



A study of the clash of cultures in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*

Dr. Madhu Jindal

Associate Professor, Department of English, MP College for Women, Mandi Dabwali, Sirsa, Haryana, India

Abstract

"The greatest journeys are the ones that bring you home"

Jhumpa Lahiri *The Namesake*.

The clash of cultures takes place when people belonging to one nation move to another in search of greener pastures. This cultural blending, intermingling, leading to identity crisis has given birth to several best sellers. In a way to connect and come closer to that place, the closeness to the culture, the native language and the rules evoke a psychological oppression resulting to dilemma of cultural clash and identity. All around the world people struggle with a sense of self-individualization, which is the internal battle each person has to face in order to discover one's true identity. The quest to find oneself is a difficult and lengthy endeavor that can take a lifetime to accomplish. In the Novel *The Namesake* by Lahiri, identity is illustrated by intensely examining the importance of one's background, name and culture. The main characters in the story try to uncover the reasoning behind their lineage. Jhumpa Lahiri, a daughter of an immigrant is one of the postcolonial writers who faced clashes between two cultures. In *The Namesake*, Lahiri presents the character of Ashoke and Ashima where they feel nostalgia as they migrate to a new land and through the feeling of diaspora, they recollect the memories back at home especially in the character of Ashima. It also deals with the cultural identity crisis which is faced by both the generations of the immigrants. In the case of the first generation, the immigrants face dilemma, consciousness of being an outsider and cultural identity crisis due to the language, dressing sense and food habits. But the second generation immigrants mainly face the crisis in relation to the personality, identity and adjustment in an alien land. The present paper deals with the issue of the migration to present the pain and the problems that are faced by the immigrants and in the end come back to their roots. Indeed, they complete their journey from pain to gain.

Keywords: nostalgia, identity, dilemma, immigrant, diaspora, and alienation

Introduction

The idea of a homeland and identity have come under attack under the present scenario. According to the critics like Homi K. Bhabha, Avtar Brah and Stuart Hall, the floating nature of home and fluid identity have replaced the age-old concepts of fixed 'home' and identity as well. The flow of the people across different countries breaks the concept of true home. The notion of home not only construes the sense of self, but also ties with the human emotion, feelings, sentiments, proximity and intimacy. Beyond the spatial territory, 'home' is associated with emotional territory.

Homi K. Bhabha talks of hybridity as the 'third space'. The identity as suggested by Bhabha, indicates the impure identity rather than fixed identity. Dual or hybrid identity construct an identity crisis in one's creating home of familiarity in the overseas countries. The second generation immigrants find it hardly possible to adhere to the identity of the parental land. The first generation may find their national identity changed politically, but they are able to fasten with their original homeland culturally, linguistically and ethnically. In the contemporary era, immigration, exile and expatriation are related to home, identity, nostalgia, memory and isolation. These are the recurrent themes in the diasporic writings of the post-colonial writers like V. S. Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, Bharti Mukherjee, Agha Shahid Ali, Jhumpa Lahiri, Kiran Desai and many others. Now, literature is regarded as a creation of culture and helps to know about multiculturalism.

Born on July 11, 1967, in London, England, to Bengali parentage, author Jhumpa Lahiri published her debut in 1999, *Interpreter of Maladies*, winning the Pulitzer Prize. *The Namesake* established Lahiri's ability to write lyrical narrative and her genius for writing moving and detailed accounts of everyday life is well established. Michiko Kakutani, one of the most respected reviewers at the New York Times, writes: "Jhumpa Lahiri's quietly dazzling new novel, *The Namesake*, is that rare thing: an intimate, closely observed family portrait that effortlessly and discreetly unfolds to disclose a capacious social vision."

She focuses mostly on first-generation Indian American immigrants and their struggle to raise a family in a country very different from theirs. Her stories describe their efforts to keep their children acquainted with Indian culture and traditions and to keep them close even after they have grown up in order to hang onto the Indian tradition of a joint family, in which the parents, their children and the children's families live under the same roof. Cultural identity is what provides the initial impetus for Gogol to run away. He is confused about much related to his identity and his sense of being in the world.

The Namesake, spans over 30 years in their life and tells the story of the Ganguli family, whose move from Calcutta to New York evokes a lifelong balancing act to adapt to a new world while remembering the old. The couple's firstborn, Gogol, and sister Sonia grow up amid these divided loyalties,

struggling to find their own identity without losing their heritage. She portrays in this novel the simple joys and happy moments as well as struggles, sacrifices, and sufferings of the immigrants. Her subjects of focus are material prosperity and academic pursuits, dislocation and displacement, cultural conflicts, loneliness, language barrier, loss of identity, sense of belonging, gender issues, marital conflicts, and the generation gap between the first and the second-generation immigrants.

After moving to America, the couple have the first child, a boy. New to the country and not having any sorts of communication with relatives except for letters the family is given the task to name their child. The father of the boy, Ashoke, gives his son the name Gogol, after a sentimental memory. The novel focuses on Gogol's struggle over his name as a jumping off point to explore large issues of cultural identity, integration and assimilation. Gogol is so named after the Russian novelist, apparently his father believes that sitting up in train reading Nikolai Gogol's "The Overcoat" rescued him from a train accident back in 1961. Gogol finds his strange name a continuous nuisance, and ultimately he changes it to Nikhil. At one point of time when his father presented him a book of short stories by Nikolai Gogol for his fourteenth birthday, Gogol simply tosses it showing a disinterested attitude. Later when he is a senior at Yale, his father finally reveals him the story of his name. As Gogol's affairs with Maxine and Moushmi do not last long. At the end of the novel, Gogol has come to terms with the issues of his own identity, he does not disregard the traditional Bengali customs anymore. The role of fate that played upon his life made him realize the importance of one's own tradition and families. After losing his father he is saddened and begins to regard the ways his father taught him. The tale comes full circle when the protagonist heads home for a Bengali Christmas and rediscovers his father's gift of Gogol's short stories.

When Gogol is about to start Kindergarten he is asked to change his name. He feels that changing his name may end up changing him or make him become a different person. Ashima and Ashoke send their children, Gogol and Sonia, to learn the Bengali language and also to attend culture classes every Saturday, but still, "their children sound just like Americans, expertly conversing in a language that still at times confounds them in accents they are accustomed not to trust" (65).

The cultural identity crisis is faced by generations of immigrants due to language, food habits, dress code and personal identity. In Gogol's case it is due to his name. The feeling of nostalgia, loneliness and homelessness is also divided systematically. The important characters such as Ashima, Ashoke, Gogol, and Moushumi experience loneliness and alienation. As the host society does not fully accommodate their wishes, they feel alienated. In Ashima's case it is due to migration. Gogol and Moushumi face it due to cultural hybridity. Ashoke and Ghosh are permanently dislocated from the world. They leave all homes behind and reach the other world. The term alienation is inextricably tied to loneliness as to Ashima. While Ashoke is pursuing his studies at MIT, most of the days, Ashima is alone in her apartment feeling terribly lonely. And then again she feels the pangs of loneliness when she is admitted at the maternity

ward, with no known persons around her either to comfort or to console. She is exceedingly afraid of raising a child in a country where she is related to no one, where she knows so little, where life seems so burdensome and worrisome that she fumes with indignation: "I'm saying I don't want to raise Gogol alone in this country. It's not right. I want to go back" (33).

In *The Namesake*, the cross culture issues analyzed from two perspectives: one is the first-generation immigrants' difficulty in assimilating into the host culture and the second-generation immigrants' ease in adapting to the cultural practices of the host society. The immigrants make attempts fill the cultural gap, and in the process, they move gradually towards assimilation into and adaptation of the host culture as "a sensitive immigrant finds himself or herself perpetually at a transit station fraught with memories of the original home which are struggling with the realities of the new world" (Dubey,22). Initially, Ashoke accepts the celebration of Christmas and Thanks Giving after initial hesitation, for the sake of his children, as Gogol, after his father's demise, acknowledges it: "it was for him (Gogol), for Sonia, and that his parents had gone to the trouble of learning these customs"(286).

Gogol belongs to the second generation immigrants who face the cross culture conflict, who finds himself sandwiched between the cultures of the country of their parents and the country of their birth. He struggles to carry the burden of two cultures and two names. He makes all efforts to erase his native identity and as a result he even does not introduce his parents to his American girlfriends, Ruth and Maxine.

Gogol is Lahiri's autobiographical double. She herself belongs to the second generation of Indian Diaspora whose ongoing quest for identity never seems to end. They feel sandwiched between the country of their parents and the country of their birth. They are to maintain ties between the ideologies of these two countries which are poles apart. But in this process, they are caught between acute identity crisis from where there is nowhere to go. Lahiri finds herself quite a stranger to both of the countries - in India she is an American and in America she is an Indian. Gogol tries to put a wall between his past and his present but it is not easy. The adoption of 'Nikhil' is a part to live only in the present, but the ghost of Gogol clings to him that he signs his old name unconsciously, he does not respond immediately when he is addressed as Nikhil. He tries to become an entirely different person from what really he is. Gogol struggles to carry the burden of two names. Nikhil resembles American names, yet 'Gogol' and his past follow him everywhere. He experiences a feeling of being in-between. He is considered an 'ABCD' "America-Born Confused Desi" But he considers himself an American. American society says, "But you're Indian" (157). Gogol is an outsider in American society whereas he does not feel intimacy with Indianness. So 'who he is' becomes a great problem. What determines identity?

The death of his father brings great change in him. He realizes that his identity is embellished by both cultures and comes to know "identity as a production, which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside representation" (Hall 10). He does not have to be one or the other; he does not have to choose. He is made up of both and

it should strengthen his pride instead of weakening it. He feels no shame. He has assimilated himself in American culture and values, at the same time retaining his parents' Indian heritage and now proud of his name 'Nikhil Gogol Ganguly' and all it means.

Gogol tries to cope up with the situation to gain a new identity which does not need a particular nationality and hence different from the old one. So there starts a journey "to rediscover his roots, his self, his hyphenated identity and to revitalize the in-betweenness of cultures, the alternate culture." (Fernandes 117). He actively participates in the formation of his new and ever-widening identification. Thus it is not the name only which determines identity. Cultural hybridism is the other aspect which has a telling effect on his identity. He belongs to many cultures at once and identity may not be determined by national boundaries only. As locations change, identity can also change.

One must not be excessively obsessed with one's cultural legacy, because it is not something meaningless; rather, it is deep rooted in one's collective psyche. "Fanon argued that the first step for 'colonised' people in finding a voice and an identity is to reclaim their own past" (Barry 193). Identity is not just who I am. Identity is not stable and unitary rather it is multiple and ever-widening.

It is the past only, which with the present prepares a way to the future. As the novel, *The Namesake*, by Jhumpa Lahiri comes to an end, it can be seen that Gogol has finally come to realize the true value of his parents and has come to appreciate them for the hardships they've faced through immigration and separation. As he attempts to swallow the idea that "his mother is really going, that for months she will be so far", he comes to realize just how hard it was for both his parents to leave their own parents for such a long time. Through this fact, he finally gains appreciation of the hardships his parents faced when they came to America and he understands that his parents have gone through these hardships, in order to give him the life he has lived and is currently living in America. Further, he believes his parents got through such hardships with "a stamina he fears he does not possess himself". By stating that he doesn't believe he will be able to endure this experience of separation, Gogol shows understanding of the difficulty of the task that his parents have fulfilled. The irony created from his new sense of appreciation for his parents is quite representative of just how much Gogol has developed throughout the novel. This irony is created through the fact that for most of his life, Gogol was simply attempting to escape and ignore his parents, however only when he has lost Ashoke and is on the verge of losing Ashima does he truly realize just how important they are. Gogol no longer feels the need to distance himself from his parents; rather he feels sorrow at the idea of separation between him and his mother which shows the extreme magnitude to which his connection to his parents has grown. Only through experiencing the hardships his parents faced does Gogol come to appreciate his parents.

This idea of Gogol's appreciation and connection with his parents also indicates his increasing interest in his own Bengali culture. He regrets for not having cherished his time in India and for "all those trips to Calcutta he'd once resented". Therefore near the end of the novel, it can be seen

that Gogol has reached a state where he is no longer afraid of his roots, in fact he's now ready to embrace them.

Moreover, Diaspora writings contribute on a world wide scale, the cultures of different societies. Diaspora literature thus builds information which results in solving many cultural and psychological problems. It helps to re-discover the unity and completeness of India. *The Namesake* works as a network to solidify the different parts of the states in India and also in relation with the other parts of the world like America. The Indian philosophy has its notion that the world is a family to an extent.

Gogol's relationship with his parents in the mid twenties shows that he is rebellious towards the life style his parents have in America. Gogol and Maxine break up after having arguments about Gogol going to Calcutta without her. "Maxine going so far one day admit that she felt jealous of his mother and sister," (p.188) Rather than putting his materialistic and sexual desires first, Gogol starts to spend more time with his family and, starts to care about them after realizing the significant role his father had in the family. Gogol is reunited with a childhood family friend Moushumi and they start dating. The first encounter they had Gogol introduced himself as Nikhil to someone who once knew him as Gogol. Moushumi still calls him Nikhil; this is perhaps a secret bond they have together. Gogol and Moushumi never thought that they would be dating a Bengali even though both their parents pressured them into doing so. "She was convinced in her bones that there would be no one at all. Sometimes she wondered if it was her horror of being married to someone she didn't love that had caused her, subconsciously, to shut herself off." (p.213) During their relationship Gogol, remembers the Bengali parties they both attended. Perhaps the tragic death of Ashoke has woken Gogol's awareness of the importance of family.

Conclusion

On the basis of foregoing discussion, it can be said that Jhumpa Lahiri has very meticulously portrayed the clash of cultures, and convincingly brought out the crises which bedevil the protagonists. The novel analyses old mindset of the first generation and second generation immigrants and the conflicts that arise out of these. While the themes of nostalgia, culture shock and unsettling are addressed through the characters Ashima and Ashoke, the themes of identity crisis and culture stereotyping are addressed through the experiences of Gogol. Lahiri's send a clear message to people who are dreaming to settle in different countries for a better life that the experience they are going to encounter may not be an unmixed blessing. They are going to face the cultural shock, rootlessness, sense of alienation, nostalgia and identity crisis. Hence *The Namesake* can be considered a voyage towards self-recognition, self-definition, and self-realization.

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