

Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*: An Intense Diasporic Experience

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Transnational migration has emerged out as a reality and necessity in the post-colonial world. A number of people move from their home-lands to promise-lands, either under compulsion or deliberations. This first generation of diasporic people tries very hard to make a balance between their born and gained cultures. However, the second generation melts into the mainstream of the culture and strikes a balance between them, but this process is very gradual and long. Jhumpa Lahiri, an America based Indian woman writer of Indian diaspora reflects this theme in her maiden novel *The Namesake*. Born in Bengal and brought up in South Kingstown, Rhode Island, she is well exposed to cultural diversities. Her diasporic experiences find different dimensions and colours in her novels and short-stories. In spite of being raised in America, she has inherited the sense of exile from her parents and feels the difference between two cultures. She opines “growing up in America is different. I have my own room, I can shut the door. There we became a part of other families, lived according to their schedule.” (Lahiri Newsweek International)

The contrast between her Americanization and ancestral home and culture gave a vent to her creative impulse and she has presented this dilemma of past and present, native and alien, innate and acquired values in *The Interpreter of Maladies* (that made her won Pulitzer Prize), *The Namesake* and *Unaccustomed Earth*. While talking about her recollection of memories, Lahiri states:

I spent much time in Calcutta as a child-idle but rich time—often at home with my grandmother. I read books. I began to write and to record things. It enabled me to experience solitude ironically because there were so many people, I could seal myself off psychologically. It was a place where I began to think imaginatively and my interest in seeing things from different points of view. There is a legacy and tradition there we just don't have here. The ink hasn't dried yet on our lives here. (Lahiri, Newsweek International)

On the canvass of her novels, Lahiri portrays the ground of 'roots' and 'rootlessness' in the personal relations of her characters. Like Bharati Mukherjee and Chitra Banerjee, Lahiri is not only confined to married spheres, but examines the problems of exile, alienation, nostalgia, dislocation and relocation of individual in a wider range. Her characters feel trapped between two worlds, and experience a constant sense of cultural displacement. In *The Namesake*, Gogol and Ashima feel the problem of belongingness at different places and Lahiri points out the presence of national identity within them. While commenting over nationalism, Said makes an apt observation:

We come to nationalism and its essential association with exile. Nationalism is an assertion of belonging in and to a place, a people, a heritage. It affirms the home created by a community of language, culture and customs and by doing so; it fends off exile, fights to prevent its ravages. Indeed the interplay between nationalism and exile is like Hegel's dialectic of servant and master, opposites informing and constituting each other. (Said 176)

The phenomenon of crossing the national boundaries requires a lot of adjustments from immigrants to adopt and imbibe the culture of foreign land. Change of 'Culture' is not only a geographical displacement, but a whole transformation of being. While defining 'Culture', T.S Eliot states that it is deep, infinite, pure and imperishable like religion. He says, "Religion' and 'Culture' besides meaning different things from each other should mean for the individual and for the group something towards which they strive, not merely something which they possess" (Eliot 31). The whole personality of the individual is determined by specific society, age, country, tradition, nationality, caste and religion. Alienation from the born culture leads to 'fluid' or 'fragmented identities'. In *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha postulates that cultural alienation reinforces the feeling of "not belongingness" that reduced them to a state of "non-recognizable entity". Bhabha declares:

Cultural difference must be understood as the free play of polarities and pluralities in the homogeneous empty time of the national community . . . The analytical of cultural difference intervenes to transform the scenario of articulation . . . the aim of cultural difference is to rearticulate the sum of knowledge from the perspective of the signifying position of the minority that resists tantalization . . . producing other spaces of subaltern signification. (Bhabha 162)

The Namesake explores the psyche of both generations of immigrants—the first generation of immigrants manages to survive in their exile as “Indian Americans” and the second generation of immigrants accepts their predicament as “Americanized Indians”. This first group suffers the trauma of dislocation with a sense of pride for their national heritage while the second group finds the foreign land as a land of opportunities and develops a romantic view towards their home culture. Jhumpa Lahiri clearly indicates that both these groups feel serious disillusionment because of emotional attachment with the homeland which often leads to trauma and its undesirable consequences like sadism, alienation and sometimes even suicide. Trauma is marked by “loss in psyche”. Commenting over Trauma, Caruth says, “Trauma is deeply tied to our own historical realities” (Caruth 12). Mitchell further throws light over it and retorts, “Trauma creates a breach in a protective covering of such severity that it can’t be coped with by the usual mechanism by which we deal with pain or loss . . . in trauma we are untimely ripped” (Mitchell 113).

Being born in Bengali soil and Bengali tradition, and settled in America Jhumpa Lahiri presents the story of a Bengali man Ashok and his Bengali wife Ashima in *The Namesake*. While commenting over Lahiri’s writing skills Nayar says, “Lahiri negotiates the dilemma of cultural spaces lying across the continents a master touch . . . endowed with a distinct universal appeal . . . between and across two traditions, one inherited and left behind and other encountered but not necessarily assimilated” (Nayar 03). The novel starts with the story Ashok and Ashima Ganguli, when Ashok gets an opportunity to move to Boston for pursuing his PhD with a scholarship. Ashima Ganguli who is an epitome of traditional Indian woman, accompanies him. In the starting of the novel Lahiri reveals the predicament of an Indian girl who is on the verge of marriage and being rejected often times, when an NRI boys comes to see her, she can’t hide her temptation towards him and even his shoes. Ashima when sees the shoes of Ashok at “*dekhossession*’ (in Shobha de’s term)” (Prajapati 149), she can’t resist to put her foot in it. It is like opening of an unseen, unimagined world for her. Lahiri writes:

They were brown shoes with black heels and off-white laces and stitching. There was a band of lentil-sized holes embossed on either side of each shoe . . . looking more closely, she saw the shoemaker’s name written on the insides, in gold lettering that had all but faded: something and sons, it said. She saw the size, eight and a half, and the initials U.S.A . . . Ashima, unable to resist a sudden and overwhelming urge, stepped into the shoes at her feet. (Lahiri 08)

After a haste marriage, Ashima Bhadudi moves to Boston as Ashima Ganguli with her husband Ashok Ganguli. Ashok in Boston is always busy in his career and Ashima is left alone with no major work to do. She passes her time cleaning house and moving markets. Memories of the homeland keep on haunting her and this trauma increases with the revelation of her pregnancy. The feeling of motherhood makes her more apprehensive as she is afraid of the child losing the cultural heritage of Bengali family in this foreign land. For an immigrant woman like Ashima, all alone with no one to call her own, motherhood becomes a burden which is quite explicit in her confession in her labour pain:

It's not so much the pain, which she knows, somehow, she will survive. It's the consequences: motherhood in a foreign land. For it was one thing to be pregnant, to suffer the queasy morning in bed, the sleepless nights, it is the dull throbbing in her back. . . this was happening so far from home, unmonitored and unobserved by those she loved, had made it more miraculous still. But she is terrified 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 06)

Lahiri records that how it is emotional need more than physical pain that is bothering Ashima. She is missing all her near and dear ones who might have been a support to her in these crucial moments. When she listens one English couple saying 'I love you' to each other, she can't expect her husband saying the same to her in public. In fact, like a good Bengali wife, she never utters her husband name. The mental crisis of Ashima forces her to relate pregnancy and foreignness as complementary to each other:

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. Like pregnancy, being a foreigner, Ashima believes, is something that elicits the same curiosity from strangers, the same combination of pity and respect. (Lahiri 49-50)

The migration of women is an unquestioning acceptance of the social norms of native lands that define their destinies. Perhaps the most significant aspect that distinguishes narratives of male migration from female migration is choice: choice of males and the force behind females'

migration. Rushdie himself confesses that the immigrant experiences of women writings are definitely different from men's writings. That's why he says, "Having been borne across the world, we are translated *men*" (17). The diasporic literature is focused on the study of men and wants to explore the experiences of men as men, as son, as husbands, as fathers, as exploited and even as exploiters. So, whether it is the craving of Mr. Biswas to build a house of his own in *A House of Mr. Biswas* or Ralph Singh of *The Mimic Men* to claim his identity in the larger world, it is man only who are focused. Man decides and woman follows.

Women are not the primary agents of emigration because the diasporic experience is one that is forced on them by the circumstances of their choice-less marriages and customs of native land – but they emerge, through this experience, as evocative symbols of a new and aspirational more justly ordered society when compared to their native societies. Chandra Talpade Mohanty argues that "being a woman has political consequences in the world we live in; that there can be unjust and unfair effects on women depending on our...marginality and/or privilege" (Mohanty 03). Diasporic novelists like Monica Ali and Jhumpa Lahiri propose that the absence of the boundaries of home, lost through exile, allows the vision for transformation as well as trans-creation and hence, the creation of modern, contextual identities.

Ashima like Nazneen of *Brick Lane* share the classic 'insider'/'outsider' perspectives of immigrant lives and both narrate the experiences of alteration and confusion. The lived differences of their lives alter their physical spaces and create new areas; thus, *Brick Lane* in London (Ali) and Cambridge in Massachusetts (Lahiri), which are initially depicted as alien, are, through the course of the novels, transformed into spaces *chosen* as homes by the protagonists. Indeed, it could also be argued that it is precisely Nazneen's and Ashima's positions as 'insiders'/'outsiders' that permit the double-consciousness which allows them to cross borders of various kinds. The idea of selecting an identity, defined by context and culture, rather than inheriting it, is increasingly finding support among contemporary diasporic thinkers who are themselves products of this hybridization. Nobel Laureate economist, humanist and well known diasporic personality, Amartya Sen, suggests that:

History and background are not the only way of seeing ourselves and the groups to which we belong...identities are robustly plural, and...the importance of one identity need not obliterate the importance of others.
(Sen 19)

After the birth of his son, the biggest problem of Ashok is to name him, as it is impossible in America to get Ashima released from hospital without a proper name to the child. It is the earnest desire of Ashima that her new born son must be named by her grandmother as according with custom of Bengali tradition. Her temptation to choose a Bengali name given by

her grandmother is the symbolic triumph of her Indian values over Americanization. It is the common practice of Indian immigrants to patronize and adore all that is Indian in nature as Sanjukta Dasgupta says, “the resident or nonresident Indian will invariably prioritize his or her regional identity and culture” (Dasgupta 76). Not so emotional, American society can’t accept a *dakname* or pet name for the discharge of the baby. Ashima finds herself in fix as in Bengali social rituals, the custom of assigning the name is mandatory. Here, the episode of naming is not merely part of the story; Lahiri uses it for a special purpose. While highlighting the significance of the episode, Beena Agarwal states:

Lahiri admits that the name has become a complete metaphor of human identity inclusive of one’s national, social, moral, religious and cultural identity and the carminative effect of them constituting the consciousness of “identity” and “belongingness”. The official names are selected with the rare aspiration to determine the future of the child. (Agarwal 114)

Finding no way out Ashok names the child, Gogol, after the name of a famous Russian writer, Nikolai Vasselievich Gogol, as once this writer in one way or the other acted as life-saver to Ashok. Ashok conceives it as his second-birth and the name fortunate. The name may be dear to the father, but the son feels disgusted with it to a great extent, as it is neither Indian and nor American. However, when Gogol went to school, Ashok tried to change it with ‘Nikhil’ but the child couldn’t accept the sudden change in the name and it goes on like this only. The frustration of Gogol increases when he comes to know that the Russian writer was a professional and personal failure and “pronounced a death sentence on himself, and proceeded to commit slow suicide by starvation” (Lahiri 91). Gogol decides to change his name and when the Magistrate asks the reason, he straight forwardly says, “I hate the name Gogol” (102). It is always impossible to detach from the past. So, Gogol’s parents, friends and even the novelist address him as Gogol. This shifting of the name is an attempt to shift identity of immigrants. It is not only the crisis of Gogol but of many immigrants like him. Reena Chhabra states, “Gogol is constituted as an epitome of an American—Indian hybrid who vacillates between his identity and American nationality” (Chhabra 75).

After changing the name, Gogol changes himself, makes girlfriends, starts exploring life, prefers to celebrate his birthdays with Maxine and feels “that here at Maxine’s side, in this cloistered wilderness, he is free” (Lahiri 158). Gogol’s practice of comparing his family and parents with Maxine’s family and parents shows his urge for freedom and adventures life. The first generations of immigrants are not so welcoming to the cultural change, but the second

generation wants to taste the freedom and openness of the foreign land. Gogol and his sister were not that happy in their eight month stay in Calcutta, but here Gogol is feeling himself in the lap of nature. Many young children born and brought up in foreign feel the same way Gogol is feeling. Lahiri says it as:

The family seems to possess every piece of landscape, not only the house itself but every tree and blade of grass. Nothing is locked, not the main house, or the cabin that he and Maxine sleep in . . . it is a place that has been good to them, as much a part of them as a member of the family . . . he feels no nostalgia for the vacation he's spent with the family, and he realizes now that they were never really true vacations at all. Instead they were overwhelming, disorientating expeditions, either going to Calcutta, or sightseeing in palaces they did not belong to and intend never to see again. (154-155)

Unfortunately the sudden demise of his father brings Gogol from where he has started. He realizes "Nikhil evaporates and Gogol claims him again" (106). Quite naturally, he assumes the place of the eldest member of the family and becomes ready to marry Ashima's choice, Maushumi leaving Maxine behind, as the former one share the same upbringing like Gogol in USA and England. Ziauddin Sardar makes a very apt comment over this, when he says:

Indeed, attempts to delink the heritage by a simple name changing, as Lahiri shows so brilliantly, does not alter the fabric of a person but leads only to a crisis of identity and meaning. The past is ever present, Lahiri seems to be saying, and a viable future depends in recognition and appreciating this past. (Sadar 42)

However, the marriage proves to be a failure because of Moushumi's extra-marital affair. Maushumi attracts towards her old boyfriend and Gogol understands it's time to get separated. Gogol fails to synthesize between the two worlds presented in the form of Maxine and Maushumi. His attraction towards Maushumi is only because of his mother's desire to get her son married a Bengali cultured girl. In his three affairs Gogol fails to maintain an individual ideology and adaptation as well as rejection both remains incomplete to him. Moving towards Maushumi is like going back to "imaginary homelands" or "The lost origin" (Rushdie (9-21). This in-between position for diasporic like Gogol and Maushumi is very painful. Over this McLeod comments, "Though the children born to migrant peoples enjoy better settlement and place in

that country but “their sense of identity borne from living in a diaspora community [is] influenced by the past migrant history of their parents or grandparents” (McLeod 207) .

An autobiographical vein can also be noticed in the experience of growing as a child of the protagonist Gogol and Jhumpa Lahiri. Like Gogol, her pet name becomes her good name and it is through it that she wants to highlight the agony of fragmented identity and loyalty. While commenting over this issue Jhumpa Lahiri set her heart open to the Hollywood director of the movie, Mira Nair, “The names we have, there is so much about them: who are we and they are the one world that exists that represents us. And yet we don’t choose them. These are from our parents”. For Gogol, his name is a mess but for Ashok, it implies new beginning and life. Gogol tries to cope-with his father’s sentiments but fails to understand the emotional significance of the name. In an interview released by Houghton Mifflin Company, Lahiri makes this turmoil of immigrants more clear:

I think that for immigrants, the challenges of exile, the loneliness, the constant sense of alienation, the knowledge of and longing for a lost world, are more explicit and distressing than for their children. I wanted to please my parents and meet their expectations. I also wanted to meet the expectations of my American peers, and the expectations I put on myself to fit into American society. It’s a classic case of divided identity.

Through her characters, the novelist, Jhumpa lahiri investigates the strangeness of diasporic feelings and conflicting ways of the life. She exposes the cultural bewilderment and struggle of assimilation that disturbs the emotional ties between generations. The parents struggle for maintaining the culture and stopping their children becoming all American while the children struggle with the parents who are all Indian and this lead to dual identity crisis. But, Gogol finally understands that life lies in the adjustment of Indian and American culture. To fully abandon or accept only one culture is no solution at all. The identity crisis that Ashima feels first is transformed to her son, but at the end both learns how to strike a balance between the two cultures. Ashima decides to live the rest of her life in America as well as India. True to her name, that in English means, “one without boundaries”, she will be free from borders, resident of both the nations, “Ashima has decided to spend six months of her life in India, six months in the States . . . true to the meaning of her name, she will be without borders, without a home of her own, a resident everywhere and nowhere” (Lahiri 276). Like Gogol, she also becomes a namesake, without boundaries and restrictions. Thirty years in America has changed her a lot. Now, she is not the same Ashima that used to live in Calcutta. She is more confident and the fact that she is alone doesn’t bother her. From now onwards, her brother and his wife would be her

family, though she would miss the country where she has grown and loved her husband, but she would move there as and when wanted. Lahiri writes:

It is a solitary, somewhat premature version of the future she and her husband had planned when he was alive. In Calcutta, Ashima will live with her younger brother, Rana, and his wife, and their two grown, as yet unmarried daughters, in a spacious flat in Salt Lake. There she will have a room, the first in her life intended for her exclusive use. (Lahiri 275)

For her, America is not the place where she was born and brought up, but at the end of the novel metaphorically, politically and consciously, she links herself to that place. It is 'leaving home' that stimulates new frameworks of engagements, interactions and ultimately construction of identity – a feeling that could never have emerged in the confines of the household in the homeland or village. Salman Rushdie in *Shame* opines:

We have performed the act of which all men anciently dream, the thing for which they envy the birds; that is to say, we have flown . . . look under your feet. You will not find gnarled growth spouting through the soles. Roots, I sometimes think, are a conservative myth designed to keep us in our places. (Rushdie 90-91)

Likewise, Gogol also realizes that he has inherited Indianness from his parents and assimilated himself in America. The weakening of one will surely not make him strong. Vertovec also interprets diaspora in a contemporary context and concludes that it is no longer a dangerous thing. According to him, Diaspora is a community of local and plural identities, ethnic and transnational affiliations and celebrations of cosmopolitanism. He states:

Diaspora discourse has been adopted to move collective identity claims and community self-ascriptions beyond multiculturalism . . . the alternative agenda - advocates the recognition of hybridity, multiple identities and affiliations with people, causes and traditions outside state of residence. (Vertovec 05)

Initially extremely sensitive about his name, Gogol understands that everything is perishable. Without his parents there is no significance that whether he should be called Gogol or Nikhil:

The givers and keepers of Gogol's name are far from him now. One dead and another a widow . . . without people in the world to call him Gogol . . . Gogol Ganguli will, once and for all, vanish from the lips of loved ones.

Yet the thought of this eventual demise provides no sense of victory, no solace (Lahiri 289).

He understands the crux of life and decides to move with a new confidence. Now, he is not a mere child of vulnerable sensitivity, now he is more experienced and more mature. Kung makes a befitting comment over this, "he is embellished by both cultures. He does not have to be one or the other; in fact he is made up of both. With this new understanding, Gogol is no longer ashamed of himself or the way he has lived" (Kung 133). Finally, the bridge is crossed and Gogol feels more close to his father now and for the first time decides to read the book given by his father on his 14th birthday, *The Short Stories of Nikolai Gogol*, 'For Gogol Ganguli'.

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