

## Cultural disruption in Jhumpa Lahiri's Novel "The Namesake"

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### Abstract

The Question of identity is always a difficult one, and especially for those who are culturally displaced. The immigrants are those who grow up in two worlds. Jhumpa Lahiri believes that for immigrants, the challenge of exile, the loneliness, the constant sense of alienations, the knowledge of and longing for a lost world are more explicit and distressing than for their children. The Namesake is essentially, a story about the struggles and hardships of a Bengali couple who immigrate to the United States to form a life outside of everything they know. The current research work highlights the cultural disruption in Jhumpa Lahiri's novel "The Namesake".

**Keywords:** culture, identity, namesake

### Introduction

The novel is a narrative about the assimilation of an Indian Bengali Family from Calcutta, the Ganguli's, into America, over thirty years (from 1968-2000); the cultural dilemmas experienced by them and their American born children in different ways, the spatial, cultural and emotional dislocations suffered by them in their effort to settle "home" in the new land. New York Times writes about this novel, "This is a novel as affecting in its Chekhovian exploration of fathers and sons, parents and children as it is resonant in its exploration of what is acquired and lost by immigrants and their children in pursuit of the American dream".

The Name sake', takes the Ganguli family from their tradition bound life in Calcutta through their fraught transformation into America. On the heels of their arranged wedding, Ashoka and Ashima Ganguli settle together in Cambridge, Massachusetts. An engineer by training, Ashoka adapts far less warily than his wife; who resists all things American and pines for her family. When their son is born, the task of naming him betrays the vexed results of bringing old ways to the new world. Named after a Russian writer by his Indian parents in memory of a catastrophe years before, Gogol Ganguli brows only that he suffers the bender of his heritage as well as his old, antic name.

The novel shows how the immigrants face cultural dilemmas in the foreign system Lahiri shows that the immigrants in their enthusiasm to stick to their own cultural beliefs and customs gradually imbibe the cultural ways of the host country too. Their own children groomed to be "bilingual" and "bicultural" face cultural dilemmas and displacement more.

Meenakshi Mukherjee has rightly pointed out the Indianess of Indian English Writer is a matter of identity. This is related to our mind, thought and emotion. The peculiar character of Indianess can cannot be explained through words, as 'brahma' cannot be realized through a series of lecture on 'brahma'. The diasporic writers write on the theme of east west encounter in their own individual manner. In fact, the diasporic writers are negotiating between home and host countries. A hub of immigrants are migrating to the United States from around the

world. National borders are fought over and redrawn materially as well as textually, further undermining any sense of a stable location Writers create cultural products emerging from evermore shifting ground we find "our identity is at once plural and partial" and "sometimes we feel that we straddle two culture.... it is a fertile territory to occupy for the writers."

The present paper explores to what extent do the immigrant writer locate and stabilize the transnational identity in their work. Do the immigrant live in a land of nowhere, resulting from their attempt to overcome cultural issues and negotiate diverse racial identities. Do the conflict between rootedness, constituting a tie to their past and up rootedness, living in the present contemporary immigrant writer no longer cling to the themes of dislocation, displacement and up rootedness but they are affected by the notion of globalization and transnationalism, they attempt to locate and stabilize their identities in the new territories. The paper also explores where the immigrant writer goes beyond the conventional wisdom and creates the 'third space' where they create their identity as transnational. As Homi K. Bhabha's concept of 'third space' (third space where we negotiate between different identities) as the common ground of negotiation and transformation, which is neither assimilation nor otherness but represents the history of coalition building and the transnational and cultural diasporic connection. Jhumpa Lahiri emphasizes not only the immigrants who leave somewhere called home to make a new home in the United States but also the endless process of coming and goings that create familial, cultural, linguistic and economic ties across national borders. Her characters live in between, straddling two worlds, making their identity transnational.

Culture suggest the arts, customs and institutions of a certain people or nation, thereby helping us to distinguish a certain people or nation, thereby helping us to distinguish a certain group of people from others and one nation from another. It also helps in the burgeoning of a distinct national identity among its citizens. Multiculturalism in the context of one nation's experience of vicissitudes appears to institutionalize another way of expressing that nation cultural identity.

### Cultural Dislocation and Changing Identities in Jhumpa Lahiri's Novel "The Namesake"

'The Namesake' provides readers with different paradigms of life among people representing distinct cultures and worldviews. It is in this context, however, that we ought to remember Edward Said's skepticism with the concept of cultures as something distinctive, representative of an exclusive to a certain group or nation in Culture and Imperialism so as to understand the basic problem with such terms. Said writes:

Culture is a concept that includes a refining and elevating element, each society's reservoir of the best that has been known and thought, as Mathew Arnold put it in the 1860's Arnold believed that culture palliates, if it does not altogether neutralizes, the ravage of a modern, aggressive, mercantile and brutalizing urban experience....In time culture comes to be associated, often aggressively, with the nation or the nation or the state, this differentiates 'us from them' almost always with some degree of identity, and a rather combative one at that....(xii) (Said:1993)

Against this concept of culture as a homogenization of the good, patriotic attributes of a nation for the sake of exclusiveness and creation and preservation of an identity, Said mentions 'multiculturalism and hybridity' next in order to praise their 'permissiveness' and 'relatively liberal philosophies' (xiv). In case of Jhumpa Lahiri's character, a search for their origin, finding a place or a nation that may be called one's own and belonging to either the Indian subcontinent or the USA or in other words, making a choice between the concept of cultural identity and multiculturalism seen to remain juxtaposed always.

'Multiculturalism' suggest the co-existence of a number of different culture. It does not prescribe homogenization and conformity directly nor does it encourage overtly different ethnic religious, lingual or racial constituents of a particular society to denigrate and alienate each other to such a society is damaged or destroyed permanently. It is at a transitional point between two hemispheres east and west and two segments of the world hierarchy –third and first –or, the Indian subcontinent and the USA that we may locate most of Jhumpa Lahiri's fictional world. Jhumpa Lahiri first novel 'The Namesake' (2003) explores the theme of transnational identity and trauma of cultural dislocation. Being "an Indian by ancestry, British by birth, American by immigration" (Nayak:206:2002) <sup>[4]</sup> and her parents having the experience of "the perplexing bicultural universe" of Calcutta in India (now Kolkata) and the United States," Lahiri mines the immigrants experience in a way superior to Bharti Mukherjee and others" observes Aditya Sinha (Sinha: 2003)

This novel is a story about the assimilation of an Indian Bengali family from Calcutta, the Ganguli, into America, over thirty years (from 1968- 2000); the cultural conflict experienced by them and their American born children in different ways, the spatial, cultural and emotional dislocation suffered by them in their effort to settle "home" in the new land. Like many "professional Indians" who "in the waves of the early sixty's", "went to the United States, as part of the brain drain" (Spivak: 61:1990) <sup>[3]</sup>. Ashoke Ganguli too leaves his homeland, and comes to America in pursuit of higher studies to do research in the field of "fibre optics" with a prospect of settling down "with security and respect" (The Namesake:105). After two year's stay in the USA he comes

back to India, marries a nineteen years old Bengali girl from Calcutta named Ashima, who has no idea or dream of going to a place called Boston so far off from her parents, but agrees for the marriage since 'he would be there'. After the legal formalities, she flies alone to be with her husband, with a heavy heart and lots of instructions from her family members and relatives who come to see her off at Dum Dum Airport "not to eat beef or wear skirts or cut off her hair and forget the family the moment she landed in Boston.(The Namesake, 37)

Ashima often feels upset and homesick and sulks alone in their three room apartment which is too hot in summer and too cold in the winter, far removed from the description of house in the English novels she has read, she feels spatially and emotionally dislocated from the comfortable 'home' of her father full of so many loving ones and yearns to go back. Home is an 'a mystic place of desire' in the immigrants imagination. (Brah: 192:1997) <sup>[2]</sup> Most of the time she remains lost in the memories of her 'home' thinking of the activities going there by calculating 'the Indians time on her hands' which is 'ten and a half hours ahead in Calcutta'. She spends her time on rereading Bengali Short Stories, poems and article from the Bengali magazines, she has brought with her. She "keeps her ears trained, between the hours of twelve and two, for the sound of the postman's footsteps on the porch, followed by the soft click of the mail slot in the door" (36), waiting for her parents letters which she keeps collecting in her white bag and re-reads them often. But the most terrifying experience for her is 'mother hood in a foreign land', 'so far from home', unmonitored and unobserved by those she loved, 'without a single grandparent or parent or uncle or aunt at her side' and to 'raise a child in a country where she is related to no one, where she knows so little, where life seems so tentative and spare.' (The Namesake: 2003) After the birth of her son Gogol, she wants to back to Calcutta and raise her child there in the company of the caring and loving ones but decides to stay back for Ashoke's sake and brings up the baby in the Bengali 'ways' so 'to put him to sleep, she sings him the Bengali songs her mother had sung to her' (The Namesake: 35). She keeps all her emotional hazards and disappoints to herself and not intending to worry her parents. She presents in her letter a good picture of the domestic facilities and cleanliness here.

Gradually she learns how to be independent. Takes pride in rearing up the child, moves out alone in the market with her baby in the pram, communicates with the passersby who smile at him and goes to meet her husband on the campus, thus she grows confident. The very feeling of displacement is felt more by her, after their migration from the University Apartments to a University town outside Boston when Ashoke is 'hired as an Assistant Professor of Electrical Engineering at the University'. The shift to this suburban area with no 'streetlights, no public transportation, no stores for miles' makes Ashima feel 'more drastic more distressing than the move from Calcutta to Cambridge had been'. Feeling lonely and displaced in foreign land. Ashima begins to realise that, 'being a foreigner... 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 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.” (The Namesake: 49-50).

Like immigrant of other communication Ashima and Ashoketo make their circle of Bengali acquaintance. They all become friends only for the reason that “they all come from Calcutta” (38). Robert Cohen rightly remarks “a member’s adherence to a diasporic community is demonstrated by an acceptance of an inescapable link with their past migration history” (Cohen: ix: 1997) <sup>[5]</sup>. These Bengali families celebrate these different customs and ceremonies like, marriages, death, childbirth, festivals etc. together. They celebrate these as per Bengali customs, wearing their best traditional attire, thus trying to preserve their culture in a new land. John McLeod remarks that “their belief, tradition, customs, behaviours and values along with their ‘possession and belonging’ are carried by migrants with them to ‘new places’ (McLeod: 211:2000) <sup>[6]</sup>. The immigrants also face political displacement “they argue riotously over the films of Ritwik Ghatak verses those of Satyajit Ray for hours they argue about the politics of America, a country in which none of them is eligible to vote” (The Namesake:38).

### Research Study

Lahiri in her novel ‘The Namesake’ also shows how these immigrants are making efforts to preserve their ‘home culture’ in their new homes. The first generation immigrants train their children in Bengali language literature and history at home and through special Bengali Classes and expose them to their own family lineage, religious custom, rites, beliefs food tastes, habit and mannerisms. They also groom them to cope with the way of life in America. Lahiri shows that the immigrants in their enthusiasm to stick to their own cultural belief and customs, gradually imbibe the cultural ways of the host country to. Ashima teaches Gogol ‘to memorize a four line children poem by Tagore, names of deities at the same time when she goes to sleep in the same time when she goes to sleep in the afternoon she switches the television to channel -2 and tells Gogol to watch ‘sesame street’ and the electronic company “in order to keep up with the English he uses at nursery school” (54). Though initially Ashoke did not like the celebration of Christmas and thanksgiving but as Gogol recalls that “...it was for him, for Sonia (his younger sister) that his parents had gone to the trouble of learning these customs” (286). Their own children groomed to be ‘bilingual’ and ‘bicultural’ face cultural dilemmas and displacement more though forced to sit in pujas and other religious ceremonies along with the children of other Bengali families. Gogol and Sonia, like them, relish American and continental food more than the syrupy Bengali dishes and enjoy the celebration of the Christmas.

Transnationalism is a process by which migrants, “through their daily activities and social, economic and political relations, create fields that cross national boundaries” (Linda, Schiller: 1-2:1994). In fact, migrants live a “complex existence” that forces them to confront and rework different hegemonic constructions of identity developed in their home or new nation state(s) and “reterritorialize” their practices as well as their identities.” (Bill, Griffiths, Helen: 1989). For example, as Ashima and other Bengali immigrants in ‘The Namesake’ feel deterritorialized in the United States, the attempt to restructure the territory by starting to celebrate Christian festivals in their own way. They celebrate Christmas

and thanksgivings the way they would deserve Hindu festival like Dipawali and Durga Pooja. By doing so, they integrate US culture that crosses national boundaries.

Towards the second-half of ‘The Namesake’ Gogol celebrates his twenty seventh birthday at his girlfriend Maxine’s parents Lake house in New Hampshire without his parents. Maxine and her mother Lydia throw a dinner to celebrate his birthday. At dinner Gogol encounters Pamela, a middle aged white woman. Who insists on viewing him as Indian, despite his polite response that he is from Boston. Although Gogol must never get sick when he travels to India. When Gogol must never get sick when he travels. When Gogol denies it, she asserts, “but you’re an Indian... I’d think the climate wouldn’t affect you given your heritage” (156). Maxine’s mother corrects Pamela, asserting that Gogol is American, but in the end even she hesitates, asking him if he actually was born in the United States (157). Even Gogol’s United States citizenship does not guarantee his identity as an American. This tendency to categorize Gogol as an Indian might be viewed as an example of “othering” of “Indian” immigrants in the United States, where individuals are identified according to their roots, rather than their country of residence or citizenship. However ‘The Namesake’ is a novel that celebrates the cultural hybridity resulting from globalization and the interconnectedness of the modern world and rethinks conventional immigrant’s experience. Lahiri is aware of the existing problem of cultural diversity in the multicultural United States, and she argues that the struggle to grasp a transnational identity becomes an urgent issue for immigrants in this environment. While she represents Gogol as someone who is confused about his identity, she also presents Gogol as a prototypical transnational agent who lives between two different worlds with the possibility of creating multiplicity of identities. In fact Lahiri offers a revision of the contemporary United States not as a static and insular territory but a participant in transnational relations. Given the nature of mobility of people and their culture across nations, Lahiri deterritorializes the definite national and cultural identities of India suggesting that individuals cannot confine themselves within the narrow concept of national and cultural boundaries in this globalised world characterized by hybridity, transculturalism and migration.

Gogol doesn’t think of India as his country or ‘desh’, he sees himself as purely American. Though Gogol considers himself an American, he is brought up by between two diametrically different cultures, similar to Bhabha’s in between space where people can, to a certain extent, move and negotiate within their worlds (Homi: 1-2:1994). He is both Indian and American. He belongs to Indian parents on a different geographical space than India and is acculturated as an Indian at home but outside the house, he is an American. He thinks of India as a ‘foreign country’ far away from home, both physically and psychologically (The Namesake 118). He struggles to reconcile his dual culture. On one hand, he is fascinated with the free and happy lifestyles of his American girlfriend, Maxine. On the other hand he feels a sense of obligation towards his parents. Like that of every immigrant child Gogol’s real challenge is to secure an identity in the midst of differences influenced by US lifestyle. Gogol tries to distance himself from his parents and adopt an American identity. He spends ‘his night with Maxine, sleeping under the same roof as her parents, a thing Ashima refuses to admit her Bengali

friends' (166). Lahiri's character attempts to form a multiplicity of identities in a process of cultural formation. Their cultural identity formation includes pieces of cultural inheritance to incorporate into their lives as Americans, which is similar to Hall's idea of 'being' and 'becoming' of cultural identity (Hall:70:1989). Redefining homeland becomes a matter of redefining identity.

### **Significance of the Study**

Lahiri's focus on the tension between past and present complicates Hall's idea of 'being' and 'becoming'. For instance Gogol lives between the world of past and present. Although he attempts to escape from the past by denouncing his cultural roots and changing his name, he is someone how connected to his roots. He is uncomfortable with his past. He likewise cannot understand the significance of the name Gogol that his parents chose for him. Rather it is because of the very name, he is being teased by his friend. As a result, when he turns eighteen, he goes into a Massachusetts courtroom and asks the judge to change his name. Gogol thinks that by switching his name to Nikhil he would get rid of his past, but his parents still calls him by his original name. This shows that a simple name change does not alter the fabric of a person. Later he comes to know from his father Ashoke that how his name 'Gogol' is connected with his father's past life. Ashoke tells Gogol, 'the story of the train he had ridden twenty - eighty years ago, in October 1961...about the night that had saved him and about the year afterward, when he'd been unable to move'. Ashoke survived the accident because he was reading Gogol "The Overcoat" when the accident occurred near two hundred and nine kilometres away from Calcutta "killing the passengers in their sleep". Gogol realizes how his life had been interwoven between the past and present. However, although Gogol is living in the in-between space and struggling to balance the two different world, he still longs to balance the two different world, he still longs to escape from his cultural roots and venture into his US girlfriend's life.

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