

Quest of Utopia in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*

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Abstract: My paper propagates Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* as a fictional work which deals with man's quest for utopia. It is a sincere attempt to peep into the core of character's heart to find a place where he can live happily and perfectly ever. *The Namesake* is a much debated novel in the realm of diaspora. Migration becomes a powerful prospective to find an ideal place to live. This paper tries to explore and study the characters' conscious and unconscious effort to obtain their utopia, grappling with constructing identity amid the new foreign milieu. Man as a social creature, always longs for a bright and better future but for that sake what he has to lose in the long run, he is quite unaware. This novel unfolds enticing chapters of relocation resulting in dislocation and reclaiming the heritage and tradition despite of cultural clash and dilemma. It tells the story of diasporic characters in search of a better future and their hardship in acculturating to strange things.

Keywords: Utopia, quest, culture, primitive, perfect, fulfillment, contentment.

In almost every culture, religion, belief and societies, there is some folklore or myth in the history of mankind, when people used to lead a happy and perfect life in the primitive stage with simple living in the lap of nature. It is a memory of distant past of perpetual shower of happiness, contentment and fulfillment. These kind of prevailed lore informs about the instinctive unification of human and nature in its purest form. Such kind of myth is famous in India as "Ramrajya" particularly in Hinduism. People's needs and desires were satisfied and fulfilled by the abundance of nature. Ram is taken to be the incarnation of God on the earth and his reign was a period of eternal happiness and bliss. Their needs were handful and their desires limited. People were simple and closer to the nature around them. These mythical and religious archetypes can be found in many cultures and they get refreshed and resurged like fountain when people are in difficult and critical times. However, the projection of the myth does not take place towards the remote past, but either towards distant and fictional places, imagining that at some time of the future, at some point of the space or beyond the death must exist the possibility of living happily. It might be possible that the very thought gave birth to the concept of heaven and paradise. Those myths of the earliest stage of humankind have been referred to by various cultures and societies as utopia. Generally, we define 'utopia' as a world or state possessing highly desirable qualitative perfection. "This word was first used by Sir Thomas More for his book *Utopia* written in Greek in the 16th century. It describes a fictional island society in the Atlantic Ocean. The term has been coined to describe both—the intention and desire of people to create

an ideal society and an imagined society as portrayed in fiction as well. The word comes from the Greek: ou` (not) and To TTOS (place) and thus means no place. The English homophones eutopia, derived from the Greek EU` (good) and TO` TTOS' place means good place. Due to the identical pronunciation of both the words 'utopia' and eutopia' gives rise to the ambiguous double meaning." (Wikipedia) A quest is a search, a pursuit a long or arduous search for something. Hence quest of Utopia is to find a good place to live happily forever or perhaps a no place quite unavailable and which does not exist. In pursuit of utopia migration becomes a vital force and interestingly, migration has been the history of man exploring the horizons. Not only humans but birds and animals also migrate for their food, for desirable climate and for safety. They change their place and abode for a better life so does human. This quest of utopia does not emerge out of a vacuum, they emerge from a certain social and cultural milieu which is deeply embedded in the society. In the process of quest of utopia people try to paralyze their past and proceeds towards a search of perfect immediate future.

The Namesake is a debut novel by Jhumpa Lahiri, who's *Interpreter of Maladies*, a collection of short-stories won the Pulitzer Prize. In the realm of Indian writing in English she is a strong voice to notice, to evaluate for the projection of Indian values and tradition with an eternal significance to the issue of identity and identity crisis. Undoubtedly, the novel is a manifestation of diasporic sensibility of Indian people living abroad and struggling to relocate themselves in a foreign location. Apart from all the other themes of *The Namesake* Jhumpa Lahiri seems to me, pointing her finger towards man's undying yearnings to find or to establish an unknown (no place or good place) ideal place to live. Throughout, the novel one can easily observe the throbbing sigh of mankind in the humdrum of postmodern sensibilities. Postmodernism is generally considered as a time where there is celebration of fragmentation, the center cannot hold and things have fallen apart. It is not a detachment from the past but it is a continuation of past surfing the memories of past. It displays the maladies of materialistic advancement where human self is repressed and suffocated in one way or another. Amid the clashing forces of materialism and spiritualism man is finding only uncertainty. But even though man is progressing and proceeding like a horizon scanner in a desire to live peacefully in a utopia, an ideal place, to find his "Ramrajya", where he can be forever happy. *The Namesake* is Jhumpa Lahiri's much studied novel in different perspectives with several approaches. It also deals with man's perpetual desire for quest of utopia. Its narrative starts with a Bengali couple who come to the US. Someone has rightly said if you are at the doorsteps of someone your diaspora starts. Ashoke gets an opportunity to study in the USA with scholarship and his wife accompanies him immediately after his marriage. The novel opens with the introduction of pregnant Ashima Ganguli who as an epitome of traditional Indian woman, longs for her family support system. At the time of birth of her first child she desperately longs for the presence of her relatives so that she can share the precious moment of early motherhood with them and she can find assistance in bearing and carrying the child and childbirth. Gradually she manages herself in the

new foreign country where culture, language, family values, social life, customs and conventions are poles apart from her native land. Before her marriage when Ashoke's family come for the 'dekhosession' (in Shobha De's term) to Ashima's house, she is attracted towards Ashoke's shoes, at the doorsteps. She is not only attracted but she could not resist her temptation to wear those shoes, for her they were tempting and opened for her a new, unseen, unimagined world. Though it is quite interesting that she never gives up her Indian way of wearing clothes and Indian customs in the host location. Lahiri describes:

"They were brown shoes with black heels and off white laces and stitching. There was a band of lentil-sized holes embossed on either side of each shoe, and at the tips was a pretty pattern pricked into the leather as if with a needle. Looking more closely, she saw the shoemaker's name written on the insides, in gold lettering that had all but faded: something and sons, it said. She saw the size, eight and a half, and the initials U.S.A. ... Ashima unable to resist a sudden and overwhelming urge, stepped into the shoes at her feet." (8 Lahiri)

The most noticeable episode in the quest of utopia is in the case of Ashoke who is fond of book reading. He gets the heritage of books through his grandfather and he is being introduced to the Russian writer Nikolai Gogol. Gogol, for him accidentally or better to say because of an accident became the hero of his life and his life-saver as well. Once in his prime he was traveling by train in India, he was encountered to an emigrant person in his compartment, who opened for him a new enticing world of perfection. He describes to him the materialistic development of England and America when life is too easy and glamorous and suggest him as well to go there. At that time Ashoke was quite reluctant to explore such utopia but immediately after the talk his train derailed and the unforgettable trauma happened in his life. The most tragic episode was the death of that man in that accident, who came to India for his wife and whose last words were enough to shake his soul (I should have never come here). Ashoke's life was saved in a dramatic way. He was grasping the book of Gogol in his hand and by waving the page he could give signal to the men who came to rescue the victims. Needless to mention his mental status after the trauma which fanned his ignited desire to be involved in a quest of utopia which was probably to be found in the foreign country, far from his (mis)happening world. His trauma has been beautifully depicted by Ms. Lahiri:

"It is not the memory of pain that haunts him; he has no memory of that. It is the memory of waiting before he was rescued, and the persistent fear, rising up in his throat, that he might not have been rescued at all. To this day he is claustrophobic, holding his breath in elevators, feels pent up in cars unless the windows are open on both sides. On planes he request the bulkhead seat. At times the wailing of children fills him with deepest dread." (21 Lahiri)

Fortunately, he gets an opportunity to study abroad and he embarks on his journey of utopia. Ashoke, Ashima and their son who was previously named as Gogol (but intentionally it was a pet name for him) and daughter Sonia make a unit of family in the novel. As the novel progresses we see Gogol as a central figure for whom his name becomes a big

problem. He feels awkward because of his name. Gogol may be a hero for his father but for him it is ridiculous and absurd. When he comes to know about a life of frustration lived by the Russian writer N. Gogol, his irritation intensifies more and more. He bears the pangs of identity and identity-crisis. There comes a time when he is no longer ready to bear the burden of his name and finds a way, a legal way to rename himself. In the court before the judge he when he was being asked why he wants to change his name, his anger and says, "I hate this name." He is a man who is looking back in anger. But it is quite observable that he renames himself as Nikhil, once chosen by his parents but could not be viable somehow. Simultaneously, it is quite interesting and brings a wry smile on the reader's face that Gogol's actual name is Nikhil, though, throughout the narrative he has been addressed as Gogol by the novelist, perhaps it is not possible to detach the past from the present. It is perhaps, without stitching the past and the present together, we cannot proceed towards the future and towards the quest of utopia. Gogol finds his utopia when he begins to live with his girlfriend Maxine. He lives with her and her parents at their house. Then he gets a chance to be closer to their ways of life and feels a hush of freedom. He prefers to celebrate his birthday with Maxine and her parents at their place. In the party a white lady taunts him to re-recognize his belongingness as an Indian, and if he is an American "I mean, you must never get sick". (157)

In the company of Maxine's family he realizes that their world is close to nature. They feel the happiness in the lap of nature with a stamp of materialistic growth as well. He compares his and his parents' life with that of Maxine's family and comes to enunciate his thought that Maxine's family is leading a life of fulfillment with extravaganza of freedom.

"The family seems to possess every piece of the landscape, not only the house itself but every tree and blade of grass. Nothing is locked, not the main house, or the cabin that he and Maxine sleep in ... The Ratliffs own the moon that floats over the lake, and the sun and the clouds. It is a place that has been good to them, as much a part of them as a member of the family...He feels no nostalgia for the vacation he's spent with his family, and he realizes now that they were never really true vacations at all. Instead they were overwhelming, disorienting expeditions, either going to Calcutta, or sightseeing in places they did not belong to and intended never to see again. (154-155 Lahiri)

After the sudden demise of his father Gogol turns back to his family and cares and shares the family's pain due to the loss of the elder member. It is because of his strong pulling up towards his family that he has to leave his terms with Maxine.

"Indeed, attempts to delink the heritage by a simple name change, as Lahiri shows so brilliantly, does not alter the fabric of a person but leads only to a crisis of identity and meaning. The past is ever present, Lahiri seems to be saying, and a viable future depends in recognizing and appreciating this past. (Sardar)

Ashima finds a Bengali girl named Mousami as a perfect life partner for Gogol who has the same upbringing like Gogol in the USA and England. Both of them were pushed towards each other by their parents and in the

beginning feel at home to be together. But it does not work and their marriage collapses. Mousami is attracted towards her old boyfriend and enters into an extra-marital relationship secretly. It seems as if she is in search of a utopic relationship with perfection. She is in a chaotic state of mind. When she was a girl in her prime she swears along with her other friends not to marry an Indian (may be girlish or childish) despite of (un)knowing that she is an Indian by ancestry.

“By the time she was twelve she had made a pact, with two other Bengali girls she knew, never to marry a Bengali man. They had written on a statement vowing never to do so, and spit on it at the same time, and buried it somewhere in her parents' backyard.”(213 Lahiri)

Before her marriage with Gogol she was to get married with an American man but their relationship breaks due to her fiancé, who finds Indian culture as something 'taxing' and 'repressed'.

“All they did was visit her relatives, he said. Though he thought the city was fascinating, the society, in his opinion, was somewhat provincial. People tended to stay at home most of the time. There was nothing to drink. Imagine dealing with fifty in-laws without alcohol. I could not even hold her hand on the street without attracting stares,” (217)

Mousami's genuine feeling towards Gogol has not been much revealed by the novelist authentically but her union with her old American friend after marriage exposes her repressed desire to get married with some American, to find her utopia, at least to some extent. In the beginning of the novel when Ashoke and Ashima owns a house of their own they feel contented. For Ashoke living in the US, in a materially developed country means providing his children best education, safety and security as well. Ashima was also surprisingly astonished when she finds back all her shopping bags which she left unknowingly in the train.. She is quite bewildered at the thought that she can find her lost assets in the foreign land which is almost impossible in her native land. But their chain in the quest of utopia shuffles when they have to put the security system in their house in the concluding episodes of the novel. Their security within the walls of their house has been interrogated because of the rate of increasing crime in their locality. In their world of utopia they have to be beware. Ashima is a strong woman character in *The Namesake* who does not change herself much. She drives car, she serves American food along with Indian, she celebrates American festivals (though she prefers Indian tradition and Indian food) but simultaneously she wears Indian clothes, speaks her mother tongue(speaks foreign language as well), she cooks Indian food. After the death of her husband she is free to go back to India, to her relatives for whom she always longed but she finds herself unable to move from her 'lived past' and unable to embrace her 'left world'. Her utopia is hybrid: half in the host location and half in her home land. She is unable to select either.

“The word diaspora often invokes the imagery of traumas of separation and dislocation, and this is certainly a very important aspect of migratory experience. But diasporas are also potentially

the sites of hope and new beginning contested cultural and political terrains where individual and collect, collide, reassemble and reconfigure.” (Brah 193)

Hence, in one way or another almost all the characters in their fictional world are involved in pursuit of utopia. Sonia, daughter of Ashima and Ashoke also gets married with an American but her character has not been portrayed in detail. In search of utopia where man wants to find a perfect and ideal place to live, is natural. Gogol also finds a glimpse of utopic contentment and fulfillment in primitive kind of living adaptation, close to nature in the life of Maxine's parents. But why migration often becomes a major tool and proves inevitable in the quest of utopia or 'Ramrajya'. Why man cannot think of creating a utopia at his own immediate place. Why he has to shift? Why does he choose to immigrate? We all know that utopia means nowhere, it does not exist but quest of utopia is continue, no matter what they have to sacrifice for that sake, for utopia-sake. The horizon scanners are curious enough to discover the utopia with an unflinching faith, unfolding the layers after layers. The characters of the novel try to find the gems of utopia but it slips from their hands and they fail to catch it back, because its nowhere. Whenever they try to dial their quest digits, the voice comes that this number does not exist or the number is not reachable.

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