



Alienation in Alien Nation: A Study on Jhumpa Lahiri's Novels

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Submission Date:21.03.2025

Acceptance Date:24.03.2025

APA Citation:

Muruganandham. V, (2025). Alienation in Alien Nation: A Study on Jhumpa Lahiri's Novels, *Journal of Indian Languages and Indian literature in English*, 03(02),43-50; 2025

Abstract

Alienation, a fundamental human experience, permeates modern life. Alien nation is a metaphorical expression for a foreign country, and this title effectively conveys the theme of alienation experienced by immigrants in a new country. The immigrant experience is frequently characterized by hardship, encompassing injustices, disparities, prejudice, and cultural upheaval in a new and unfamiliar environment. Adapting to the social, economic, political, psychological, and environmental shifts poses significant challenges. The sudden transition in lifestyle, culture, status, and society can evoke emotional and psychological distress. The Indian Diaspora explores the

diverse facets of life abroad, shedding light on the challenges and difficulties of the immigrant experience. Postcolonial writers, including Jhumpa Lahiri, who have experienced cultural displacement, examine this phenomenon in their works. Lahiri's novels, *The Namesake* and *The Lowland* vividly portray the diasporic experience and alienation through its Bengali immigrant characters. This study examines the manifestation of alienation in her novels, providing an insightful understanding of the immigrant experience. This study also explores the experiences of Indian immigrants in the United States, examining the challenges they face in adapting to a new culture and society. As a child of Bengali immigrants, Jhumpa Lahiri's life has embodied the challenges of belonging to two worlds. Born in London and raised in Rhode Island, she has bridged her Indian heritage and American upbringing. Through the experiences of her characters, Lahiri examines the struggles of being torn between two cultures, highlighting the disconnection from cultural and historical roots. The study probes how her characters struggle with feelings of disconnection, isolation, and loneliness, ultimately shedding light on the human cost of alienation and the resilience of those who seek to find their place in a new world.

Keywords: Alienation, loneliness, immigrant experience, cultural dislocation, identity crisis.

Introduction

Jhumpa Lahiri has emerged as a leading figure among Indian diasporic writers, crafting a unique literary identity that garners international recognition. Born to immigrant parents, her works provide a thoughtful exploration of the immigrant experience, examining the challenges that arise from cultural displacement. Her experience of displacement began in her early childhood. When she was just two years old, her Indian immigrant parents relocated to the United States, immersing her in a dual identity crisis. This liminal existence, torn between two cultures, would profoundly shape her postcolonial writings. Lahiri has spoken about the sense of meaninglessness that arose from being unable to choose between her Indian heritage and American surroundings. Her daily life was marked by a stark dichotomy: she was Indian at home, but felt compelled to conceal her Indian identity outside the family sphere.

In her novels, she spotlights the intricate struggles of immigrants adapting to a new country. Her works demonstrate the remarkable resilience and adaptability of those who have left their homelands in search of new opportunities. While migration may promise a brighter future, the reality is often more complicated. For those who successfully integrate into the host culture, the experience can be life-changing. However, for those who struggle to adjust, the journey can

be marked by feelings of dislocation and isolation. Her works skillfully capture the tensions between cultural identity and displacement, expertly weaving together themes of belonging, identity, and the search for one's place in the world. Through her writing, Lahiri presents a powerful and moving portrayal of the immigrant experience, illuminating the complex emotions and experiences that shape the lives of those who exist between cultures.

Discussion

The concept of alienation has been defined and described in various ways across different sources. A dictionary of literary terms defines alienation as “a state of being alienated from something or somebody; a condition of the mind.” Similarly, Encyclopedia Britannica describes it as “the state of feeling estranged or separated from one's milieu, work, products of work, or self.” Etymologically, the word ‘alienation’ originates from the Latin noun ‘alienato’ and verb ‘alienare,’ which mean to snatch, avoid, remove, or make things for others. The French words ‘aliéner’ and ‘aliénation’ are closely related to the English words ‘alienate’ and ‘alienation.’ Additionally, the Greek words ‘Anomia’ (self-alienation) refers to personal disintegration while ‘Anomie’ (alienation from society) refers to disconnection from society. In the English language, other words such as isolation, estrangement, and separation are also used to convey the concept of alienation. This theme is particularly evident in two of her notable works: “The Namesake” and “The Lowland”.

Alienation is a central thread in Jhumpa Lahiri's writing, deeply embedded in the lives of her characters. In "The Namesake," her first novel, Lahiri explores the experiences of the Ganguli family, tracing their journey across two generations as they build a new life in America. Ashima, the protagonist, faces significant challenges as an immigrant after marrying Ashok and moving to America. The stark contrast between her native India and her new American surroundings creates a deep sense of discomfort and disconnection. Ashima's feelings of estrangement and isolation propel her towards alienation, a sentiment that permeates the novel. Her longing for her native Calcutta is a recurring motif, highlighting her sense of disconnection from her cultural heritage.

The Novel begins with vivid scene of Ashima, a pregnant woman from Calcutta, struggles to recreate an Indian meal in her American kitchen, only to find it unfulfilling. This opening scene artfully captures the physical and emotional disorientation of migrants. Despite having the same ingredients, Ashima's dish falls short of her expectations, mirroring the sense of disconnection she feels in her new surroundings. The feeling of displacement and alienation pervades every aspect of the characters' lives. Her isolation in a small, cold apartment, alone and

pregnant, is a stark departure from the traditional Indian experience, where family and community typically surround expectant mothers. In India, Ashima would have been enveloped by loving relatives, celebrating the joyous occasion of her child's birth. The arrival of a new life is a momentous event in Indian culture, marked by festivities and warmth. In stark contrast, the birth of her child in America feels subdued, lacking the significance and fanfare that would have accompanied it in her homeland. The birth of her child intensifies her feelings of alienation, as she mourns the absence of familial support and cultural celebrations that would have accompanied this joyful occasion in India. In America, the birth of her child is met with isolation, underscoring the cultural disconnect that contributes to her alienation. "Without a single grandparent and an uncle and aunt at her side, the baby's birth like most everything in America, feels haphazard, only half trueShe never knows of a person entering the world so alone, so deprived". (Lahiri, *The Namesake* 25)

In the American medical system, parents are required to provide their child's name on the birth certificate before being discharged from the hospital. This proves to be a challenging task for Ashima, as in her culture, the grandmother traditionally chooses the child's name. A letter with the suggested names would normally arrive from India a month later. However, with the hospital's insistence, Ashok suggests the name Gogol, inspired by the Russian author Nikolai Gogol, which Ashima reluctantly agrees to. Upon returning home, Ashima's resentment simmers, and she confesses, "I don't want to raise Gogol alone in this country. It is not right. I want to go back." (Lahiri, *The Namesake* 33) This incident intensifies the couple's feelings of alienation, particularly Ashima's. The strict rules and unfamiliar culture of America intensify her loneliness. The couple's alienation is multifaceted: first, they are disconnected from their homeland; second, they are estranged from their cultural heritage due to their new surroundings. When they move to the suburbs, Ashima feels alienated once again, describing it as "a sort of lifelong pregnancy" – a poignant metaphor that captures the perpetual sense of disconnection and isolation she experiences in her adopted country.

Gogol, the son of Ashima and Ashok, feels disconnected due to his unusual name, which lacks clear cultural significance. As a second-generation immigrant, his bond with his ancestral homeland is weaker than his parents'. This difference in cultural ties leads to a unique sense of disconnection. It highlights the distinct experiences of first and second-generation Indian-Americans. The first generation clings to their cultural traditions, whereas the second generation must balance multiple identities, merging their heritage with the diverse American culture. This

complex identity formation deepens Gogol's feelings of disconnection. Gogol's feelings of isolation intensify as he distances himself from his parents and keeps his friends away. He attempts to blend in with American culture, adopting local customs and lifestyles. He feels self-conscious about his parents' cultural distinctiveness and attempts to keep it private. In an effort to fit in, Gogol changes his name to Nikhil, befriends Kim, and explores American culture. He even tries to connect with Maxine's family, enjoying luxurious experiences. Yet, his conscience eventually troubles him, leaving him uncertain. As Gogol participates in Maxine's family gatherings, indulging in wine and conversation, he is struck by a nagging sense of guilt. He feels that his immersion in their world is a betrayal of his own cultural heritage. This internal conflict is palpable in the moment when "At times.....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 betrayal of his own." (Lahiri, *The Namesake* 141) At this moment, Gogol's experience epitomizes the concept of alienation. Gogol's feelings of guilt and disloyalty illustrate this definition, as he struggles to reconcile his desire for cultural assimilation with his loyalty to his own cultural roots. This internal conflict leads to a sense of alienation, as Gogol feels disconnected from his own identity and cultural heritage. His attempt to fit in with Maxine's family has created a psychological barrier, one that ultimately impoverishes his sense of self.

Following her husband's death, Ashima is left to confront the emptiness of her Pemberton Road home, where darkness pervades both her surroundings and her inner world. Her determination to live alone in the house poignantly underscores her deep-seated loneliness and alienation. Moushumi, once considered a potential bride for Ashima's son Gogol, also experiences a unique form of existential alienation. As In his seminal work, Jean-Paul Sartre explores the concept of alienation that arises from interpersonal interactions. He describes this phenomenon, stating: "In the shock that seizes me when I apprehend the other's look, I experience a subtle alienation of all my possibilities which are associated with the object of the world far for me, in the midst of world." (Sartre 18) This concept is echoed in Moushumi's past, marked by her rejection of prospective grooms selected by her parents and her subsequent decision to remain unattached after a painful breakup. Moushumi's emphasis on freedom and her connection to France can be seen as a manifestation of existentialist alienation, where she seeks to assert her individuality and autonomy in a world that often seems suffocating.

In the aftermath of the party in Calcutta, Ashima is overcome with a profound sense of loneliness, a feeling that has become a constant companion. She turns away from the mirror, overcome with grief, and sobs for her late husband. The weight of her loss is crushing, leaving

her feeling impatient and indifferent to the long days ahead. Ashima's sorrow has also led to a sense of disconnection from her loved ones. She feels detached from her family in Calcutta and her children in America. The pain of separation from her husband has become all-consuming, deepening her feelings of alienation. Her grief has created a sense of emotional isolation, leaving her feeling disconnected from the world around her.

Jhumpa Lahiri's novel "The Lowland" tells the story of two brothers, Subhash and Udayan, who are inseparable despite their vastly different natures and attitudes. When Subhash leaves for Rhodes Island, America, to pursue higher studies, Udayan chooses to stay in India and join the Naxalbari movement. Udayan's deep sense of loneliness is palpable in a letter he writes to Subhash in America: "The days are dull without you.Will you hurry up with whatever it is you are doing? An embrace from your brother." (Lahiri, *The Lowland* 42-43). This heartfelt message conveys the depth of Udayan's emotional isolation without his brother by his side. In America, Subhash confronts loneliness and disconnection, despite being surrounded by colleagues and students. His thoughts frequently wander back to his family in India, and he longs to hear their voices. The physical distance weighs heavily on him, and he struggles to cope with the absence of everyday moments shared with his loved ones. For a year and a half, he has relied solely on written letters to stay connected, a meager substitute for the warmth of their presence. Subhash's life in America takes a turn when he becomes intimate with Holly, a married woman. One day, while staying at her house, he notices the upcoming date, August 15th, which fills him with nostalgia for his homeland. It was a national holiday, marked by lights on government buildings, flag hoisting, and parades. However, in their new surroundings, it was just an ordinary day. He feels a deep sense of loneliness and alienation, highlighting the contrast between his life in America and the celebrations in India.

In contrast, Subhash's younger brother Udayan dedicates himself to the Naxalbari movement in India, refusing to pursue higher studies abroad. Despite his commitment to the cause, Udayan also experiences moments of isolation and loneliness. After meeting with an accident while preparing an explosive, Udayan's physical and emotional vulnerability are revealed: He struggled with hearing loss, often asking Gauri to repeat herself. His concern deepened as he worried that he might not be able to hear the buzzer. Despite being together, he complained of feeling a profound sense of loneliness. This feeling of isolation was the most fundamental of human experiences.

After Udayan's tragic death, Subhash marries Gauri in an attempt to save her from the abyss of alienation. However, Gauri's past continues to haunt her, rendering her incapable of fulfilling her roles as a wife and mother. Her struggles are deeply rooted in her own experiences of alienation, which began when Udayan married her without his parents' consent, leading to her isolation within her in-laws' household. Following Udayan's demise, Gauri accompanies Subhash to Rhodes Island, where she gives birth to a baby girl named Bela. Nevertheless, the trauma of her past persists, causing her to withdraw from Subhash and Bela. Her restlessness is palpable, and she finds solace in isolation. This poignant moment reveals Gauri's deep longing for tranquility, a sense of calm that eludes her except in the quiet refuge of solitude.

The tragic loss of Udayan also takes a devastating toll on his parents, leaving them feeling isolated and lonely. With one son gone and the other, Subhash, living in America, they are forced to confront the harsh reality of their empty nest. The departure of Gauri to America further exacerbates their sense of abandonment, leaving them with no choice but to lead a solitary existence. As time passes, Subhash's father also succumbs to the inevitability of death, but not before expressing his desire to dispose of the family home. However, his emotional attachment to the house, laden with memories of the past, proves too strong, and he is unable to let go. Ultimately, Subhash's mother also meets a lonely end, passing away in a room filled with strangers, denying her son the opportunity to be by her side in her final moments. This powerful and heartbreaking conclusion reveals the devastating effects of alienation and loneliness on the lives of Udayan's family.

Conclusion

In general, alienation occurs when individuals struggle to form meaningful connections with their surroundings, leading to a sense of disconnection and isolation. This occurrence is vividly illustrated in Jhumpa Lahiri's works, particularly in "The Namesake" and "The Lowland". In "The Namesake," Ashima and Ashok's inability to assimilate into American culture and form meaningful relationships with the people around them leads to their alienation. Their struggles to reconcile their cultural heritage with their adopted homeland result in a profound sense of disconnection. Similarly, in "The Lowland," Udayan, Subhash, and Gauri all experience alienation in various forms. Their inability to adapt to the new circumstances and environments they find themselves in – whether it's Udayan's revolutionary ideals, Subhash's life in America, or Gauri's isolation after Udayan's death – leads to feelings of loneliness and disconnection. Through these narratives, Lahiri skillfully explores the complexities of alienation, highlighting

the ways in which individuals can become disconnected from their surroundings, their loved ones, and ultimately, themselves.

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