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### **Human Adaptation: Ecological Study of *The Namesake* by Jhumpa Lahiri**

#### **Abstract**

This article provides an exhaustive review of Lahiri's *The Namesake* traveling between two geographies; India and USA to understand how a population survives and reproduces within a given or changed environment. This paper discusses how Lahiri represents ecology of home by employing homeland and western environment in her narrative. Ecocriticism and Postcolonial Studies provide backdrop to the current study. Qualitative method of study analyzes the relationship between ecosystem and imaginative text to configure that literary texts have ecological function which regenerates and revitalizes a new identity. Ecology plays the role of an analyst between culture and environment.

**Key Words:** Culture, Home, Ecology, Displacement, Adaptation, Renewal

#### **Ecology and Home**

There is a strong connection of human mind with the biological environment. There is balance and harmony if the nature is undisturbed so is the case with human nature. Human nature has the adaptability likewise. Displacement forced or by choice causes change, argues Riaz et.al.(2015). Human being as a part of nature is largely dependent. The interdependence of nature and human is the cause of their sustainability. There is no replacement for both. Change in behavior largely depends on the changing global environmental situation

Recent research attempts to articulate the scope and objectives of eco-criticism. Eco critics determine ecological standards to investigate the notion of 'place' as a distinct element more akin to the other cultural values. By Ecological or environmental standard, we mean a policy guideline that controls the effect of human activity upon the environment. An "increasingly heterogeneous movement" (Buell 1), eco-criticism is "simply...the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (Glotfelty xviii); literature being a reflection of human life encompassing all activities. "Human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it" (Glotfelty xix).

William Rueckert for the first time used the term *eco-criticism*. He intended to focus on "the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature"(1978). Subsequently, it has become an umbrella term to explore avenues which link environment with literature. Recent developments in eco-criticism have heightened the need for further more investigations in the respective field. It has led to a renewed interest in cultural ecologies, a term referring to the study of human adaptations to social and physical environments. This adaptation refers to both biological and cultural processes. It enables a population to survive and reproduce within a given or changing environment.

As a matter of fact the cultural norms of nature and the environment have equally contributed to the environmental degradation. As a matter of fact nature becomes hazardous when it is disturbed. Nature is the source of providing resources which are extremely desirable to our existence. Air, water, sunshine and food we need for survival. Environmental change causes a change in the human personality. The concept of 'place' is equally discussed by literature and environment. Human being are endowed by nature to adapt new changes. Nature leaves its imprints on wherever they go. Their personalities are always conquered by the new environment both organic and cultural. Relationship of nature and human beings is established in literature leadings to the renewal of their selves resultant of adaptability for survival.

Interactions between humans and their physical environment is a much talked about in contemporary research when globalization has turned the world into a web. Lahiri's works depict her interest to globalize the environmental perception of home through the employment of nature. A second-generation immigrant, Lahiri found it difficult having parents who, even after living abroad for thirty years, still considered India home. She said she inherited a sense of exile from her parents, even though she felt more American than they did.

Thus home is a complicated and abstract conception. Scholars argue that it is difficult to discuss it in isolation from the context of environment. Palmer (2011) argues about the rise of arguments that 'particular places are significant to communal and individual identities have triggered the development of a literature in geography and environmental studies that is critical of the possible implications of such arguments'.

This remark emphasizes ecocriticism emerging as a new aspect of literary theory and a lens which views literature 'in terms of place, setting and/or environment'. It links home directly to

the conception of place in postcolonial theory. One often experiences sense of the loss of home at home. Notion of home is fundamental to an individual's identity.

Notion of 'home' is regarded as a complex phenomenon that has to be understood within the parameters of the setting in which the immigrants find themselves. As Fazal&Tsagarousianou(2000) argued in their research, 'what is important in diasporic notions of home is their relationship to a multiplicity of locations through geographical and cultural boundaries(p. 11).They further stated how can one distinguish between 'feeling at home and staking a claim to a place as one's own' (p.11-12). Therefore home has to be understood in physical as well as psychological terms.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Glotfelty (1996) developed Rueckertian idea and proposed a key definition of ecocriticism as a new way of studying the relationship between literature and environment. He argued that ecocriticism takes an earth-centred approach to literary studies just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender conscious perspective and Marxist criticism focuses on an awareness of means of production and economic class to its reading of texts. This leads to assert that ecocriticism examines literary works with an ecological lens. The term 'earth-centred approach' clearly signals the move of examining literary texts from an anthropocentric perspective which "considers humans to be the most important life forms and other forms of life to be important only to the extent that they affect humans or can be useful to humans," to a more "biocentric" perspective that holds the standpoint that "all life has intrinsic value" (Kortenkamp & Moore, 2000). Ecocriticism considers the entire ecosystem to be part of a community. Glotfelty's theoretical concepts concerns questions such as how is nature represented in a literary

work or what role does the physical setting play in the plot of any novel. In addition to race, class and gender, place is equally vital as critical category. Despite the wide range of inquiry ecological criticism asserts that human culture is connected to the physical world specifically the cultural artifacts language and literature. It has one foot in literature and the other on land; as a theoretical discourse, it negotiates between the human and the nonhuman (Gltofelty 1996). Gltofelty further equates "the world" with society--the social sphere (1996). The world is considered as space and it is further linked to the notion of home.

Brah's (1997) idea of claiming home is deeply related to the power relations within society. These relations typical to post colonialism structure never let the immigrants feel 'at home' inside or outside their country. Individuals carry around the memory of their growing-up places which affect their perceptions in the present. The concept of home is not only a nostalgic space that the individual has left, but it becomes the institution that constructs his/her perception of future. The immigrants are faced with a difficulty of being transformed into anything other than what actually they are.

The present study blends the two theories to illuminate the ecological elements of the conception of home in Lahiri's work .It uses the concept of ecological interconnectedness which reflects the ecological perspective of home.

## **FABRICATING SELVES**

...men are not blank tablets on which the environment inscribes a culture which can readily be erased to make way for a new inscription (Bery et al. 13).

*The Namesake* is studied with an eco-critical approach that emphasizes the interrelation between culture and environment. *The Namesake* opens with a clear reference to the environment

foreshadowing the problems in the life of the protagonist, Ashima. 'A sticky August' (chap.1) enhances the value of her mental agony that sticks to her till the last page of the novel. Lahiri denotes the strength of imagination in the description of the birth pains. Ashima's imagination at that moment travels between the dusty study room of her grandfather and 'a blue strip of the Charles River, thick green tree tops...' (Chap 1). It depicts the breadth of her suffering and shines a light on the long journey Ashima has set forth. It equally reflects the human adaptation to environment within the means of their ecosystem. Ecological environment varies around the globe. Home is a predominant theme in Lahiri's work. In *The Namesake* environment is closely linked to the notion of home thereby establishing a connection between ecocriticism and postcolonial studies. Her depiction of environment in which fictional immigrant characters find themselves and their homeland contribute to understand her notion of home and survival.

*The Namesake* travels between two geographies; India and the U.S.A. Brought by her marriage to America Ashima, the female protagonist, is depicted as an impeccably Eastern girl who clings to her tradition and culture till the end of the novel thus retaining her identity. She demonstrates through her household activities not to succumb her real self although it is fabricated later to a reasonable extent. She keeps herself connected to the grief, sorrows and all actual events which are connected to her own [Bengali] people by reading the letters from home and Bengali magazines. This is her effort to keep herself alive in foreign land.

Place is linked with memory. There notion of 'home' travels along us. Lahiri uses three locations as settings for her novel: Massachusetts, India & New York. It is indicative that readers are faced with a global environment. The character move around from Boston to suburb to New Haven, to New York, to Ohio to New Hampshire to New Jersey; travelling and surviving in different settings. The

cultural environment transmits the power of place-sense at rural as well as urban level. They think globally but act locally. From the perspective of eco-criticism, travelling attaches a value to aestheticism says Berry et.al. Everywhere these characters go, they carry a sense of detachment along, being a part of nowhere.

Brah gives the notion of home as in her book *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* a mythical place of desire in the diasporic imagination.<sup>1</sup> In this sense it is a place of return, even if it is possible to visit the geographical territory seen as the place of 'origin'. On the other hand, home is also a lived experience of a locality. Its sounds and smells, its heat and dust, balmy summer evenings, somber grey skies in the middle of the day...all this, as mediated by the historically specific of everyday social relations (p.180-192).For this reason Ashima sends her son Gogol to Calcutta to make him feel the ancestral environment. But he finds himself in an 'insufferable void' ( Bery et al.109) as he is caught between two geographies none of which he completely belongs to. In Calcutta he uses the blue nylon net as a remedy against mosquitoes when he couldn't bear the mosquitoes 'that shriek in his ears, and leave angry, lumpen welts between his toes, on his arms and thighs' (p.143).It reminds of the environmental differences around the globe. Humid environment is most acquiescent to mosquito's' growth and survival. The text highlights the physicalenvironment differences affecting human lives. People in the third world are likely to suffer from these environmental irritants. Third World countries are the breeding places for insects due to lack of resources and over population. Lahiri points out the standards of living around the world. Here environment pressure depicts the change that occurs in the behavior parterns. It signifies the impact of fair physical environment that is a source of attraction for people to migrate and settle in foreign countries. Better life environment

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<sup>1</sup> Brah ,Avatar *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* 1996

offered to them push them to adapt foreign culture. It provides better living standards but the ghost of their memories haunt them persistently.

Moushumi's Europe is the other region that plays a part in the novel. Born in England, she spends a long time in Paris as an adult. She and Gogol plan a trip to Venice, which unfortunately Gogol takes alone, after their divorce. The scenes in Paris and Venice give Gogol an array of estrangement as he is used to travel between Indian and American cultural and physical boundaries. They also serve as a subtle reminder of the European origins of Gogol's first name. Traveling always marks a transition between cultures, or stages of life.

*The Namesake* represents the significance of the place. That is the reason Lahiri gives importance to description. She often draws parallels between Dhaka and America to show the difference in cultures. Ashima's disturbance on movement from city to the suburbs reflects her phobia and anxiety of the objects and the outer world shifting her household. Life in the suburbs bequeaths the immigrants a strong sense of alienation when they are removed from the centre to the periphery. Periphery becomes symbolic of marginality. This consciousness towards the foreign soil is prevalent as the main theme in *The Namesake*. Though they are home they are disconcerted by the space, by the uncompromising silence that surrounds them. They still feel somehow in transit, still disconnected their lives, and bound up in an alternate schedule, an intimacy only the four of them share (*The Namesake*, 87). Gogol's visit to the apartment where his father Ashoke spends his last moments signifies the alienation and isolation of the immigrants to the foreign environment. Immigrants are in semiotic parlance 'floating signifiers'. They carry alienation and isolation in hearts dangling between two places.



Ashima 'she who is limitless, without borders' (p. 26), finally assimilates herself in the foreign culture. Her marriage to Ashoke foretells the troubles in her life ahead when her consent is asked to marry a person in Boston and fly on a plane to live in a city characterized by 'sever, snowy winter, alone' (*The Namesake*). References to sever season forshadow the dilemmas of her life.

Environment does affects the physique and psychology of the characters as fear of getting lost is always there in their sub-conscious. One may 'repudiate one's roots and still exhibit them unwittingly' Sowell (1994) said. The novel depicts the fear that there is no escape from the dangers of getting mixed in the various cultures. Culture receives change when is exposed to a foreign environment . The study views the characters as means to evoke and promote contact with environment. Setting is a binding agent to understand their mental status. In immigrants case, their consciousness of of the surrounding has a direct impact on the attitudes and behaviors of individual characters. Place to a person, therefore, is a fusion of 'personal allegiance' (Buell, et.al.2011). They are home but disconcerted by the space, by the uncompromising silence that surrounds them (*The Namesake*: p.87). Characters in *The Namesake* literally drive the readers into emotional, physical and mental world. They have no fixed self; surely [their] several selves 'melt' and are 'mutated' daily (Kureishi, 1995). They live 'in between two geographical cultural locations' (Bhabha, 1988). Long descriptions show Lahiri's consciousness to the place as well as environment. Griffin (1978) remarked:

...Space has changed; we are living in a matrix of our own sound; our words resonate, by our echoes we chart a new geography; we recognize this new landscape as our birth place...

(p.195).

Migration is closely connected to eco-criticism as it relates to global process of ecology. *The Namesake* is a chronicle of migrants who change their environment hoping for a better one. Ironically they are unable to overcome a foreign environment rather they are subdued.

Recent researches attempt to explore complex relations of nature and human in literature to see if it leads to the renewal of culture itself. German critic Hubert Zapf (2002) argues that a textual form breaks up social structures and ideologies. It reconnects what is culturally separated. Ashima displays this by practicing her Indian cultural values.

In case of Ashoke (Ashima's husband), his lifelong trauma is associated with the great 'ecological disaster' (Vadde 2011) and never lends him peace. An immigrant, he suffers the trauma of postcolonial eco criticism. Although he adapts himself to the physical environment yet he fails to overcome his fear till his death. Psychologically these immigrants remain suppressed. Ashoke's dreadful memory of a natural disaster is associated with his homeland haunting him for years. It posits the argument that human minds are agitated by the forces of nature.

To this day he is claustrophobic... At times the wailing of children fills him with deepest dread. At times he still presses his ribs to make sure they are solid. (p.21)

This claustrophobia denotes that nature has a power over his mind. Natural calamities unconsciously dominate human minds as humans are helpless at the hands of natural disasters.

Setting is significant for understanding a text. Human mind is profoundly connected to its physical environment. Ashoke's craving for a new world in the hope to find a better future leads him to experience new things around the world. Images prompted as a result of a natural calamity constantly chase him 'lurk[ing] around' (p. 20) everywhere he goes. Despite of his attempts he fails to push these images away forever. This leads to the speculation that that physical environment is

connected to the social power structures in determining the life standards .Dispersion is not only a matter of geography but it is cultural and social. These factors intersect each other and form a new approach to life.

‘Gogol’s annaprasan, his rice ceremony’ (p.38) is a typical Bengali ceremony of their lives circles around the consumption of food. The celebration is arranged in a typical formal Bengali tradition where food is served to each guest in a separate bowl. It ensures the belief system resultant of various behavioral patterns that may not ‘appear’ (Steward 1955) in other societies while these are an essential societal component of a particular community. It also indicates that cultural practices play role in helping humans respond and revive their environment.

Reoccurrence of letters in the novel emphasizes the peculiarity to the themes of separation and distance. The letters depict a world of memories and landscapes through words .Ashima’s world is portrayed through these landscapes. The sound of the postman’s footsteps were long awaited by Aishma (*The Namesake*,36) as a bringer of good news from her parents and siblings in contrast to the ring bell of telephone that always scared her. Technology frightens her .Patterns of behavior are best understood through technology in the process of cultural ecology (Steward 1979). Ecology in terms of ‘adaptation’(Steward 1979) implies the response of expatriate characters to the US environment that carries their Indianess as well.Traveling around the landscape of America, Ashima’s son Gogol explores new avenues to support his affiliation with his ancestral geographical land. He seizes to be an ‘enigma’ to himself (Kureishi, 1991, p. 28).

Gogol’s physical field trip at scoohl reveals the peculiarity of his name. various odd name on the gravestones fills him with thoughts that ;names die over time’ (p.70). A Hindu by creed, he believes that his body will be burnt after he dies. Ashes will merge into earth and air. This embarks a strange

thought in his mind that beyond life he will find no place in America. External force of nature ,the 'sinking sun'drowns his hope to 'occupy [a] plot of earth...even a stone that 'bears his name' (p.70). Lahiri's description of India through tinted windows of air conditioned car as'gloomy and gray'(p.84) emphasizes that no matter how luxurious life style one has, place of origin remains in mind as a shadow falling and rising. Literary texts via such descriptions reiterate the significance of physical environment in the course of its plot (Glotfelty 1996). Affect of Taj Mahal building on Gogol and Sonia to the extent of 'eluding' them (p.84). Environmental change causes illness and 'the air,the wind, the rice' are blamed for this. It emphasizes that environmental changes occur physically as well as psychologically... 'with relief' Gogol puts on his headset once he is back to America. (p.87)..

### **Conclusion**

The analysis of the text display that ecology and place travel with the characters in *The Namesake* driving the readers into emotional, physical and mental world. There is a close association of place with environment . Long description shows Lahiri's consciousness . She mentions the seasons and months to encounter the severity of nature and its effect on the daily lives of these people. Whatever the characters see make an impression on them. The environment does influence the capability of adaptation but it does not completely determine their characters. They remain connected to their lands of origin psychologically ,may not be physically. Environment and culture are separate evolutionary tracks and the ability of one to influence the other is dependent on how each is structured. If the construction is positive, new culture and environment finds it difficult to 'inscribe' themselves to make way for a new 'inscription' (Bery et.al. 13). Although as a matter of fact it does leave its imprints.

Goltsfelty and Brah 's theories merged together depict through novel's action that assimilation in the characters is a survival strategy. Behavioral patterns become central to everyday life .These may be strange and vary from culture to culture but affect the aspects of other culture evolving a system of beliefs required to survive around the globe. This very characteristic of human adaptation both biological and cultural processes enable a population to survive and reproduce within a given or changed environment. In case of *The Namesake* the population is the fictional characters who live within

the means of two different environments within one ecosystem. It is where the concept of cultural ecology rests. It interprets cultural practices in terms of their long-term role in helping humans adapt to the environment where they live.

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