
Hybrid Identities and Cultural Dissonance in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*

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Abstract: The well known phrase ‘diaspora’ refers to the people of dispersion from their native soil to overseas. Diasporic folks often endure emotional and mental challenges such as alienation, defencelessness, cultural dislocation and a fragmented sense of identity both in personally and as a group. They often find themselves trapped between the customs of their native culture and the expectations of the adopted one. While striving to maintain their own cultural values in an unfamiliar land, they also have to trust that their children will maintain their home traditions. Conversely, the second generation immigrants face the twin burden of satisfying their parents’ cultural expectations while concurrently adapting to the norms of their exotic peers, resulting in a conflicted and separated identity. The same issue was dealt in the novel *The Namesake* by Jhumpa Lahiri who is a second generation immigrant, explored the exertion of migrated Bengali family in Boston. This study aims to analyse the diasporic sensitivity and cultural conflicts that are confronted by both first and second generation immigrants of America.

Keywords: tradition, identity, displacement, adoptability, sustenance.

Diaspora is a social formation that is outer surface of the nation of origin. It is a significant phenomenon concerning, of a group of people, deracinating from homeland, furthermore conserving in the hostland. Diasporic subjects are packed with intense nostalgia for the land they left behind, still tend to acculturate or assimilate the new ethnicity of foreign land. The phenomenon of diaspora has accepted transnational proportions such as accelerated transport and communication, well advanced technology, pliability in government policies, effortless investment modes and first-rate political as well as economic networks. By these developments diaspora and transnationalism are considered as coterminous terms. Transnationalism is an equivalent subject analysed within the framework of dispersed populations. The nuances between ‘diaspora’ and ‘transnationalism’ stated as ‘human centred’ and ‘impersonal forces’ respectively. Diaspora writing has flourish by the significant luminaries like Amitav Ghosh, Salman Rushdie, V.S.Naipaul Bharati Mukherjee, Jhumpa Lahiri, Anita Desai, Bapsi Sidhwa, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. Jhumpa Lahiri is one among the acclaimed authors, belonged to second-generation immigrant set, explored diasporic tensions by examined identity crisis in addition to cultural conflicts faced by both first and second-generation immigrants in America.

The dazzling novel by Jhumpa Lahiri, *The Namesake*, presented the life story of Ganguli’s family and their efforts to survive in the middle class vicinity at Boston. Ashoke Ganguli is a research scholar at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, married Ashima, a nineteen-year-old woman from India, and settled in

the exotic land, United States. In time, Ashoke takes up a teaching position at MIT. While the couple becomes materially established, they grapple with emotional disturbance that marked by a profound sense of alienation, nostalgia and the loss of cultural lineage. In addition, they deal with the moments of mortification because of their Indian legacy in the American sub-cultural context. Ashoke and Ashima go all-out to uphold their native traditions and inculcate the same in their children. That shows their Determination of preserving their cultural identity. However, both they and their children struggle to reconcile the demands of American culture with their Indian values. They remain unable to completely assimilate into American life or dissolve their ties with Indian heritage. Torn between two varied cultural worlds, they lived in a state of cultural dichotomy and divided identity.

Ashima is the female protagonist, who equally endures emotional segregation and cultural discomfiture in her new environment. In the native land Calcutta, she enjoyed a supportive extended family and societal system comprising parents, grandparents, siblings, relatives and friends. Her life at the other hand flowed smoothly that enriched by camaraderie and shared customs. In contrast, her new life in America is marked by solitude and incarceration that restricted to the domestic sphere. Ashima's only solace comes from Bengali novels and enquiring letters from home which she reads repeatedly. She anxiously anticipates communication from her family that clinging to memories of her past, native Bengali cuisine and the cultural festivities such as Durga Puja, Diwali, and Holi. Her experience typifies the condition of woman immigrant loneliness. The new life she obtained in America is reduced to caring for her husband and satisfying her duties as a dutiful spouse.

The significant circumstances of their life accelerated the estrangement feel. Ashima's sense of alienation deepens during her first pregnancy period, as she navigates the untried land of impending motherhood devoid of the familial support system typical in her inhabitant culture. She terribly misses the nurturing company of her parents and the traditional foods associated with pregnancy in Bengal, for instance pickles and puffed rice. Lacking close relative female companionship or emotional reassurance she faces childbirth in a foreign hospital that attended by doctors and nurses rather than family elders. This is the moment that becomes emblematic of her diasporic state. Jhumpa Lahiri poignantly captures her inner turmoil as

“Without a single grandparent or parent or uncle or aunt at her side, the baby's birth, like most everything else in America, feels somehow haphazard, only half true. As she strokes and suckles and studies her son, she can't help but pity him.” (Lahiri, 25)

Their son is named as Gogol by Ashoke that a decision born out of obligation when a post letter containing the suggested Indian name from Ashima's grandmother failed to arrive on time. So he chose the name in tribute to his favourite and memorable Russian author Nikolai Gogol, whose short story book had inadvertently saved his life during a train accident in India. The symbolic importance of the name intertwines with themes of memory, survival and cultural admixture. But for Ashima, raising a child in a country where no familial support and deficient cultural familiarity felt overwhelming. She voiced her deep anxiety to Ashoke by saying: “I'm saying hurry up and finish your degree.” And then, impulsively, admitting it for the first time, “I'm saying I don't want to raise Gogol alone in this country. It's not right. I want to go back”. (Lahiri, 33)

Ashoke habitually returns home and find Ashima's despondency, weeping quietly over letters from her parents. Her emotional turmoil intensified after they relocate to a suburban university town after Ashoke becomes a professor and purchased a modest house. The latest move to the suburbs felt more dislocated for Ashima than the initial migration from Calcutta. The author captured her inner condition with notable compassion as

“ Though no longer pregnant...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”. (Lahiri, 49)

It is an intense metaphor that articulated the persistent state of liminality, displacement and cultural estrangement that defines the immigrant experience.

Ashima and Ashoke faced the challenges of immigrant loneliness with significant strength by gradually adapting a new role as a mother, worker in a foreign land respectively. Ashima built a structured routine and cared her child Gogol with resilience and tenderness that included singing traditional Bengali lullabies learned from her mother as well as reading books. Her strength is an evident as she transformd her isolation into nurturing through cultural continuity. Five years later, she gave birth to a daughter, Sonali; later called Sonia - a name selected in advance to circumvent governmental snags at the hospital. As a loving and devoted self sacrificing mother, Ashima raised both children to the best of her ability to inculcate values also attempting to preserve her cultural inheritance.

As the first- generation immigrants, Ashoke and Ashima remain deeply rooted in their Bengali identity and struggled to pass it to their children. They gave Bengali language practice at home by introducing literature, history and religion. They taught the children about the Bengali Renaissance and nationalist figures. Ashima persuaded Gogol to memorize poems by Rabindranath Tagore and some sacred slogans. So the children are familiarized with Hindu customs, rituals and Gods such as Durga, Lakshmi and Saraswathi. The Gangulis believe it is fundamental for their children to retain cultural knowledge while concurrently adjusting to the atmosphere in which they are raised. Ashima allows Gogol to watch American educational programmes like 'Sesame Street' and 'The Electric Company' to support his English language acquisition. While they continue the traditional Bengali food, no restriction to the children for enjoying American cuisine. This act is clearly exhibited a conscious effort to balance Eastern traditions with western influences.

Even with Ashima and Ashoke's conscious choice to settle in the USA for professional opportunities they cannot relinquish their deep connection to India. Ashima, in particular, experiences dissension between Indian customs and American practices by children school cultural activities. As Gogol and Sonia grow older, Ashima's cultural anxiety intensifies particularly as her children begin to reveal some behaviour and liking that shaped more by American than Indian culture. Gogol's continuing act of decent distance from his heritage becomes painful. At the age of eighteen, he unilaterally changed his name from Gogol to Nikhil that rejected a name that holds personal and symbolic significance within his family. He thought that his name carries neither Indian nor American cultural resonance and has subjected him to ridicule. He had completed the legal formalities without consulting his parents. He had chosen to attend Yale rather than MIT by defying parents' aspiration. He pursued architecture instead of conventionally honoured professions like engineering, medicine or law. This proved the nature and inclination of second generation people in exotic soil.

"He prefers New York, a place which his parents do not know well, whose beauty they are blind to, which they fear." (Lahiri,126)

Gogol started to experiment the behaviours and relationships that challenge his parents' cultural expectations. He smokes, drinks and becomes passionately involved with American women that makes him to feel free from the boundaries framed by his parents. His initial relationship with Ruth is met with censure from Ashima. She thought that he is too young for such commitments and will find a way to come out of it. Shortly he falls in love with Maxine and even lives with her parents in an unconventional agreement. Further he spoils his ties with his family. This period marked a crucial cultural divergence.

"his mother says 'please Gogol. You haven't been home since May'. I have a job, Ma. I'm busy... I'm going on a vacation. I've already made plans." (Lahiri, 144)

Though his parents had meticulously instilled Indian values, Gogol's actions echoed a rebuff of those teachings. Likewise, Sonia adopts the lifestyle of her birthplace like choosing an American of mixed Jewish Ben as her life

partner. Unlike her initial conflict to Gogol's relationships, Ashima accepted Sonia's choice by recognizing Ben's positive influence and support. Also the wedding is solemnized in Calcutta.

Gogol's internal conflict between Eastern and Western values remains unresolved even though he had obvious assimilation. While in the beginning smitten with Maxine's affluent and liberal American household, Gogol eventually realized the cultural and emotional chasm between them. However, this captivation causes him to pass over his parents also, in retrospect, felt like a betrayal of his heritage. After his father's unexpected death, significantly, Gogol undergoes a insightful transformation. His return to Indian traditions like shaving his head, performing Hindu interment rites and travelling to India for immersing his father's ashes in the sacred Ganges that marked a reunification with his cultural line.

The sudden death of Ashoke becomes a decisive moment in Gogol's life. His renewed sense of duty toward his mother and sister prompted him to visit Massachusetts on weekends regardless of working in New York. By the direction of Ashima, he married Moushumi, a candidate of Ph.D. in French Literature, second generation Bengali American with whom the families had long association. Conversely, the marriage union deteriorated quickly by reason of Moushumi's want for personal freedom as well as her extramarital affair with Dimitri. As Lahiri notes, "She is the only woman in her family to have betrayed her husband, to have been unfaithful" (267). The marriage ends in divorce within a year, underscoring Gogol's continuing struggle to find personal and cultural identity.

Gogol's experience illustrates the broader dilemma of second-generation immigrants, who are suspended between dual cultural affiliations. On one hand, they feel the burden of honoring their parents' traditions; on the other, they are compelled to integrate into the cultural fabric of the society in which they are born. This duality leads to a fragmented or "divided" identity, a theme Lahiri herself identifies with. In an interview with Hindustan Times, she reflects:

"It was always a question of allegiance, of choice. I wanted to please my parents.... I also wanted to meet the expectations of my American peers.... It was a classic case of divided identity" (qtd. in Sinha 186).

Thus, through the character of Gogol and his evolving consciousness, Lahiri powerfully articulates the complexities of diasporic identity, intergenerational conflict, and the emotional cost of cultural negotiation.

Experiences of humiliation and marginalization are common among immigrant communities in host societies, and the Gangulis are no exception. An incident in *The Namesake* poignantly illustrates this when young Gogol draws a picture of his mother with a traditional bindi on her forehead and presents it to his teacher, Mrs. Merton. Rather than appreciating the cultural symbol, she responds with a disparaging remark, referring to it as a "spitting image." The comment deeply unsettles the young boy, marking one of his early encounters with cultural insensitivity.

Lahiri recounts another moment which subtle discrimination when Ashoke and Ashima are met with condescension at an American department store. Their Indian-accented English becomes a source of ridicule for the sales staff, which prefers addressing Gogol over his parents, treating the elder Gangulis as if they were either incompetent or deaf. While Ashoke chooses to ignore such as micro aggressions, their cumulative effect is undeniable. These experiences underscore how both first generation immigrants and their American born children are subjected to prejudice, though they are often based on race, language, or cultural difference. In social gatherings, Gogol, despite being raised in the United States, is frequently reminded of his Indian heritage in few ways that are mocking or exclusionary. The persistent defamation of their customs and cultural expressions leaves emotional scars that are difficult to either hide or erase.

While assimilation appears more realistic for second generation immigrants like Gogol and Sonia, it remains fraught with their identity struggles. In contrast, for first generation immigrants such as Ashima, complete

detachment from the homeland proves highly emotional and impossible to abandon. Her enduring connection to India ultimately leads her to make a significant life decision whenever she needs she resolves to divide her time between Calcutta and the United States spending six months each year with her brother Rana and extended family in India, and the remaining six months with her children and Bengali acquaintances in America. This choice reflects her attempt to reconcile her bifurcated identity and maintain ties between both inevitable worlds.

In conclusion, Gangulis both the first generation immigrants, Ashoke and Ashima, and their American born children are continually conscious of their diasporic condition. They inhabit a space between two cultural realms, negotiating tensions between the traditions of their homeland and the realities of their adopted country. Neither fully rejecting Indian culture, which was their own for many generations long, nor wholly embracing American norms, they find themselves caught in a state of cultural inbetweens. Lahiri has masterfully captured this conflict and portraying the diasporic experience as a continuous balancing act between heritage and adaptation.

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