

Cultural spaces: A thematic reading of Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*

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Abstract

Literature, as a product of culture becomes the source by which we would be awoken about the global scenario and multiculturalism. Good fiction embellishes facts and adds interesting layers to hold readers' attention and make people aware about the contemporary society. Jhumpa Lahiri a Pulitzer prize winner novelist have explored the identity crisis, racial and cultural conflicts, ethnicity, sense of belongingness, loneliness and alienation among the immigrants in the novel *The Namesake*. The paper discusses the term 'Cultural Spaces in diasporic world', its role and consequences in contemporary times. For every freedom won, a tradition is lost. For every second generation assimilated, a first generation in one way or another spurned. For the gains of goods and services, an identity gets lost, and uncertainty found.

The paper discusses the major issues pertaining to the Indian Diaspora and raises socio-cultural and psychosomatic identity questions. Cultural cross-currents have led to a hybrid culture and a new process of cultural assimilation. A mixed cultural milieu opens up new vistas of communication and dialogue in this cosmopolitan world.

Keywords: Cultural disorientation, belongingness, cultural disharmony, Multiculturalism, Indian tradition, identity crises, transformation, globalization, universal fraternity

1. Introduction

The Namesake by Jhumpa Lahiri, a Pulitzer Prize winner novelist discusses the cultural conflicts before the first and the second generation of Indian Diaspora. The Namesake presents characters as the victims of displacement, dual identity, multiculturalism, and struggle for name, cultural disorientation and belongingness. This is more common with the second generation immigrants who are unable to accept either their parental identity or the existing social identity. The Namesake is about this perpetual dilemma faced by immigrant as they struggle to maintain their identities while trying to shake them off at the same time. "The first generation's story was about adaptation and learning acculturing and also discovering new things about themselves. The generation finds itself presented with two conflicting realities and cultures and sets of expectations-one of the host countries through the socio-cultural surroundings and the other of the home country through their parents. (Batra 50)

The change of geographical location is the first major difference for the first generation immigrants like Ashoke and Ashima. The differences in the landscape- "heaps of broken snow", "the frigid New England chill", "leafless trees with ice-covered branches", "not a soul on the street" (30) on the other hand colourful and crowded India, which is strewn about all over the novel through the experience of isolation. Ashima is preoccupied with the Indian tradition, culture and language. Her motherhood in a foreign land is much severe for her. The continuous longing for her home land, "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 the previous life has vanished, replaced by something more complicated and demanding." (49) Ashoke adjusts himself since he feels that the foreign land is the land of opportunities. He accepts both

the identities: "Though Ashima continues to wear nothing but saris and sandals from Bata, Ashoke, accustomed to wearing tailor-made pants and shirts all his life, learns to buy ready-made.... Though he is now a tenured full professor, he stops wearing jackets and ties to the university." (65)

The first generation Indian-Americans Ashima, Ashoke never fail to follow what they carried with them from their mother country whereas the second generation Indian-Americans Gogol, Sonia and Moushumi, find it difficult to identify themselves either with the people at home or with the society outside. The insistence of the parents on the their children being true to their native land but the more they are focused, the less they pay attention with an excuse that they are living in America. Through Gogol, Lahiri presents identity crisis, his name is one of the chief causes which make him feel alienated, his loneliness starts from the moment he enters the world. His mother thinks to her - "she has never known a person entering the world so alone." (24) After his birth, selecting a name becomes a problem for them. The difference between the naming process in Indian and American cultures pushes into chaos. All of a sudden, it becomes inevitable for Ashoke and Ashima to decide on a name for the baby to be discharged from the hospital. Ashoke names the child Gogol after the Russian writer Nikolai Gogol. The book of this author helps him save his life; So Ashoke has great reverence for this author and his name. For him, Gogol name fills him with joy and indicates a new life. But this very name, the first factor which contributes to the problem of identity crisis. Gogol does not understand the emotional significance of the name and like to be known by a name which is neither Indian, nor American, nor even first name. When he comes to know about his namesake, the Russian author, he becomes desperate to get rid of his name. He does not feel like an American with this name, "sounds ludicrous to his ears, lacking dignity of gravity." (76) He does not want to read Nikolai Gogol because

he thinks it “would mean paying tribute to his namesake, accepting it somehow”. (92) Nikhil replaces Gogol when he enters Yale as a freshman, feel relief and confident. Here starts his transformation. He starts doing many activities which he could not dare to do as Gogol. But a new dilemma encircles him – He changes his name, but “he does not feel like Nikhil” (105). The loss of the old name was not easy to forget. When he visits his home “Nikhil evaporates and Gogol claims him again” (106) in this way he struggles to carry the burden of two names/ culture. He considered an ‘ABCD’ “an American Born Confused Desi” But he considers himself an American but American society says, “But you’re Indian” (157).

Adesh Pal says, “The first generation has strong attachment with the country of their origin. From the second generation onwards ties with the homeland gradually get replaced by those with the adopted country. Food, clothes, language, religion, music, dance, myths, legends, customs of individual community etc. become the markers of identity. These are retained, discarded or adopted differently at different times and places.” (Pal 2004) Jhumpa Lahiri’s yearning for Indian sensibility is best exposed through her first generation Indian-American characters. Ashok and Ashima try hard to hold on to their Indian-ness, their culture despite surrounded by the American culture all around. They insist for Kathakali dance, Bengali literature, Bengali culinary items and some other cultural traits to Bengali ‘men, milieu and moment’. The second generation immigrants are not attached to their cultural past, in fact; they find it easier to accept America’s hybrid culture. Both Ashoke and Ashima also accept and adopt a few things of the culture of the settled land since the survival of the second generation has been destined there. They even start celebrating Christmas for the children look forward to such celebrations more than the worship of *Durga* and *Saraswathi*, and decorate the door with a wreath during December. Ibrahim Khalilullah in his article points out that “Lahiri tries to show the way these immigrant Indians assimilate in a changed perspective, shows that characters no longer behave as traumatized refugees but their life endeavour is to negotiate the twist and turns of their life situation in a changed scenario of America that seems to provide opportunities” (119).

Cultural disharmony has not only affected the first generation Indian-Americans but also the second generation Indian-Americans. When the Gangulies go to Calcutta, the spirits of Ashoke and Ashima become boundless, “Ashima, now Monu, weeps with relief and Ashoke, now Mithu, kisses his brothers on both cheeks, holds their heads in his hands. Gogol and Sonia know these people but they do not feel close to them as their parents do. Within minutes, before their eyes Ashoke and Ashima slip into bolder, complicated versions of themselves, their voices louder, their smiles wider, revealing a confidence Gogol and Sonia never seen on Pemberton Road.” (81-82) Their visits to India give vent to their physical and emotional displacement. But, for Gogol and Sonia, they feel like losing their identity; they feel alien in their real root, they feel like losing their privacy and above all, the sudden nearness and overflowing affection of so many relatives is distressing. Only on their return to America, they feel at home. While discussing the problem of immigrants, Jaydeep Sarangi in his article ‘Bond and Bondage’, ‘Feeling at home can be an indication of a process, which is known as adaptation. Man cannot be uprooted thoroughly from his socio-cultural fixity.

Yet, none can transcend his cultural identity; certainly no great writer like Jhumpa Lahiri does.” (Sarangi 143)

Among the second generation Indian-Americans Gogol, the protagonist of novel is true child of cultural disorientation. He willingly accepts the American way of life in order to gain a sense of belongingness in the new land. In his early romances, he is careful to avoid any contact with his past or upbringing. However, he cannot completely disown his native culture during his father’s sudden death which forces him to look back at his own culture. Like the other Indian he too remains a consolation to his mother and his family. His sudden closeness to his mother makes his girlfriend, Maxine feel that she is ignored and couldn’t understand his cultural background and provide solace. He even begins to realize that instead of abandoning or diminishing the importance of either culture he must learn to mash the two together that his identity is embellished by both cultures. However, he decides to marry the Bengali Indian-American Moushumi Mazoomdar, his mother’s choice. She may also be described as the daughter of the cross-cultural heritage like Gogol and Sonia. Moushumi, like Gogol, wants to be a true Bengali house wife like her mother but her conflicting identities wreck her marriage and “she wonders if she is the only women in her family ever to have betrayed her husband, to have been unfaithful. This is what upsets her most to admit: that the affair causes her to feel strangely at peace, the complication of it calming her, structuring her day.” (266) For the second generation Indian Americans, like Gogol and Moushumi, it is inevitable to be caught up in a critical cultural juncture at a particular moment in the history of Indian American immigration. The question of identity has remained a source of conflicts and has led to wars in history. But it is more persistent for those who are grown up in two worlds simultaneously. In short, Lahiri’s *The Namesake* is about a reference bible of experience for immigrant population of South-East Asian Diaspora. The process of globalization has not only unsettled people and cultures but has created new identities and affiliations in terms of both conflicts and collaborations. Globalization might have abolished physical borders but it has set up intellectual and psychosomatic borders. Through this novel Lahiri stresses the fact that for diasporic people ‘home’ is a very fluid concept which changes its meaning along with the prevailing mindset of the person. As a diasporic text, in the parent child relationship we find the generation harboring essence of dislocation and the other finding it rootless. For every freedom won, a tradition is lost. For every second generation assimilated, a first generation in one way or another spurned. For the gains of goods and services, an identity gets lost, and uncertainty found. The identity of the individual, which is consistently affected by society, is something one has to discover through a process of reflections and negotiations. As Hall says, “identity as a production, which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside representation” (Hall 10). The assimilation of culture and values, at the same time opens towards a new understanding the creation of new identities, spaces for growth, resolution of conflicts and a new culture, either composite or plural. Lahiri conveys a crystal –clear message to the third-world people who are quite keen on entering into the first-world with strong aspirations for a better future without realizing that this displacement to the first-world demands greater adaptability in terms of both climate and culture. As *Vasudhaiv Kutumbakam*

is ingrained in Indian philosophy, so multiculturalism should not be regarded as threat but a part and parcel of the life of all human beings living on the earth, reaching the great ideals of world peace, harmony, and universal fraternity. As Gandhiji says in 'Young India', "I do not want my house to be walled in on all sides and my windows to be stuffed. I want the cultures of all lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any" (1921).

2. Reference

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