

**Uncomely Home: Diasporic Discourses in Jhumpa Lahiri's  
*The Namesake* and Anita Desai's *Bye Bye Black Bird***

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***Abstract***

*Diasporic literature had acquired a great place in the area of literature. Writers of Indian Diaspora have carved for themselves a special niche in the arena of literature. Tapping their varied experiences and rich exposure to advantage, these writers wrote with a broad vision and perspective. In the modern world of flux, uncertainty and constant erosion of identities they explore major issues cultural conflict, immigrant's alienation, psyche and changing social values. Among the prominent writers who were sensitive to the lives of immigrants were Jhumpa Lahiri and Anita Desai. Through this paper I would like to explore the cultural conflict and diasporic elements in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* and Anita Desai's *Bye- Bye Blackbird*.*

**Keywords:** *post colonialism, hybridity, identity, alienation, other*



## **Introduction**

The word ‘Diaspora’ has been taken from Greek, meaning “to disperse”. It can be described as voluntary or forcible movement of people from homeland to different regions. Diaspora or expatriate writing occupies a place of great significance between countries and cultures. Living in an alienated country proves really troubling for the marginalized strata of the Diasporas. The sense of homelessness every immigrant suffer is genuine and intense. The disoriented and blurred memories of the homeland seem to whip up in them a pathetic feeling carving for “home”, a longing to go back to “the lost world”. Though the immigrants are carving for “home”, they have the ability to regenerate not only the nation they arrive at but the nation they have left. In today’s multicultural countries, hybridity and confusion of cultural identity are key issues. Whether in Us or in England, immigration has resulted in a multi-ethnic society and cultural diversity as well as problems of alienation, assimilation, which not only affected the society itself but the lives of various individuals. Traditionally, the countries like America and England has been defined as a melting pot in which various cultures are assimilated and blended as immigrants mould their beliefs and behaviors to the dominant white culture. The melting pot image has given them a more pluralistic ideal in which immigrant maintain their cultural identity while learning to function in society. Thus there is a greater chance of occurrence of cultural conflicts. Indian immigrants are isolated pockets of Indian culture within western society and they are exclusively made up of immigrant Indians who constantly stoke the embers of longing for their left behind motherland and they negotiate any thought of assimilation. This creates problems for first generation Diasporic Indians , especially in relation on to

their own progeny who, being born and bred in the West, define themselves as Westerners of Indian origin and cannot identify with their parent's ethnic self-fashioning. Contemporary fiction celebrates hybridity. Novel has a universal appeal, cutting across barriers of culture and time. Culture is inextricable from conflict, though it does not cause it. Culture is embedded in every conflict because conflicts arise in human relationships. Culture affects the way we name, fame, blame and attempt to tame conflicts. Culture is always a factor in conflict, whether it plays a central role or influences it subtly and gently. For any conflict that touches us where it matters, where we make meanings and hold our identities, there is always a cultural component. Cultural displacement involves the loss of language, family ties and a support system.

## **Self- Other conflict in The Namesake**

Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* is the saga of the "old world of India" confronting the perpetual "unnerving newness of America". *The Namesake* is a conventional piece of novel speaking of pattern of hope and disenchantment arising from the predicament of the writer placed between two traditions, neither of which she can wholly accept or renounce. The novel highlights the dichotomy between Indianism and Americanism. Ashoke Ganguli and Ashima Ganguli the first generation immigrants are trying hard to adjust with American life, but at the same time they uphold Indian values and tradition. Though they are living in a country like US they are still following Indian customs and restrict their movements only to the community of expatriate Bengalis. First generation immigrants prefer to create feeling of home in their host land by maintaining their traditional way of dressing and customs. Ashima finds it difficult to face the new and the different culture of the host country. Ashoke and Ashima struggle to adopt the new culture of new land. They are differentiated from the people of the host country even in their appearance. Ashima is a traditional Bengali woman who has migrated to a new land after marriage; she feels it difficult to adopt a new cultural identity of a foreign land. In her initial days of marriage, she remembers her family. Most of the time she remains lost in the memories of her home thinking of the activities going on there she spends her time re-reading Bengali short stories and articles from magazine she has brought with her as a bride who has nurtured the Bengali culture. She could not change her life to live like an American woman. Thus, as a conservative woman she alienates herself by not being one among the American ladies, but as a Bengali woman who managed to find her own space in a big and developed country like America. The most terrifying experience for Ashima is motherhood in an alien land. Jhumpa Lahiri describes the cultural differences in *The Namesake* by stressing on the major issue of naming a child and the rituals related to birth. Culture has different perspectives in different generations. The first-generation immigrants are interested in their home country whereas the second generation feels more like home in the host country. For Ashima foreignness is a sort of "life long pregnancy", but representatives of the second generation Gogol Ganguli, Sonia Ganguli and Moushumi see it as a boon, because for them the host country serves the right and

courage to be more confident and assertive. Jhumpa Lahiri as a second-generation immigrant portrays their life in a different and complex way. For them they belong completely to none of the cultures, they are so called ABCD's i.e. American born confused or conflicted Deshis. A line therefore is clearly drawn between Ashoke and Ashima, the first-generation Indian immigrants and Gogol and Moushumi the second-generation Indian immigrants.

Anita Desai's novel *Bye-Bye Blackbird* deals with Indian immigrants in England before 1964, the year when England completely changed its immigration policy. Desai said in an interview "of all my novels *Bye- Be Blackbird* is the most rooted and experienced and least literary in derivation" (R.K.Dhavan 92). In this novel Desai seeks to explore the complexities of the dilemma of alienated immigration by focusing up on its attraction and repulsion. The blackbirds are the immigrants in England especially from India. Adit is an Indian who lives in England even though he suffers humiliations ungrudgingly and he inwardly identifies himself as Indian. Apart from this he obviously long for Indian friends, activities, food, dress, music and culture. Like many of his fellow immigrants in England, Adit has developed a love and fascination for England right from his school days in India. He is the product of Lord Macaulay's Indian education which aimed at providing a class of people Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste and opinions in morals and in intellect. He regards England as the land of oppourtunities. Even after his love for England, the country does not accept him. He is always insulted and humiliated. His rootedness to the English soil is proved zero. Adit represents a person who is fascinated by the magic of developed country, but later he understands that he can only be happy in this own land and return to his motherland. Dev another protagonist is misfit in England, he can't get a accustomed to silence and emptiness of the city. He considers England as a "jungle city" and has no wish to live in the country. To disentangle from the influence of one's culture which has become a part of his consciousness is not easy for an immigrant. One is tempted to analyze the alien culture with the measuring rod of one's own. Towards the end of the novel, things entirely change. Adit begins to be nostalgic for India and gradually gets disenchanted with England, where as Dev is attracted by the magical spell of England. Sarah, the heroine of the novel stands between poles-India and England. She becomes a victim of psychic alienation. Alienness in her own nation makes her to think of going to India where she might get an identity which she lacked in her homeland. She finds leaving her home country and settling in India will be most possible solution for the problem of her personal identity. she is living as an outsider in her own country. Her final dicission to accompany Adit to India gives hopes in her mind at atleast in India she gets her own identity as Adit's wife and not as Sarah or Mrs. Sen that others used to call her. Desai portrays the conflict of the immigrants who can't save their cultural roots and makes an effort to strike new roots in alien territory and eventually becomes alienated.

Even though Adit feels that his host country is better than his home every time it makes him realize that he is a misfit. He longs for India for his identity and he wants his son to be born in India so that he has his own identity. Adit doesn't want his son to be an ABCD i.e. American born confused or conflicted Deshis, but as real Indian upholding Indian values. Whereas in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* Gogol who is born in America for Indian parents finds it difficult to gain an identity. Ashima and Ashoke struggle with adapting a different culture Gogol and Sonia struggle for maintaining the two different cultures.

Jhumpa Lahiri and Anita Desai have added an autobiographical touch to their novels by describing their own life experiences as immigrants. Both of them are Indian by birth and ancestry but have lived in foreign countries and hence they enjoy a sense of freedom and authority in depicting the life of Indians in foreign countries. Playing interpreters between the two cultures of East and West, they seem more inclined towards their native land.

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