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Raison d'être of Trains and Train Journeys in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*

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Abstract:

*This research article provides a deep insight into the symbolic and metaphorical usage of trains and train journeys by Jhumpa Lahiri in her novel *The Namesake*. In this novel, almost all the major characters travel in trains and these train journeys form an important part of their life. These journeys either in themselves become a life changing event or become a cause of some life changing event in the characters' lives. Ashoke takes a life changing decision to migrate to America only after his train journey to Jamshedpur and the accident of the train that follows. Ashima finds her first association to America after she recovers her belongings that she forgets on a train. All the important incidents of Gogol's life happen either in trains or after a train journey – he meets Ruth in a train, his father tells him about his own train accident and the real reason for naming him Gogol only after a train journey, and he discovers his wife Moushumi's affair in a train journey from New York to Pemberton.*

Keywords: Train, Journey, Discovery, Connection, Self-discovery, Mystery

Introduction:

In the Victorian era, trains emerged as the fastest, easiest and comfortable mode of transportation. So, trains and railway travels form an integral part of the Victorian fiction. Writers like Thomas Hardy, Charles Dickens, George Eliot, Arthur Conan Doyle, etc use trains as a sign of modernity in general which has both positive and negative aspects. Though trains and railway lines disturbed nature by producing noise, wasting productive land, and hindering the production of good

breeds of horses, but they increased connectivity and became a sign of Victorian modernity, progress and civilization. Trains, thus, became an unavoidable destiny of Victorian age, both in fiction and in reality. Railways became the hub and centre of lively cities. In Victorian era, people were mostly excited about train travels as they met different people and many romantic love affairs had their beginning in trains. However, in modern literature, trains are more than just a mode of easy and fast transportation; they have turned in to complex metaphors. Trains have been used by a variety of modern authors to symbolize many a things. A train is not a symbol of modernity anymore but of novelty, continuity of life, passing of time, emotional connectivity or distance. They have become a symbol of self-discovery, responsibility, mystery and it marks the beginning of a new world. A train becomes a space of union, reunion or separation.

In the novel *The Namesake* by Jhumpa Lahiri, almost all the main characters engage in train journeys. These journeys prove to be very crucial for their character development. At the age of 22, Ashoke boards a train to Jamshedpur to collect the treasure of books from his grandfather. While taking to a fellow passenger, Mr. Ghosh, in the train, who is an English return, advises him to travel the world and consider going either to America or England. Ashoke tells him that he is the eldest of six siblings in his house and has a mother to consider. Ashoke revealing his world view to Ghosh says that books serve the purpose of exploring and travelling the world “without moving an inch” (Namesake 16). However, when the train in which they are travelling meets an accident, Ashoke is severely injured and is bedridden for months. This train accident, in which Ashoke almost died, changes his perspective of the world. While he was bedridden, “in those silent hours, he thought often of Ghosh. ‘Pack a pillow and a blanket’, he heard Ghosh say” (Namesake 20). Ashoke decides to give a new beginning to his life after this tragic train accident by embarking on a journey of self-discovery in America. He applies for a fellowship after his B.E. and is accepted in the engineering department of MIT Cambridge America.

Ashima travels in an overcrowded train from downtown Boston to Cambridge after buying gifts for her family, back in India, with Gogol in his stroller. She falls asleep and forgets her things in the train. This train journey signifies passing of time, distance and connectivity, enables Ashima to think about her family in India, and evokes her emotional attachment for them. “She pictures the black iron bars in the window of her parent’s flat, and Gogol, in his American baby clothes and diapers, playing beneath the ceiling fan, on her parent’s four-poster bed. She pictures her father missing a tooth, lost after a recent fall, her mother has written, on the stairs. She tries to imagine how it feel when her grandmother does not recognize her” (Namesake 42). This journey in the train becomes the marker of the journey that she has taken away from her home into a foreign land. After she returns home, having lost all her belongings in the train, Ashoke “calls the MBTA lost and found; the following day the bags are returned, not a teaspoon missing. Somehow this small miracle

causes Ashima to feel connected to Cambridge in a way she has not previously thought possible...” (42-43). So, this event which happens on a train enables Ashima to move a step ahead in her assimilation, feel connected to America and accept this country. Ashima takes another train journey after she comes to know about her father’s death; she leaves all the things she has bought for her father on the train intentionally. This train journey succor’s her to evacuate her emotional despair, escape her suffering of loss to some extent and to express her emotional turmoil.

On his train journey from New Haven to his home at Pemberton Road, Gogol meets Ruth and both of them recognize each other in a vague way as they belong to the same university. Gogol takes a seat besides her and they start talking to each other, first loudly and then in whispers, as a woman sitting across the aisle reprimands them because she’s trying to take a nap. On this train journey to their respective homes, Gogol and Ruth tell each other about their lives, families and origins etc. This journey signifies the developing connectivity between two people. This meeting has an enigmatic effect on Gogol as he continuously thinks about Ruth and the company she offered him. This journey marks the passing time and beginning of a romantic relationship between Ruth and Gogol as they date after meeting again in the university. Gogol experiences a new kind of emotion as it is his first romantic relationship and this relationship becomes an important step towards his American way of living.

The train journey of Gogol taken by him to spend Thanksgiving with his father at home makes the environment favourable for the revelation of the mystery of the devastating accident of Ashoke, which happened years ago in Calcutta. The train in which Gogol is travelling is delayed because someone jumped in front of it, so Gogol misses his connecting train in Boston, which takes him to the suburbs. When Gogol reaches to the station, his father is anxiously and impatiently waiting for him. Ashoke enquires about his safety as he has already got the information about the accident. So, when they drive towards their home and reach into the driveway, Ashoke stops the engine and tells Gogol about the real reason of naming him Gogol. Ashoke tells him about his own train accident which happened in October 1961, when he was travelling to Jamshedpur. He tells him, how the book of Nikolai Gogol saved his life. Someone noticed him move among hundreds of dead bodies as he raised his hand and papers of Nikolai Gogol’s book dropped from his fingers. This revelation of the real cause of Gogol’s odd name allows him self-discovery on his part. This journey enables Gogol and Ashoke to connect emotionally and lessens the distance between them as Gogol thinks “though there are only inches between them, for an instant his father is a stranger, a man who has kept a secret, has survived a tragedy, a man whose past he does not fully know” (Namesake 123). It is on a train journey, when Gogol and Moushumi are travelling from New York to spend Christmas with Gogol’s mother and sister that Gogol comes to know about Moushumi’s affair. In a conversation with Gogol about where to spend the coming summer, Moushumi mentions Dimitri’s

name “immediately a hand had gone to her mouth, accompanied by a small intake of breath” (Namesake 282). It is after months that Gogol is on firm grounds with her. Gogol experiences bewilderment and feels sick, the same way he felt when he came to know about his father’s secret; but instead of sympathy and tenderness that he felt at that time for his father, he feels angry and humiliated for being deceived. This journey and revelation of the secret of Moushumi becomes a rude awakening on the part of Gogol as he realizes, why Moushumi was behaving in a weird manner from the last few months. This journey also becomes a marker of distance between them, as they separate and divorce each other after this train journey. This journey also sets Moushumi free to confess everything, i.e. how this affair developed, to Gogol and to take the responsibility of her act. This journey lets her free of her responsibilities of marriage and being a wife and enables her to migrate to Paris, the city she loves.

Trains not only signify the progress of life in this novel but also its closure. Many people die in the train accident in which Ashoke survives after a grave injury, a businessman is killed by dacoits on a train (in Calcutta) in which the Ganguly family is travelling, and someone commits suicide by jumping in front of the train in which Gogol is travelling home. These deaths signify that individual lives may come to a sudden closure but, life goes on. Through various train journeys Ashoke, Ashima, Gogol, and Moushumi take specific journeys towards self actualization, self realization, and progress and towards seeing the world through different perspectives. Ashoke lets go of his past life structures and sees the world in a new way after his train accident. Ashima moves on emotionally and finds association to America after her train journey. Train journeys mark the beginning of Gogol and Ruth’s relationship, and of Gogol and Moushumi’s marriage.

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