

Diasporic Predicament of Binary Identity & Cultural Struggle in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*

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Abstract

Lahiri's *The Namesake* narrates the assimilation of an Indian Bengali family from Calcutta, the Gangulis, into American culture, 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 efforts to settle "home" in the new land. This shows the juxtaposition of conventional thinking, and unconventional desires, their fruitless effort to satisfy a traditional lifestyle, while trying to comprehend the open western culture. The present study proposes to study the reasons that draw immigrants back to their roots and analyze the causes and consequences of the alienation, as well as the Diaspora writers' longing for a homeland that results in cultural conflict. These immigrants are haunted by some sense of loss and agony over the home left behind; and they create their writings with elements of imagination. The impact of diasporic experiences on their psyche depends on their level of belonging in a foreign land.

Keywords: Culture, Dislocations, Diaspora, Foreign

Introduction

In Jhumpa Lahiri's fiction, Indian roots and American life, or, to be more precise, at least in the case of *The Namesake*, Calcutta on the one hand, and Cambridge and New York on the other, provide readers with different paradigms of life among people representing distinct

cultures and worldviews. It is in this context, however, that one ought to remember Edward Said's scepticism with the concept of culture as something distinctive, representative of and 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 Matthew Arnold put it in the 1860s. Arnold believed that culture palliates, if it does not altogether neutralize, the ravages of a modern, aggressive, mercantile and brutalizing urban experience . . . In time culture comes to be associated, often aggressively, with the nation or the state; this differentiates 'us' from 'them,' almost always with some degree of xenophobia. Culture in this sense is a source of identity, and a rather combative one at that. . . . (xiii)

The Namesake brings to fore many of the issues that Indians, settled in the promising land of opportunities, face in America. The narrative revolves around the difficulties faced by a Bengali couple in a different country – the clash of cultures, the relationship between parents and children, the generation gap, identity problem etc. It talks about the journey of an Indian woman Ashima, the central character of the narrative, who moves from India to America after her marriage and in the process, suffers a lot by missing her country every now and then. She belongs to a traditional Hindu Bengali family, which lives in Calcutta. The novel opens with Ashima recalling her homeland fondly. She is in an advanced state of pregnancy, admitted in a hospital for her delivery. The novelist states:

... Nothing feels normal to Ashima. For the past eighteen months, ever since she has arrived in Cambridge, nothing has left normal at all. It's not so much the pain, which she knows, somehow, she will survive. It's the consequence: Motherhood in a foreign land. . . It was happening so far from home, unmonitored and unobserved by those she loved. (Lahiri, *Namesake* 6)

After sometime, she feels pain in her stomach and her husband Ashoke, an electrical engineer, takes her immediately to the hospital. In the hospital, she feels awkward when asked so many questions in a language with which she is not comfortable. Although, she has been a student of English literature, she can't speak or understand English with American accent with ease. A doctor comes to examine her progress and asks her something regarding her delivery, "she is told that she is still in early labour three centimetres dilated, beginning to efface. What does it mean dilated? She asks and Dr. Ashley holds up two fingers side by side, then draws them apart explaining the unimaginable thing her body must do in order for the baby to pass" (Lahiri, *Namesake* 3).

Ashima tries to settle in and adjust herself to her surroundings, but she feels strange and lost in this country and spends hours remembering her parents and family, and reading the same five Bengali novels time and again. While waiting for the child to be born, she relives the past until the point of her departure for Boston. The thought of bringing up a baby in an alien land terrifies her: ". . . 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" (Lahiri, *Namesake* 6). Ashima, while staying in the hospital really craves to talk to the other three women in the room. She is used to live in a joint family and is not in the habit of being lonesome without talking to each other. But now, she has to lie alone in her bed. Here, she really feels the ache in her heart as she is giving birth to her first child away from her home. "It is the first time in her life she has slept alone, surrounded by strangers; all her life she has slept either in a room with her parents or with Ashoke at her side. She wishes the curtains were open, so that she could talk to the American woman" (Lahiri, *Namesake* 3). Being an Indian, she is in the habit of talking or sharing thoughts on such matters. She wants to communicate to an American who has given birth and wants to know what to expect at such a moment. But she is bereaved at the hypocrisy of the Americans, "She has gathered that Americans in spite of their public declarations of affection, in spite of their miniskirts and bikinis, in spite of their hand holding on the street and lying on top of each other on the Cambridge Common prefer their privacy" (3).

Ashima gives birth to a boy and he is named Gogol after the Russian writer Nikolai Gogol. She feels, “Without a single grandparent or uncle or aunt, at her side, the baby’s birth, like most everything else in America, feels somehow haphazard, only half true. . . . She never known of a person entering the world so alone, so deprived” (Lahiri, *Namesake* 25). After the birth of her son Gogol, she wants to go 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 way. “To put him to sleep, she sings him the Bengali songs her mother had sung to her” (Lahiri 35). She keeps all her emotional hazards and disappointments to herself and not intending to worry her parents, she presents in her letters a good picture of the domestic facilities and cleanliness here. By and by she comes to her own, takes pride in rearing up the child, moves out alone in the market with her baby in the pram, communicates with the passers-by who smile at her and goes to meet her husband on the campus, thus growing confident. But the disappointment 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” (Lahiri, *Namesake* 48).`

Tejinder Kaur observes, “The shift to this suburban area with no streetlights, no public transportation, no stores for miles makes Ashima feel more drastic and distressing than the move from Calcutta to Cambridge had been” (268). Feeling lonely and displaced in a foreign land, Ashima though not pregnant now, begins to realise that “being a foreigner . . . is a sort of life-long 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” (Lahiri, *Namesake* 49-50).

Gradually Ashoke and Ashima's circle of Bengali acquaintances grow and the cultural spirit of Bengal is recreated whenever the friends meet. They know Maya and Dilip Nandi, meet Mitras, the Banarjees and then the young Bengali bachelors in the market who return from Calcutta with 'wives.' They all become friends only for the reason that they all come from Calcutta. Robert Cohen comments that "distinct diaspora communities are constructed out of the, . . . conference of narratives of the old country to the new which create the sense of shared history. Thus a member's adherence to a diasporic community is demonstrated by an acceptance of an inescapable link with their past migration history" (IX). These Bengali families gather together on different occasions like the rice and name ceremonies of their children, their birthdays, marriages, deaths, and Bengali festivals. They celebrate these as per Bengali customs, wearing their best traditional attires, thus trying to preserve their culture in a new land. In fact, their beliefs, traditions, customs, behaviours and values along with their possessions and belongings are carried by migrants with them to new places. The migrant Bengalis act as honorary uncles and aunts, mashis and meshos for the children for various ceremonies and "sit in circles on the floor, singing songs by Nazrul and Tagore, passing a thick yellow clothbound book of lyrics among them as Dilip Nandi plays the harmonium. They argue riotously over the films of Ritwik Ghatak versus those of Satyajit Ray. The CPIM versus the Congress Party. North Calcutta versus South" (Lahiri, *Namesake* 38). But their existential dilemma in this new country is, as pointed out by the novelist, "For hours they argue about the politics of America, a country in which none of them is eligible to vote" (38). Thus the immigrants face political displacement too.

"How they keep alive the memories of their homeland and culture in their 'new-home' in some other ways is shown by Lahiri by giving a peep into different Bengali homes" (Kaur 269). Ashima hangs on her living room wall a water colour painting made by her father of a caravan of camels in a desert of Rajasthan framed at the local print shop and she is very touchy about it. In Moushumi's flat too Nikhil "recognizes versions of things he knows from home: a Kashmiri

crewelwork carpet on the floor, Rajasthani silk pillows on the sofa, a cast-iron Natraj on one of the book cases” (Lahiri, *Namesake* 208) but she is not emotional about these relics.

Ashoke and Ashima continue to maintain solidarity with the community. How these immigrants face cultural conflict in the foreign systems is shown through the problems faced by Ashoke and Ashima. They find it difficult to make understand their cultural practice of having two names – pet-name at home and good name for formal purposes which will be decided on the receipt of a letter from Ashima’s grandmother, to hospital authorities on their son’s birth and on his admission to the school. Hence on their daughter’s birth, they decide not to give her two names. Later they identify that Gogol continues to search for his own identity, for a set code that will not make him feel an ‘insider – outsider’. The first time his parents leave him alone overnight he goes with his friends Colin, Jason and Marc to a party in the university where his father teaches. This is his first visit to a dorm. There he meets a girl and he introduces himself as Nikhil and “he feels at once guilty and exhilarated” (Lahiri, *Namesake* 96). Stunned at how easy it is to say Nikhil, he who never dated a girl before and feels brave. He manages to kiss her before he goes. But it hadn’t been Gogol but Nikhil, “That Gogol had nothing to do with it” (96). One must note the dual identity or identity crisis in Gogol. Prior to his departure for college, Gogol officially changes his name to Nikhil. But even though he had longed to change his name, he finds that he has to get used to being called Nikhil. And when his parents also refer to him as Nikhil he feels, “... in that instant that he is not related to them, not their child” (Lahiri, *Namesake* 106).

Ashoke and Ashima make adjustments which are absolutely necessary. While 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 customs, rites, beliefs, food

tastes, habits and mannerisms. They also groom them to cope with the ways of life in America. Ashima teaches Gogol:

To memorize four-line children's poem by Tagore, and the names of the deities adorning the ten-headed Durga during Puja: Saraswati with her swan and Kartik with his peacock to her left, Lakshmi with her owl and Ganesh with his nose to her right. Every afternoon Ashima sleeps, but before nodding off, she switches the television to channel 2, and tells Gogol to watch *Sesame Street* and *The Electric Company*, in order to keep up with the English he uses at nursery school" (Lahiri, *Namesake* 54).

Moreover, they try to bring up their children the way it is done in India. Sonia and Gogol try to assert their individuality, and Gogol goes to the extent of reminding his parents that he is eighteen. Ashoke and Ashima cannot think of Pemberton Road as their home, but Nikhil refers to his New Haven hostel as his home. Ashima is outraged by his remark. "... Sorry, I left it at home," Ashima says "... that after twenty years in America, She still cannot bring herself to refer to Pemberton Road as home" (Lahiri, *Namesake* 108). Ashima Ganguli, an imperative persona in this work of fiction, is not a preacher, but a practitioner and she has proved it in her long journey from India to America. With her grandmother, whom she is very close always believes in her and knows that she will not change even after living in a different culture:

She has fed her sweets with her own hand. Unlike her parents, and her other relatives, her grandmother had not admonished Ashima not to eat beef or wear skirts or cut off her hair or forget her family the moment she landed in Boston. Her grandmother had not been fearful of such signs of betrayal; she was the only person to predict rightly that Ashima would never change. (Lahiri, *Namesake* 37)

Whenever she teaches her children the culture of their own country, it is because she has been very fastidious in practicing it. She guides them but she never forces her children to do, as she wants them to do it willingly. She gives them full freedom to move out and explore the world

and do the things according to their wishes. As far as the customs are concerned, she teaches them the norms and rules of a traditional family, but never restricts them to her own domain.

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. Though initially Ashoke did not like the celebration of Christmas and Thanksgiving, but as Gogol recalls that “. . . it was for him, for Sonia, that his parents had gone to the trouble of learning these customs” (Lahiri, *Namesake* 286). Though they invited American children too on the birthdays and a few other Bengali celebrations but still Ashima found preparing a number of Bengali dishes for above forty Bengali guests “less stressful than the task of feeding a handful of American children, half of whom always claim they are allergic to milk, all of whom refuse to eat of crusts of their bread” (Lahiri, *Namesake* 72). Their own children groomed to be bilingual and bicultural face cultural dilemmas and displacements 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, Thanksgiving and Halloween more, as attractive gifts follow therein.

The first generation migrants face cultural dilemma, but do their best to retain their cultural identity and cultural practices in their beliefs, values, cloths and eating habits. These ‘beliefs, traditions, customs, behaviours and values along with their ‘possessions and belongings’ are carried by migrants with them when they arrive in new places. The children of the migrants do not face the same problems because of their parents living ‘here now’. Thus Lahiri has shown dynamically the shifting concepts of ‘home’ and ‘displacement’ in the successive generations of migrants.

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