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Between Memory and Survival: Nostalgia, Adaptation, and Resistance in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* and Kate Grenville's *The Secret River*

Miti Sharma[1] and B. K. Anjana[2]

Abstract

The modern world is characterised by migration and displacement. But even after finding a new home, many continue to carry their old worlds within them. This inner conflict has profoundly been portrayed in literature, because the journey of relocation continues after arrival as well. In this context, the present article explores how nostalgia, adaptation, and resistance structure everyday life in conditions of displacement. The novels selected for the analysis include *The Namesake* (2003) and *The Secret River* (2005), authored by Jhumpa Lahiri and Kate Grenville respectively. Through the study of the female protagonists, the article demonstrates that certain responses are not abstract emotions but practical behaviours enacted through food, language, and rituals. Ultimately, belonging emerges from the negotiation between attachment to the past and present existence. Both the novels portray displacement as a condition which plays a crucial role in shaping perception and ethical choice. This article argues that the experiences of immigrants and settlers differ in context but converge in revealing the fact that belonging is not tied to a single place but is negotiated over time rooted to memory and habit.

Keywords: Home, belonging, displacement, migration, nostalgia, memory, adaptation, assimilation, resistance

Humanity has a long history of displacement. Migration, exile, exploration, and colonisation are a few basic reasons in this light.

1 Miti Sharma, PhD, is an Assistant Professor at Swami Vivekanand Govt. College Nagda, Dist. Ujjain (MP) India. Email: mitisharma4609@gmail.com

2 B. K. Anjana is a Professor of English at Samrat Vikramaditya Vishwavidyalaya, Ujjain (MP) India. Email: bkanjana14@gmail.com

This movement not only changes geographically, but also plays a vital role in altering the emotional life of an individual. When people leave their homeland, they carry with them an invisible luggage — luggage filled with memory, habits, language, and inherited meanings. In this sense, displacement produces one of the deepest psychological tensions. It creates a gap between where one lives and where one feels one belongs. This gap can never be resolved by physical settlement. A person may acquire citizenship, employment, and property, but psychologically, he/she continues to inhabit a place somewhere else. The imagination often lags behind the body and the heart continues to long for places which have been left behind due to the emotional attachment to those places. These experiences are profoundly portrayed in literature. Narratives concerned with diaspora try to bring forth the interior landscapes of the individuals because the drama of displacement unfolds inwardly rather than outwardly. The external journey ends when the traveller arrives, but the internal journey begins only then. Memory becomes the means through which the past insists upon relevance. But the present demands accommodation. As a result, literature portrays the migrant not as someone who moves once but as someone who continues moving between temporalities. The characters in such works revisit their native lands mentally while adapting materially. They compare every new environment to the one which has been left behind. This comparative consciousness generates narrative itself, and the storytelling becomes an attempt to organise scattered experiences into coherence.

Modern writers explore this condition in their works by portraying two types of characters. These characters include the migrants and the settlers. The condition of both of them is different, as the former loses home and seeks continuity, the settler acquires land but. The spaces which they inhabit are materially real but emotionally unstable. In such situations, three recurring responses emerge: nostalgia, adaptation, and resistance. These responses do not occur sequentially but simultaneously and are responsible for shaping behaviour and identity. Nostalgia recalls the past and adaptation negotiates the present. However, resistance safeguards the meaning and value of both. Nostalgia helps in preserving a migrant's identity because it prevents total assimilation. But in the case of

settlers, it complicates possession by sustaining memory of an alternative moral order. But adaptation makes everyday survival possible. It is adaptation that helps immigrants as well as settlers to learn new customs and navigate social institutions. However, it risks erasure if it is not balanced by memory. Hence resistance becomes essential which operates through ordinary acts. These may include cooking familiar food, arranging furniture in remembered patterns, narrating ancestral stories to children etc. Thus, through adaptation, familiar worlds are constructed within unfamiliar realities.

When literary discourse is taken into consideration, nostalgia helps characters in interpreting their present. Svetlana Boym (1959-2015), a Russian writer, describes it as "a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed" (3). This statement posits to the fact that longing not merely for a place but for a way of inhabiting time. It tries to restore a sense of continuity where history has produced rupture. Characters preserve sensory details such as food, sounds, rituals, and language through nostalgia. It helps them in bringing coherence to fractured identity, which in turn transforms memory into lived practice. Boym also distinguishes between restorative and reflective nostalgia. Restorative nostalgia focuses on rebuilding and recovering the lost home, while reflective nostalgia accepts the loss and continues to engage with it through memory. This distinction becomes important in understanding how different characters respond to displacement.

Adaptation is the process of negotiating with immediate reality. It involves learning new social codes, adjusting behaviour, and redefining belonging within unfamiliar surroundings. But adaptation should never be confused with assimilation. This difference can well be understood by Homi K Bhabha's notion of the "in-between" cultural space (3). Bhabha suggests that individuals replace one identity with another instead of inhabiting overlapping identities. In this way, they adapt themselves to new environment only outwardly and not inwardly. This helps them in creating hybrid modes of existence that combine continuity with change.

But when memory refuses erasure, then resistance emerges. It provides alternative ways of understanding the world. In narratives of migration and settlement, it safeguards emotional and ethical

identity. Through small acts of preservation, characters assert that transformation need not entail forgetting, and belonging need not require surrender of the past. Together, nostalgia, adaptation, and resistance form a continuum. It is through these three responses that displaced individuals organise their lives within unfamiliar environments.

This continuum of nostalgia, adaptation, and resistance can be found in the literary oeuvres of Jhumpa Lahiri (1967-) and Kate Grenville (1950-). Both these novelists repeatedly deal with the question of belonging in their works. However, their approach is distinct in nature, as it is shaped by their personal and national contexts. Lahiri's literary journey emerges from the late twentieth-century experience of diaspora. Since she is born in a Bengali family and raised in the United States, therefore, her writing explores the problems faced by the immigrants. Her literary corpus consists of two short-story collections, *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) and *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008) along with three novels, namely *The Namesake* (2003), *The Lowland* (2013), and *Whereabouts* (2019). In all her works, she powerfully examines how individuals inhabit two cultural worlds simultaneously. She generally focuses upon the household of the immigrants. Her prose style is restrained, observant, and attentive to detail. As far as her characters are concerned, they neither abandon the past nor resist the present entirely but instead inhabit a hybrid condition. Thus, in her works, nostalgia serves as preservation and adaptation as gradual accommodation. She also uses resistance as the refusal to dissolve inherited selfhood.

When one examines the literary journey of Kate Grenville, then it would be found that she engages with historical memory and national identity in her novels. She uses colonial past to depict how belonging was constructed in a land marked by settlement. She has many novels to her credit: *Lilian's Story* (1985), *Dark Places* (1994), *The Secret River* (2005), *The Lieutenant* (2008) and *Sarah Thornhill* (2011) to mention a few. She never portrays celebrated historical figures in her novels but depicts the life, conditions, and struggles of ordinary people. Her novels also focus upon the emotional consequences of colonialism. Her characters try to reproduce domestic order in an alien environment. They carry habits and expectations from their homeland, but they encounter a landscape that fails to give them the

desired recognition. In this way, Grenville transforms historical fiction into psychological inquiry. Nostalgia is not treated as homesickness but as a moral reference point against which present actions are measured. Therefore, adaptation becomes necessary for survival and resistance appears as lingering doubt embedded within daily life. Thus, she interrogates the formation of national identity by exposing its emotional and ethical complexity.

These ideas become concretely visible in *The Namesake* and *The Secret River*. *The Namesake* depicts the story of Gogol Ganguli, an American-born son of Ashoke Ganguli and Ashima Ganguli. In America, Ashoke and Ashima try to recreate fragments of their homeland through food, language, rituals, and community gatherings. The conflict does not arise from dramatic exile but from ordinary day-to-day struggles such as school admissions, friendships, naming practices, marriage, and death. The novel concludes with Ashima preparing to divide her time between the two countries. Thus, she has accepted a hybrid identity rather than choosing one. The novel presents migration as an ongoing interior movement in which nostalgia preserves emotional lineage and adaptation helps in survival. However, resistance appears in the retention of cultural practices that prevent complete assimilation.

On the contrary, in *The Secret River*, the narrative shifts from migration to settlement. The novel is centred around William Thornhill, a transported convict who arrives in Australia and eventually turns into a settler by acquiring land along the Hawkesbury River. But the emotional centre of domestic continuity is his wife, Sal Thornhill. She is very much different from her husband. Her calm and practical mindset always clashes with his adventurous spirit. Sal is unable to accept her new ways of life in Australia, and her imagination remains tied to her homeland. She continuously compares the Australian land and its unfamiliar landscape to the memories of home. Outwardly, she adapts herself to the new conditions but always resists the idea of permanent settlement. Even when the family's material circumstances improve, she is unable to accept the Australian land as her own. She repeatedly expresses her desire to return. Thus, in her case, nostalgia functions as moral perception and not as passive homesickness. She continues to

demonstrate resistance and her resistance questions the legitimacy of settlement itself.

In both these novels, nostalgia, adaptation, and resistance operate through every-day behaviour. The emotional worlds of Ashima Ganguli and Sal Thornhill demonstrate how attachment to their lost homeland is embedded into their daily life. As far as *The Namesake* is concerned, nostalgia appears through sensory memory. Ashima's experiences in America are defined by absence and memory. When the novel opens, one can witness her recalling Calcutta through taste, smell, and sound. This is best evident when she prepares a snack by mixing Rice Krispies with peanuts, onion, and mustard oil. This act is symbolic, as she is trying to reconstruct her past. Ashima has been having this snack throughout her pregnancy but always failed to produce the same taste: "Tasting from a cupped palm, she frowns; as usual, there's something missing." (Lahiri 9). This moment captures the essence of what Boym calls reflective nostalgia: "Reflective nostalgia dwells on the ambivalences of human longing and belonging and does not shy away from the contradictions of modernity" (49). The failure to reproduce the exact taste does not diminish the act but transforms nostalgia into a process sustained through repetition. The nostalgia is not static but performative, which makes the past to remain active within the present. In this way, America becomes partially inhabitable.

Ashima's nostalgia also manifests in language. She not only speaks Bengali at home but also insists her children to learn it. When Gogol is born, "she sings him the Bengali songs her mother had sung to her" (Lahiri 62). Here language becomes an emotional territory carried by her across borders. She repeatedly reads the letters which she receives from India. Now, the Calcutta which she remembers has been transformed by distance and time, but its memory is responsible for shaping her daily life. Furthermore, the celebration of various festivals temporarily transforms the interior of their household into a remembered Calcutta drawing room. This act is generally observed by many immigrants, as it helps them to restore the communal rhythm that once gave structure to their life. It aligns with Avatar Brah's idea that "'home' is a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination" (192). It reinforces the idea that belonging is less about physical return and more about emotional continuity. Immigrants

also remain dependent upon the objects which they bring from their native lands. The same is the case with Ashima, as she continues to wear saris and footwear which she brought from India. These objects collapse geographical distance by inserting fragments of homeland into daily routine.

Nostalgia is best conveyed in Ashima's reaction to solitude. When Ashoke is at the university, she feels isolated and alienated. Lahiri writes:

> For being a foreigner, Ashima is beginning to realize, is a sort of lifelong pregnancy—a perpetual wait, a constant burden, a continuous feeling out of sorts. It is an ongoing responsibility, a parenthesis in what had once been ordinary life, only to discover that that previous life has vanished, replaced by something more complicated and demanding. Like pregnancy, being a foreigner, Ashima believes, is something that elicits the same curiosity from strangers, the same combination of pity and respect. (83)

It suggests that, displacement is not a temporary condition, but it is an enduring emotional state which affects Ashima's psychological state repeatedly. This can be understood through Bhabha's notion of cultural liminality. According to Bhabha, the identity of such individuals exists in a suspended state. It is neither fully anchored in homeland nor entirely assimilated into foreign life. "It is in the emergence of interstices - the overlap and displacement of domains of difference" (2). Ashima's nostalgia, therefore, is not merely emotional but structural; it shapes her perception, her routines, and her understanding of belonging.

A comparable but significantly altered form of nostalgia can be witnessed in the character of Sal Thornhill in *The Secret River*. Since Sal lives within a colonial setting, her return is imagined as well as gradually deferred. Her nostalgia acquires a distinctive emotional structure, as she not only remembers the past but also hopes for a better future. From the very first day of settlement, she refuses to accept Australia as home. She waits for return which is best reflected in her act of carving marks on a tree. Her character resembles a prisoner who is counting his/her days towards release: "she was a prisoner here, marking off the days in her little round of beaten earth" (Grenville 155). For her, home is not only a memory but something which she can count down to. Her longing aligns more

closely with what Boym terms restorative nostalgia, which "attempts a transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home" (42). In such situations, displaced individuals rely on nostalgia to make the present manageable. It allows them to endure unfamiliar surroundings by holding on to the idea of a return. Thus, nostalgia is not limited to memory alone but also shapes perception by creating a constant comparison between what was and what is.

For immigrants, nostalgia often takes a sensory form. Memories are preserved through sounds, textures, smells, and tastes associated with the past. Sal's nostalgia is also sensory. She always longs for the food as well as its smell that she used to have in England. This nostalgia is also for order, routine, and structure which characterised her life in the past. She considers Australia as a place where "only the flicker of their own fire was human" (Grenville 140). She does not simply miss a country but also misses recognisable life structured by society. England signifies meaning to her, which the new land failed to provide. In this way, sensory memory becomes a crucial means through which displaced individuals sustain a sense of continuity and belonging.

In many historical novels, nostalgia changes its form as individuals adjust to new environments. With the stabilisation of settlement, the intensity of longing often shifts from an active hope to a more subdued and internalised attachment. The same can be observed in *The Secret River*. Sal continues to say "When we go Home," but "Home remained a comfortable but distant idea" (Grenville 331). With the passage of time, the intensity of her certainty weakens and this shifts her nostalgia from anticipation to habit. But her attachment to her native land is still visible. Though her husband is determined to stay, she quietly hopes for departure. Her voice carries "the sound of someone who was prepared to yield, but against the grain of what she believed" (282). This reveals that nostalgia in her case restrains possession because her instinct recognises the danger of claiming the land. Thornhill's longing converts into ownership, but Sal's longing questions ownership.

In many cases like Sal, memory survives not through large gestures but through small, material objects that carry emotional significance. "Memory attaches itself to sites," (Nora n.p.) and the

same is reflected in Sal's behaviour when she keeps a fragment of England by preserving a roof-tile in her workbox. Accordingly, Sal's experience passes through three stages: anticipation, postponement, and preservation. She first waits to return, then doubts return, and finally lives with memory alone. This trajectory differs from Ashima's development, as she negotiates a hybrid identity and divides her life between two places. But Sal remains physically fixed in one place while emotionally inhabiting another, highlighting how displacement continues to shape identity even in conditions of apparent stability.

Though both Ashima and Sal are troubled by the memories of their past, they gradually develop ways of adapting themselves to their immediate realities. In conditions of displacement, adaptation is not a complete transformation, but it unfolds through everyday routines. It is through such routine practices that adaptation in *The Namesake* unfolds gradually. At first, Ashima experiences America as a space marked by absence and dislocation. However, with the passage of time, she begins to convert unfamiliarity into pattern. She learns to navigate supermarkets, public transport, schools, and hospitals, and slowly acquires confidence. Her gatherings with Bengali families eventually evolve into a new kind of community. While the rituals remain Indian, the social context becomes distinctly American. This suggests that adaptation does not simply erase memory but reorganises it within new frameworks of living. At the same time, such adaptation is not without tension. It involves a continuous negotiation between preservation and change. In this regard, Stuart Hall's observation that "cultural identity is not a fixed essence but a positioning" becomes particularly relevant (226). Ashima's experience reflects this process, as her identity is not replaced but constantly reconfigured in relation to her surroundings. She does not replace one home with another but learns to inhabit continuity across both.

In *The Secret River*, adaptation follows a different psychological pattern. It is the urgent need for survival that forces Sal to adapt herself to an alien land. The environment lacked social structure but still she cooked unfamiliar grain, nursed children without doctors, and managed isolation. She also stopped marking her days on the tally-tree which showcases that the idea of return slowly faded into a distant unarticulated possibility. Rather than going back to London,

she has "made home here" (Grenville 331). Now, she has learnt to live there without ever believing the place is truly hers.

The third force through which both women characters negotiate displacement is resistance. It is this resistance that prevents complete absorption into the new environment. In *The Namesake*, Ashima does not reject America but resists the erasure of inherited identity which showcases that her resistance is subtle. Her insistence on Bengali language within the domestic space is again a quiet act of resistance. Even when her children respond in English, she continues speaking Bengali. In this way, she is trying to preserve her roots. The naming practices followed by the family also become a significant site of resistance Through Gogol's unusual name, Lahiri emphasises the fact that names carry certain histories which cannot be abandoned. Food also functions as resistance. Ashima prepares traditional dishes even after spending half of her life in the United States. Such acts resist assimilation not by opposing America but by ensuring coexistence. In this way, she refuses to allow migration to sever generational continuity.

Resistance acquires a moral and political dimension in *The Secret River*. Sal's resistance is not directed towards the unfamiliar landscape but towards the idea of ownership. With the passage of time, she has accepted her fate but is never in favour of celebrating ownership. The grand house built by her husband failed to satisfy her because she has sensed its moral cost. Furthermore, her memory of England is so strong that it prevents her from completely adapting to the Australian landscape. She is fully aware of the fact that if she would settle here permanently, she would be completely dislocated from her native land. Therefore, she is neither rebellious nor consentaneous; she sustains a moral resistance that persists even after her settlement.

Ultimately, both *The Namesake* and *The Secret River* reveal complementary perspectives on displacement. *The Namesake* is written from an immigrant's perspective who leaves a homeland but gradually tries to maintain continuity within a new society. On the other hand, *The Secret River* presents a settler who acquires a new land but fails to find a sense of belongingness. However, the same triad operates in both these novels: nostalgia helps the characters to

maintain an emotional connection with the past, adaptation allows them to live within the present realities, and resistance prevents cultural erasure. These novels demonstrate that home is not a fixed place but an ongoing psychological journey that continues to shape the lives of individuals.

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