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Where do I belong: Alienation as a psychological struggle of the characters in Lahiri's *The Namesake* (2003)

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Abstract---Alienation is an inevitable aspect of the modern life. Due to the rapid changes in culture, societies, technology and most importantly, psychological science, myriads of people in the contemporary era are alienated. However, the phenomenon of alienation is not new, it has been there for quite a while, but was not given or announced publicly. Anytime anyone oppresses some of their desires and/or attempts to hide aspects of their real lives, they feel alienated and isolated from this world. Further, the more conspicuous consequences of alienation and the name came to prominence after the ruthless process of colonization. It was owing to this heartless segregation among the races and cultural or ethnic discrimination that alienation surfaced publically and the authors and/or intellectuals commenced to address it. Among them Lahiri deserves a lion's share for her novel *the Namesake*. She logically and smartly portrays the psychological status of her characters and shows the bitter consequences of alienation through her depiction of the novel's main characters. The paper thus attempts to focus on the problems of alienation and how the characters in *the Namesake* experience it.

Keywords---Namesake, Lahiri, alienation, segregation, psychology, culture.

Introduction

There are three types of alienation; alienation from other people, alienation from ourselves and lastly alienation from life in general. Moreover, people experience alienation in vastly different ways and in different degrees [1]. The aim of this paper is to describe alienation in a way that helps those who have not experienced it much understand those who feel alienated through studying the main characters in the Namesake by Jhumpa Lahiri. Another reason why this subject is important is that there is probably still a significant stigma attached to the experience of alienation. Therefore, there is a value to talking about it directly. Especially in so far as doing so can help those of us who experienced it often feel like, like maybe we are not quite so alone, which in turn can allay some of the torment of alienation.

As one of the things that makes it such an agonizing thing to experience is the paradoxical fact that feeling disconnected and alienated, tends to repel other people, which in turn, tends to generate even more disconnection and alienation, basically, a kind of circular snowball effect [2]. Further, what is necessary to break that cycle is not to run and hide from it, but to become intimately familiar with it, to enter into it, despite all of our trembling and trepidation, to learn to speak fluently in the forbidden language of our shameful alienation from life. Because, as Confucius once famously noted, the beginning of wisdom is to call things by their proper name 'GILES'.

Types of alienation

The first type of alienation is alienation with respect to other people, basically, alienation as it plays out across the social terrain. Here, alienation has to do with feeling like an alien, like a foreigner and outsider, a stranger, even in our own homelands, both figuratively and literally. It is like a persistent sense of not fitting in with the people around us. Basically, a pronounced sense of distance or separation from other people, especially when it seems like they are fundamentally different from ourselves, like creatures from another species, and that they consequently can not really understand our thoughts or values, or even our fundamental view of life itself. What would make us feel that way? Well, probably one of the more common sources has to do with the sensation that a lot of the things our world usually takes incredibly seriously, are in reality, microscopically trivial [3].

The second type is alienation from ourselves. But that might seem a little bit counterintuitive at first. After all, how is it even possible for us to be alienated from ourselves? Well, actually, it happens very easily. For instance, consider how much who we think we are, you know, the features that seem to define our lives and that desires and worries that seem to propel us forward, actually come from how we've been taught to imitate and obey the people around us. It's actually a pretty big fraction when you stop and think about it [4]. In other words, most of us end up spending a sizable part of our lives, just thinking other people's thoughts, feeling other people's feelings, living out other people's values, just believing what we have been told to believe basically, just conforming to other

people's habits and dictates. And the truth is, that there is nothing inherently wrong with that. In fact, it is an irreducible part of practically everyone's life [1].

However, a problem crops up when that's all we ever do when our lives are completely consumed and occupied to their outer edges by all the myriad edicts of the anonymous crowd, because at that point, we are in very real danger of losing our souls, and settling for lions that are a little more than a pale counterfeit of what we really are in our depths. In other words, we start to pay a very heavy price at the level of our deeper possibilities in this life, and the terrible sensation of alienation that comes upon us when we begin to realize that sometimes rending us apart like a wild animal, is really nothing more than the terrifying embrace of our deeper destiny. And ultimately, our saving grace, our souls' way of crying out for expression, and for the chance, just one chance to feel all of the inevitable singularity that is uniquely our own, surging through us. Finally, and definitively, like a raging river, swollen with new rain [5].

The third type is alienation from the reality of life itself. Something like existential alienation. And once again, the question is, how is that even possible? Well, one fairly easy way of feeling alienated from life itself can occur when we realize what a large fraction of it is about things like meaningless suffering, arbitrary cruelty and senseless violence. It is really the utter ridiculousness and unreasonableness of it all. And there is actually a hell of a lot of that in the world when you think about it. For instance, consider all of the incredibly flimsy pretexts we have for visiting homicidal and sometimes genocidal violence on each other. The obvious historical fact is that we annihilate each other for all kinds of silly reasons. Maybe it is because someone believes in the wrong God or posts the wrong flag or espouses the wrong ideology [2]. Anyhow, feeling of basic alienation from life can easily take the form of recognizing the company fleet insanity of all of that. And consequently, perceiving that the world's reality doesn't fit our own values and desires very well, that in many ways, falling in love with life is a lot like being in a recurrently abusive relationship. And so, all things considered, maybe it's better to maintain our distance from it as much as possible, even if that means feeling alienated a lot of the time.

When we are in the throes of that sort of alienation, it is always tempting to make a project out of trying to force the world to change so that it conforms to our own personal preferences, perhaps by coding those preferences in terms of some sort of necessary moral imperative. But that's almost always just an exercise in futility. Mainly because one of life's great realities is that the world will obstinately continue to be the world, whether we like it or not, whether we feel alienated from it or not, and whether or not we try to coerce it into being something else. So that leaves us with the opposite strategy, which would be to adapt ourselves to life's reality rather than and vice versa. Of course, that first that probably sounds like a formula for having to countenance all the craziness that alienated us from life in the first place. And at a relatively superficial level, there just might be some truth to that. However, at a deeper level, it actually means the exact opposite. The reason has to do with the paradoxical nature of the forces that change our lives. And that changed the world's reality to and the pair Dogs is that we can't move on. way from what we are Until we thoroughly accept what we Are when we

accept both what is beautiful and strong about ourselves and the world and also what is ugly and weak [4].

Methodology

To achieve the main aim of the paper, which is the embodiment of alienation and the bitter consequences it brings forth, a close reading to the text is conducted. The researcher aims at studying the characters' persona in deep with special focus on their internal conflicts and the quotes that reflect this fact are particularly accentuated in the paper. Not only this, how the psychological feeling affects one's behavior is also well reflected in the study through analyzing the actions of the characters.

Discussion

Alienation In The Namesake

Born in exile in 1967, Jhumpa Lahiri was always aware of the difficulties of being an alien in the society. She was black among the whites and uprooted from her native land, therefore she always carried a deep sorrow and pain on her shoulders [6]. She was an Indian at home, but the moment she stepped outside she had to cover up and force herself to fit in to the new place she is living in now. She has spent all her life in diaspora, initially was born in London but later moved to the USA. Thus, diasporic experience is one of the key themes in all her writings. Her characters are, therefore real people whom she knows too well. She attempts to depict the India she had in her mind and intermix it with the USA where she is living now. She tries to discover her Indian identity and embrace it through her philosophical journey to the land much loved in her heart [7].

In reality, the title "The Namesake" reflects Gogol Ganguli's struggle to come to terms with his unusual name. It's a two-pronged fight for him to develop his individuality. A person's identity, which essentially determines his uniqueness, becomes a burden for him. It does not give him an identity, but it does place him in a quandary about his true identity. Second, as an immigrant child in America, he is constantly confronted with contradictions resulting from a lack of sense of belonging and identity. The novel is autobiographical in that it depicts the ramifications of what children of immigrants would go through when they are destined to be born in a country that is not their parents [8].

The Namesake also is another attempt of hers to re-embrace her authentic identity and perforce all those who live in diaspora to do the same thing and get united to their real identities and cultural heritages. In the initial scenes of the novel, we are introduced to characters who are originally from India, but now are displaced both physically and psychologically and feel quite alienated. Ashima is a pregnant woman and now she lives in a small apartment in the USA [9]. Although she has all the necessary ingredients to cook the Indian food that she used to love, she is reluctant and can not manage it at all. She lives in diaspora and is very cold towards her surroundings. When she compares her previous life to the recent one, she is even more baffled. Now, although she is pregnant, she has no one around her, which makes her feel even more isolated.

Ashima is married to an Indian man, who is now enrolled in Massachusetts Institute of technology and successfully she delivers a baby boy. Ashima and her husband belong to Bengali culture, which requires babies to have two names, a pet name to be used by family members and another good name to be written on formal certificates and be used by society. When they leave the hospital, they are asked about their child's name and they reply "Gogol", that was a pet name they have in mind and hope that later they give him another good name. Gogol was a name of a Russian author whose small book in the train accidently saved Ashima's husband and she feels indebted to Gogol the author [10].

Not only this, all other events in this new place seem so out of control and Ashima's reach. One day Ashima plans to visit her parents and some of her relatives who live in Calcutta so she goes shopping and takes Gogol with herself. Just when the train arrives and they enter, someone shouts from outside that they have forgotten their bags and since the train's door is already shut and the subway is clamped, they cannot get back and regain the presents they have bought for their relatives. This makes Ashima desperate as she cannot afford to buy other gifts for them. She feels isolated and it is confirmed to her yet again that this place is alien to her. She will never be able to fit in and such things never occurred in India. These cultural differences, life style changes and progressed way of life are not absorbed in Ashima's psyche and thus she is disappointed and feels hopeless [6].

Ashima had suffered large amounts of pain because of her pregnancy as she was alone and far from her roots and loved ones, but now she thinks of exile as a perpetual pregnancy, the never-ending wait, the painful burden and the complete change that has misshapen our body and the fear that our life is never going to be the same again. She makes these comparisons between her real pregnancy and the sorrow she carries inside because of being uprooted. Although she is aware of these painful experiences in her mind, she never talks about them in public, she only feels them inside and the rebellion never transgresses beyond ideas as she is certain that Bengali culture would not tolerate these ideas. *"Who had forsaken everything to come to this country, to make a better life, only to die here?" is her another silent rebellion that passes through her mind when Ashoke is dead of a heart attack in a remote part of the country*" ([11], p. 180)

After Ashima's husband dies, she is even more desperate and loses her confidence completely. Through her life and the events occur in her life, Lahiri is able to picturize the challenging life of the immigrants and the unexpected events that happen to them in daily bases. Gogol has also suffered alienation and at different stages of his life he has had various experiences. In the beginning when he attends kindergarten, he is called Gogol and he does not seem to have any problems with that. Not only this, he is afraid to be called by any other name except Gogol "He is afraid to be Nikhil, someone he doesn't know. Who doesn't know him", ([11], p. 57). However, when he grows and attends school, he realizes that Gogol is not appropriate as he perpetually receives humiliation because of his name. Therefore, prior to attending university he changes his name to Nikhil. Nikhil provides him with better opportunities to befriends with others and find a place within the new American culture, only temporary Although [12].

Initially Gogol does not have any problems with his name and when he enters college, he changes his name to Nikhil. He thus has two names; Gogol at home, the Indian and Nikhil outside, the American. The American name seems to give him a kind of freedom that is not permissible in the Bengali culture and Gogol is the name that gives him warmth and parental affection. He seems puzzled between these two identities and therefore in the end we see him shattered and again alone in the society [13].

As long as he was Gogol, he was pure and abode by the Bengali traditions. However, the moment he becomes Nikhil he begins to act like an American; he smokes, drinks, communicates with girls more often and even loses his virginity, which is completely banned in the Bengali culture. Gogol has thus taken a new American identity for himself and does all sort of things that the young American do. He travels north, spends money on liquor and fakes ID to be allowed in in restaurants for adults and so on. Nevertheless, Gogol does not seem to leave him alone and every now and then pricks his consciences and reminds him of the wrong deeds he has committed and still continues to commit. "And 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 a betrayal of his own" ([11], p. 141). One cannot detach themselves completely from the chains and limits of the previous culture and tradition, no matter how hard they try to overcome their inner voice, it will always be there to torture them.

Gogol later meets Sonia, an Indian immigrant who is in the same situation as him. They both are lost between these two different lives; one Indian at home, the other American outside. Although their parents will never abandon their old cultural ethics, and one can detect deep-seated nostalgia in their acts, but Gogol and Sonia have a different perspective on their multi-cultural lives. Despite the fact that they are expected to attend pujas and other religious ceremonies, Gogol and Sonia, like the children of their Bengali families, prefer American food to Bengali cuisine. The parents acknowledge their children's desires. For the sake of their children, the Gangulis often bring the American way of life into their lives: "For the sake of Gogol and Sonia, they learn to roast turkeys for Thanksgiving, to nail a wreath to their door in December, to wrap woolen scarves around snowmen, and to color boiled eggs violet and pink at Easter. They celebrate the birth of Christ with increasingly increasing fanfare, an event the children look forward to even more than the worship of Durga and Sarawati" ([11], p. 66).

The novel's core theme is the experience of immigrants as described by Lahiri in the novel. We get an energizing and invigorating view of the Diasporic situations frequently faced by immigrants in the novel through different characters. Gogol wishes to be free of his Indian roots, but after his father's death, the Indian ideals he inherited from him cause him to gravitate toward his mother and sister, straining his relationship with his girlfriend Maxine [13].

The changing of the Bengali name Gogol to Nikhil was hence not sufficient to bring about a peaceful mentality for Gogol and he is always in dilemma between these two identities. Gogol, who in reality represents all the immigrants, always have this pain. The pain of not being fully adapted to the new culture and having

a deep link to the old culture. He lives in perpetual confusion; he wanders aimlessly and always has this gap within himself [7].

Gogol's quest for identity is never-ending. He cannot deny his Indian culture completely, nor can he embrace the American culture thoroughly. For him, this has turned into a very long, exhausting and challenging operation. He can not ignore the traditions; demands on one hand and, and he can not give in to the temptations of the new world. He is a postmodern man, which is most of the time defined as "the age of refugee", where people are always feeling alienated and yearn for their sense of belonging [14].

Conclusion

Despite such a strong emotional experience, Lahiri does not miss the opportunity to explain the traditional immigrant phenomenon of belonging nowhere, which she did not experience even in India. She also discusses the dichotomy of growing up in two cultures, and how it concerned her as she grew older that there was no one space to which she fully conformed. The namesake is a passionate attempt to chronicle the lives of an immigrant family through the eyes of a young boy. Both of her books have received criticism as well as praise, but she deserves special mention for tackling a subject that has long been avoided by Indian writers. The Namesake focuses on the private, restricted spaces of middle-class Bengali immigrants in America. The story is a documentary about their lives as refugees in a foreign land far from home. The novel tells the story of first and second-generation Indians who have settled in America and are having difficulty adjusting.

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