushumi ultimately concludes with divorce. If the Gangulis’ arrangement for a marriage with a girl from the same root was an attempt to reunite the diasporic born offspring with their roots, the failure of the marriage signifies the futile attempts of achieving such a would-be-wish and the unfeasibility of a reunification of these two immigrant generations. Because of Gogol and Moushumi, the very subject of the process, do not believe in such a conventional ways of marriage, as the author substantiates below: “They [Gogol and Moushumi] have not considered it their duty to stay married, as the Bengalis of Ashoke and Ashima’s generation do. They are not willing to accept, to adjust, and to settle for something less than their ideal of happiness” (Lahiri, 2003: 276).

Suthar reveals that the major reason behind the despair of the characters is the discrepancy between their wishes with the status quo they endure. For some characters like Ashima whose mind is always haunted with life back in Bengali, the prime cause of her grief lies in homesickness and loneliness, whereas for others such as Gogol is the cultural diversity by which he has remained helpless to adapt or assimilate to either, thus setting them apart from both Indian and American society (Suthar, 2014: 14). In an article titled “Diasporic Consciousness”, PreetiPuri writes: “the novelist presents a realistic and touching picture of the palpable life of the Diasporas, who are on a river with a foot each in two different boats, and each boat trying to pull them in separate directions” (194).

Puri further advances that Lahiri manifests lonesomeness of Ashima and the anguish of Gogol in a very heart-touching manner since her futile attempts to make the U.S her home for over thirty years, Ashima at last decides to divide her remained time between both Calcutta and the U.S. Gogol can never liberate himself from the ABCD’ label, and Ashoke leaves everything behind due to his ever passage to the lands of the dead (Puri, 2013: 193). Ashoke’s death is a focal point in Ashima’s life because her distress does not reach its climax until the moment of her husband’s death. Ashoke’s death is not the death of a normal man or husband for her, but rather it is the death of a figure for whom she left all her family ties, dreams and homeland behind; the loss of an only man from whom she could find a sense of shelter, human warmth, and peculiar compassion; the disappearance of a man beside whom she could find herself secure and peace. Therefore, it is not surprising if his evaporation puts her in an utter isolation, not only literally but emotionally too. (Singh, 2016: 134). As such, Ashima all feels alone as the author points out: “having been deprived of the company of her own parents upon moving to America, her children’s independence, their need to keep their distance from her, is something she will never understand” (Lahiri, 2003: 43). Ashima’s deprivation from her very husband for whom he would stand for everything, from her own children’s care to whom she had sacrificed with her own life, from her parents next to whom she land from where she finds her roots, can stand for the utter displacement and isolation of all the women living in diaspora eventually find themselves in a complete loneliness and ignorance. The division of her remaining life between Calcutta and America does not only typify her mere displacement but all those though have settled down in diaspora for decades yet have never felt at home for a moment.
Conclusion

Under the light of the above analysis of this study it can be concluded that the roots of diaspora start with the arrival of our first ancestors in this earth whereas diaspora as a term dates back to the ancient civilization of Greece. From this day on, a remarkable number of the world population has always been in movement from place to place due to a variety of reasons through the entire history of mankind. Technological progress and the dramatic rise of the world population have been two major factors paving the way to the growth of immigration and diasporas. Today, when immigration has become a global issue, diasporic literature, more specifically diasporic fiction, has been a popular form of the literature of the 21st century. Jhumpa Lahiri is regarded as one of the prominent figures having made a great contribution in the demystification of man’s suffering caused by diaspora.

Lahiri’s The Namesake is one of the world’s unique literary works endeavoring to mirror the actual realities an immigrant family is determined to undertake. Lahiri who has experienced diasporic life both as an immigrant and as a woman, points out how suffering and melancholic emigrated life could be, specifically for a woman. Through choosing a Bengali family, as a paradigm, living in the U.S, the author dramatizes the dilemmas of immigration from a variety of angles to be summed up to four levels: the dilemma caused by the new cultural and societal norms of the host country, represented by the mechanized and robotized American society; the dilemma brought about homesickness and nostalgia of the homeland, personified by the character of Ashima; the dilemma arises from the clash between first and second immigrant generation that leads to an unbearable ceaseless conflict between family members, and the dilemma sprung from identity crisis and no sense of belonging through which the characters are regarded as outsiders by both societies. Consequently, these dilemmatic situations lead to a continuous internal traumatic, emotional conflict.

Lahiri’s work, therefore, is not only a criticism and satirization of faceless, cold-blooded American society, neither is it merely a depiction of the melancholy and agony the immigrants go through, but also a challenge of the common assumption embracing diasporic life as a paradise. Lahiri argues that Ashima and Gogol are two sides of a coin symbolizing the perpetual traumatic status both first and second immigrant generation are doomed to. In short, Lahiri’s The Namesake is a message for today’s generation and the generations to come that diasporic life does not necessarily mean establishing a utopian, peaceful life as publicly assumed, instead most immigrants end with displacement, homesickness, loneliness, and thus an eternal psychological trauma.

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