

## **DESTINATION UNKNOWN IN THE INDIAN DIASPORIC LITERATURE: A QUEST FOR IDENTITY IN THE WORKS OF JHUMPA LAHIRI AND AMITAV GHOSH**

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### **ABSTRACT:**

Diaspora is an emotional journey that is taken by millions of people, not just in India but in different parts of the world. Diaspora literally means "to scatter" and in contemporary times it refers to the people who leave their original homeland and move to a new country in order to fulfill their dreams of progressing economically, socially, intellectually, and in every manner possible, and another major reason for it is forced migration. Ever since the beginning of civilization, people have been in the quest for More, and to make it worthwhile they fight and conquer. Diaspora has both pros and cons; if one calculates the economic and social progress then it can be said diaspora has contributed a lot to the progress, and if we look at emotional and psychological development, then it can be said that diaspora has caused a lot of trauma to people in terms of identity loss, rootlessness, and displacement. Light has been thrown on all the major concerns of the diaspora, through the works of Jhumpa Lahiri, who elaborates the importance of identity in her works, and Amitav Ghosh, who shuttles between past and present with no discomfort. The Diasporic Literature is about the inner turmoils of the writer and the many characters created by them.

**KEYWORDS:** Diaspora, Identity, Immigration, Rootlessness, Displacement, Alienation

**INTRODUCTION:** Different sides of the same coin have an altogether different impact on the one observing them. It simply means that the situation is the same but the reactions are different. Broadly, it's a matter of perspective, and as many people are there, as many perspectives and minds are into work. Credit goes to the fertile mind of human beings, which has been designed in such a way that it wants to analyze, explore and learn. Everyone is making some or the other move all the time to proceed in life, to do better. People have dreams of progressing economically, socially, financially, intellectually, and in every manner possible.

'Quest' and 'Conquer' have always been in existence ever since the beginning of civilization because people wanted to win over other people. The desire to attain more has never been fulfilled. Every quest has its own benefits. But in this journey, there are some drawbacks as well which don't trouble us outrightly, rather they take a toll on emotional and mental health. Detachment from one's native land gives a trauma to the soul which can't be expressed explicitly. It starts to deepen with time because deep down one knows that one can't go back to it ever again. Similar is the case of diaspora. Diaspora, as defined by the theorists, is a scattering of ethnic groups of people from their original homeland to different parts of the world. Its etymological meaning is "to scatter" while the historical meaning is in context with the Jewish displacement, centuries ago, because of the destruction of their homeland and their exile into different parts of the world. This term, diaspora, has come into existence again, after many centuries. Around the 1960s and 70s, many people moved out of their homes, voluntarily, in search of better job opportunities, and social security, while some had to involuntarily leave their native places, forcibly, as refugees. Even today the people who leave their homes in search of work, like migrant workers, are a part of the diaspora. Everyone, from immigrants to the ones in exile and also the refugees, belong to the diaspora. In either case, they have to face emotional problems because of the cultural and ethnic gap which always remains between their original place and the new place that they settle in. The psycho-socio attachment to the original place remains deep-rooted in their souls therefore, even after moving out they keep trying to protect their heritage and look at their native place with a sense of pride. After moving out they become more possessive about their homelands. Their constant efforts, to prove that their homeland is the best, keep them connected to their roots and give them an identity of their own. They find different ways to either praise or degrade their original home because they are always in a state of confusion to leave their land completely and to accept the new place. Some feel nostalgic in restoring their traditional values while some pretend that they have progressed only after leaving their traditional place. The inner turmoil which goes on in their minds is hard to comprehend unless one lives that life oneself. The literary work of the people who live far away from their birth place and who acknowledge this feeling and maintain an account of their experiences, is known as Diasporic Literature. As a matter of fact, many writers emerged in the diaspora who,

very frankly, write about their personal experiences, and find out ways to vent out their emotions. Debates have been going around to include even travel diaries as a part of Diasporic Literature, but after much discussion, it is believed that a writing can belong to this genre only if a person has lived in a home far away from home for a very long period of time.

Diaspora is not merely limited to writers. Everyone who leaves their original homeland and moves out is said to be a part of it. There was a mass movement of people from India who went to the US, UK, Canada, Saudi Arabia, UAE, i.e., stretching from Gulf countries to America and Australia, in the search of better job opportunities and good financial prospects. As per the report 'International Migration 2020 Highlights' by the Population Division of UN DESA, India is one of the most "vibrant and dynamic diaspora[s]" in the world because of 18 million people from India who reside in other countries. The reasons for this movement were several, including family and financial reasons. They moved about to explore their talents in different fields like biology, geography, science, history, literature, etc. They settled there and lived their own experiences, sometimes good, sometimes bad. All those who kept an account of their experiences and wrote about them came to be known as Diasporic writers. Their literary works are finite in nature but the themes vary in that limited range that they chose to write about. They mostly wrote about their personal experiences, so the autobiographical element is always present in their works. They write with first hand experiences of their life, yet their approach in writing about the individual is very universal. What the characters are feeling can be felt from afar. The hands-on accounts of their emotional lives are depicted in their works. A few diasporic writers who have written true accounts of their lives in the changing times are Jhumpa Lahiri, Amitav Ghosh, V.S. Naipaul, Bharti Mukherjee, Anita Desai, Kiran Desai, Rohinton Mistry, Salman Rushdie, and countless more. Some of these writers belong to the UK, some to the US, others to some other place but there's one thing common in all of them, the innate love for their ancestral land, i.e., their homeland. They like to talk about India in their works and the experiences of Indians living in the places outside of India.

If we take a glimpse of the works of some of these renowned diasporic writers, we can make an effort to understand their feelings of being in the two boats at the same time. Jhumpa Lahiri, who belongs to the second generation of diaspora, writes about her inner conflicts and her failure to adjust completely to the new country she settled in. Reminiscences of her parental home in Calcutta always reflect in her works, even though she hardly spent any time in Calcutta. Her language is very simple and comprehensible, contrary to the thoughts she has in her mind about the uprooting and then the new settlement. Lahiri is capable of going inside the minds of her characters to depict their truest picture. She has used an important symbol of 'food' to depict the feeling of displacement in the women who have settled abroad not because of their work but because of their husbands. The food has been used by them to stay connected to their roots and they established their identity by cooking.

In "A Temporary Matter", Shobha and Shukumar are married and they live in Boston and initially when their pantry is always full, the couple is very happy and there is abundant joy. But the same situation flips itself on its side when their unborn kid dies. Suddenly, the reader finds that there is no food in the house, they make do with anything that is in front of them. Here, Lahiri has tried to show that when the times are happy there is good food, and when the times are unhappy, there is no thought on food. This is also in relation to the most recent discovery of Gut health that our stomach contains more neurons than our entire spinal cord, therefore the more stressed we are, the more likely we are to avoid food. In another short story, 'Mrs. Sen', Mrs. Sen is not known by her name but by her husband who is a Professor at the University. She takes pride in that and doesn't even want to protest against this idea of having no identity of her own. It's through food that she tries to find herself. It gives her a sense of connection with people. She looks after Eliot and only because of her culinary skills that she succeeds in winning the trust of Eliot's mother. The food, therefore, becomes central to the emotions of the people.

Lahiri's other important works which cater to the theme of loss of identity are: 'The Namesake', 'Interpreter of Maladies' and 'Unaccustomed Earth'. Reading of each of these works clearly presents to us the catastrophe the characters are going through. Their emotional turmoil is hard to measure or comprehend. Her characters find peace in their cultural roots, so they linger in their past memories so that they can live peacefully in their present. They keep comparing their glorious past with their harsh reality, which is again a construct of their own mind.

Amitav Ghosh, on the other hand, uses the technique of Stream of Consciousness, which shows the inner upheavals which are taking place in the minds of his characters. Ghosh writes very blatantly about the situations. He goes back and forth between India and Bangladesh. He tries his best to blur the boundaries between India and its sub-continent. There is an emphasis on the past and memories, and he keeps trying to connect them with the present. He

has a utopian version of the world in his mind where there is unity everywhere. He is well aware of the reality but fails to forget the past. He studies the past and in the present also he's always experimentative and optimistic in approach. He constantly tries to bridge the gap between the two. Some of the key works that depict the thought process of Ghosh: 'The Glass Palace', 'The Hungry Tide', 'The Shadow Lines' and 'In an Antique Land'. In his *The Shadow Lines*, Ghosh incorporate chapter titles- 'Going Away' and 'Coming Home', that depict the movement away and toward the home. The unnamed narrator travels the diaspora through his uncle Tridib. The title of the text itself highlights the blurring of borders in the form of shadow lines. The diasporic writers travel away from their homeland, but there is a constant urge to come back to a place that is 'home'.

There are a few common themes which the diasporic writers never fail to include in their works. Some of them are alienation, displacement, disillusionment, dislocation, existential rootlessness, loneliness, identity crisis, memory, separation, boundaries, instability, survival, etc. All of these themes point to one thing, i.e., loss of connection to the homeland, transitively, to one's own identity and the struggle to get back their identity in a foreign land.

Identity is something that defines a human being, without it one feels that one is nothing or one is completely lost. Identity is very difficult to attain when you linger in two worlds simultaneously. These diasporic writers can't make peace with the thought of settling abroad without remembering their past which they look at with nostalgia. Until it's lost, one doesn't understand the value of identity. Its role comes into play when you have to prove it. For instance, in our day-to-day life nobody asks us about our identity but the moment we step out of our comfort zone/our native place, we understand what identity is and it becomes very important to us. Our upbringing gives us an identity. A theory from the times of Aristotle, that we are born as a blank slate and whatever we learn, wherever we live, helps in building up our identity. We can become anything because we know nothing when we are born. We can feel both confident and under confident about our identity and on that basis, we form our relationship with our native place. These diasporic writers have a feeling of nostalgia the moment they leave their place and they try to live in the new land with the same past memories of their hometowns. They have a responsibility of creating a self-identity that is in accordance with the new place but their soul doesn't allow them to accept this new reality, easily, so this dual state of mind makes them tear apart mentally. They want to attain the new identity without letting go of the old one. They get stuck in the loop of past and present. They keep comparing their past memories to the reality they are living. A new kind of life pattern comes into existence. It is believed that diaspora can even create personalities. After moving out of the country, one tends to become more sympathetic towards one's own country. This feeling of love towards one's roots gives one a unique kind of confidence.

The incapability to adapt to the new environment and to forget the original place makes them tumultuous. Their ambitions and dreams give them the courage to settle abroad leaving their homeland, but they are neither accepted in the foreign land nor do they plan to come back. This constant battle of being in the two places and not being able to settle in one place, completely gives them jolts of identity setback and existential crisis. They find everything different in the new place from the food to the clothes, to every little and grand thing like culture, habits, geography, environment, priorities, politics, etc. They fail to choose between them. In spite of choosing the norms of the new culture, they are never fully accepted in that new environment and are always seen as the Other. If they don't choose what they chose as they were growing up, they will have an identity crisis. So, this dilemma of choosing what is right or wrong becomes a matter of existence for them. Even their choice of words falters because their minds are stuck in two boats. They never fully accept their new place nor do they forget their old place. Rarely do they find an equilibrium between the two. They do have the added advantage of having an exposure to multiple cultures. Their creative faculties bloom when they are able to mix the learnings of the two culturally distinct places. There is a complete transformation of their writing style because of the presence of mixed feelings in their works. They use nostalgia and memory to stay connected to their homeland. Their writing gives them solace. Most of the diasporic writers write about the lands they will never come back to but have a strong longing for. Through their writings, they try to immortalize their native places.

Man is considered to be a social animal and lack of social understanding of the new place gives the diaspora a Culture Shock which leaves them in a turbulent state of mind. The deep-rooted sense of belonging to one place and then sudden uprooting of it puts them in a place where they are culturally disoriented. Moving to new places gives them an added advantage of creating businesses, transferring new knowledge and skills, honing entrepreneurial skills, success in trade and Foreign Direct Investment. There is also a huge influence of food, dress, culture, eating habits of their new place into their native place. We can verily say that every action will have both advantages and disadvantages, we are vulnerable to them both. We can only strive to be more empathetic because human mind is

really tender to understand things comprehensively. Thus, the question, 'Is Diaspora a journey forward or backward?', remains intact and will always derive meaning as per the experience of the one living it. The people who live outside their native place keep thinking about their native place only after they have left it. Neither are they able to focus on the new place nor are they able to forget the past place. This social dilemma never lets them find out their identity. They always remain victim of their own thoughts.

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