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Torn between Two Cultures: Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*

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Abstract:

Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* is about characters that are in search of their individuality which dwell between Indian and American culture. It's a story of Ashima and Ashoke Ganguli who leave India for the sake of better opportunities in America and about their children Gogol and Sonia. The immigrants lead a double identity, and, therefore, feel suspicious and fearful towards the new culture in early years of settlement in a new country. Their children are born in the new world but they belong to their native country. They belong to two cultures but in reality not to anyone. They have to put their names in such a way which seem to fit in both the cultures. Thus, my purpose in this paper is to show how the immigrant's children want to please their parents and also fit themselves in a new world despite their divided identity.

Keywords: Cultural conflict, Second Generation, Divided Identity, Social Invisibility, Name.

A society's culture defines how its members communicate and cooperate with each other. It reflects learned behaviours. The basic elements of culture are social structure, language, communication, religion, and values. Basic to every society is its social structure, the whole background that bounds the roles of individuals within the culture, and individual's liberty of movement within the society.

The quest for cultural identity arises in Lahiri's writings. India has no single culture, besides many cultures have crossed and blended here, and produced a hybridity in India which makes it unique. The Indian cultural identity has acquired a diverse structure by modern generation. Culture mirrors learned conduct that is spread from one member of a society to another. Some elements of culture are briefed from one group to another group. The basics of culture are fused. For instance, Indian's group-oriented, hierarchical society stresses harmony and loyalty. Culture changes in response to outer forces that affect the society. Individuals who share a culture are members of a society; those who do not are outsiders.

Ashima compares being a foreigner to a perpetual pregnancy where one feels out of sorts and elicits curiosity from strangers: "It is an on-going 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." (49). As Jhumpa Lahiri has said in a conversation with Sandeep Roy- Chaudhary,

"I have never felt a strong affiliation with any nation or ethnic group. I always felt between the cracks of two cultures. So much of it was about where I was and who was viewing me. When I went to Calcutta my relatives would think of me so much as American. A foreigner. In America it's always, you are Indian, when did you come here." (2007 *Seattle Reads* 7)

The understanding and homogeneity of basic cultures across societies in the situations of India makes for easier complicated and preservation of one's own culture. Hence, the

attachment between the persons is fast vanishing. But when one goes overseas, one realizes that even though one may try and integrate with that culture, yet it is a mysterious new world. The west which seemed attractive when one watched it from one's milieu appears complex and complicated when one settles there and understands that one is emigrant willingly from one's home.

Language is the part of anyone personality. Language is medium of communication. An immigrant learns the language of colonizer to communicate with them. An acquired language can't give the feeling of natural one and accent will be different from the natives. Immigrants face the general problem of accent and tone in their speaking in Western world. When Ashima wants to conform health of her husband, who is in a hospital, on the phone, she has speaks five times her name with pronouncing every word of her name. Here she faces of problem of accent. Immigrant, generally, makes fault in grammar or in spelling as Ashima did in the hospital while talking with nurse about her perspective child, "as long as there are ten finger and ten toe" (7) but when Petty, the nurse, smiles she realises her mistake and thinks it should be "fingers" and "toes".

Communication between immigrants and natives is an issue of concern for both. Although, by acquiring the language of natives the immigrants can communicate with natives at verbal level but it lacks the bonding between two persons as strong in the persons who belong to same culture, isn't, generally, possible with persons who belongs to two different cultures. Persons who belong to same culture can do communication with specific sings, which emerges in that specific culture, without speaking any word. But the immigrant who belongs to different culture, isn't aware of that specific sings, faces problem in understand them and not able to communicate as natives do by using sings. Persons who belong to same culture have a mutual understanding. They can understand each other by their body languages but the immigrant fails in doing it. Ashima and Ashoke face the similar problem of communication at internal level that's why they gathered at weekend at home to communicate with other Bengali persons. Although these Bengalis are not more than just name, not any physical or personal details are given about them by Lahiri but they played important role in the novel to make us understand the gathering of natives in Western world, which gives relief to immigrants who feel isolated in new culture. But Gogol and his sister get bored with it because they fail to understand the importance of it at adolescence.

The immigrant's children truly don't belong to any culture or country and even they born in new world but not fully devoted to it. As Jhumpa Lahiri said, "It was hard for me to think of myself as fully American." That put a weird pressure on people of the second generation, to see their parents so palpably happy in India and realizing that in some ways they gave up this happiness for a better life for their children. Jhumpa Lahiri has accepted it,

"This was one of the things that really separated me from my parents. I could try to sympathize, empathize the best that I could, but the fact of the matter is that my connection to India will never be what my parents' is. I always feel I both belong and don't belong there. ." (2007 *Seattle Reads* 7)

Children of immigrants don't feel the same as the immigrants feel because of cultural difference in two generation. Parents don't feel that they are on firm grounds so they locked their doors, windows, and tried to secure themselves but children who are seeing that natives aren't doing any this type of things, they got irritated. As at one point Gogol goes home and his father starts talking to Manhattanites about how you have to be careful where you park in their quiet suburban towns and Gogol is irritated by his parents' "perpetual fear of disaster."

Gogol has always problem with his name and origin, doesn't feels attachment towards Indian culture, his mother wants him to marry with a Bengali girl but he stays with white American girlfriend, doing late night parties, even hardly responses when phone comes from his home, wants to totally detached from his family and culture whom he belongs. He tried everything to run from his identity and culture but at last he fails to do so.

"He had spent years maintaining distance from his origins; his parent, in bridging that distance as best they could. And yet, for all his aloofness toward his family in the past...he has never been more than a four-hour train ride away"(281).

Lahiri uses food as an instrument to describe culture dilemma and also attempts to separate it from other cultures. Food is something which bounds one in his own culture. Taste of foods gives a feeling of own culture even if one is out of his land. Every type of recipes has product of any specific environment and culture. Food which has a very focal present in novel echoes the cultural dilemma. In the globalized world Western foods and materials are available everywhere but it's not same as the Indian food and materials. Use of Indian food materials aren't found even in the house of immigrant's Indian. For example Ashima is searching for mustard oil to make recipe but she doesn't find. When one leaves his country he tries to adjust himself but, hardly, can change his taste, although there are environment and biology is responsible for the taste but one change himself and his habits to live in new culture. One can asks what to do of culture with food and answer is this, eating habits shows or reflects person belongs to which culture. Food is an important part of human life. There are many stunning food scenes throughout *The Namesake*, beginning with a scene of Ashima combining Rice Kris pies, peanuts, and red onion in a bowl to asnear an Indian snack she desires. And Jhumpa lahiri did a hard work to show the lots of Bengali's recipes and through it she tries to show the difference between Indian and American food habits and making of them. She has given enough space to food in this novel through food she depicts the inner feeling of ashima and used it to communicate Ashima with Indian culture. In early days an immigrant follows the culture of his own land and do all the rituals of his native land with some changes as Ashok and Ashima do on Gogol's first solid food ritual.

....Gogol's annaprasan, his rice ceremony there is no baptism for Bengali babies, No ritualistic naming in the eyes of God. Instead, the first formal ceremony of their lives centres around the consumption of solid food. (38)

The immigrants face cultural torn when their cultural practices are scorned and there is a menace to their cultural identity. They get befuddled and express confrontation also to the treatise of supremacy in several arrangements. In the succeeding compeers these confusions, hitches and longings convert less penetrating as they get prejudiced by the culture of that country and correspondingly adjust themselves to it.

" The conventional wisdom about first generation Asian Americans is that an awareness of two cultures is a kind of curse which makes them unable to understand who they "really" are, as if identity were nothing more than cultural identification. Read with an understanding of the significance of the Gogol story, however, the novel is much more clearly an elucidation of the causes and meaning of that confusion, which comes not only from having a multiple cultural identity, but from some of the ways in which people in modern American society tend to view identity."(Caesar, Judith 4)

Lahiri being a daughter of an immigrant has faces the social invisibility, ignorance and unfamiliarity towards her name by the natives who changed her name according to their convenience, without thinking about it how much these small things effects the life of others and it's all happens because of the cultural conflict and lack of interaction between different cultures people.

Name gives someone identity but that identity is fully convey when that particular person lives in that specific culture of whom he belongs either it's futile. But in *The Namesake* Lahiri has chosen a Russian name, Gogle, for Bengali family second generation boy who lives in America. Through this ironical name, somehow, Lahiri wants to relate her story of name in which she has suffered in her early childhood where her name was changed by her school teacher from, Nilanjana to Jhmpa, for her convenience.

There is basic difference between Indian and American way of named their children. Indian believes in named their children on the name of God or related with Him to give thanks to God for giving us life. On the other hand American have different standard. They want to named children on the name of someone who is great or any famous personality whom the whole world admires.

“But this isn't possible, Ashima and Ashok think to themselves. Their tradition doesn't exist for Bengalis, naming a son after father or grandfather, a daughter after mother or grandmother. This sing of respect in America and Europe, this symbol of heritage and lineage, would be ridiculed in India. Within Bengali families, individual names are sacred, inviolable. They are not meant to be inherited or shared.”(28)

In the globalized world things are blurred most of countries follows the western way of naming their children? Ashok and Ashima also follow it and put his son name Gogle which is not resembles any connection between name and personality. Its shows on the external level but lahiri want to show the worthlessness of name of immigrant in new culture because they bring their name from their own culture that will not provide them identity because new culture people are unaware of that culture and meaning behind it. That name is futile for new culture so immigrant named their children on the basis of new culture.

Any name is the product of specific culture and its produces in a certain period of time to convey some meaning. Some name is relevant for all time but some loss their relevance as the time passes and in the cultural conflict name plays a very important role. If an immigrant named himself as his native name then his presence through his name is irrelevant but named himself according to new culture then his identity gets blurred because he is not belongs to that culture whose name he has accepted. He gets himself into the dilemma of taking which culture name so he makes easy passage to solve it by shorten his name for new culture and full name for culture which he belongs.

“Besides, there are always pet names to tide one over: a practice of Bengali nomenclature grants, to every single person, two names. In Bengali the word for pet name is daknam, meaning, literally, the name by which one is called, his friends, family, and other intimates, at home and in other private, unguarded moments. Pet names are a persistent remnant of childhood, a reminder that life is not always so serious, so formal, so complicated. They are reminder, too, that one is not all things to all people.”(25-6)

Gogol hates his name so changed his name Nikhil in his twenties which is much near to American style in its short form. He changed his name for acceptance in American society but as he grows up, realizes that name can't change him at internal level although it's sweet for him or for others.

"Without people in the world to call him Gogol, no matter how long he himself lives, Gogol Ganguli will, once and for all, vanish from the lips of loved ones, and so, cease to exist. Yet the thought of this eventual demise provides no sense of victory, no solace. It provides no solace at all" (289)

Marriage is always an issue between Indian and American society. On one hand Indian believes in arranged marriages other hand American does it by their own choice. From American point of view arranged marriage is something like uncivilized and barbaric act to do. Jhumpa Lahiri accepted it in an interview with Sandeep Roy Chaudhary.

"From a very early age. In school my friends would say their parents met in college or at a high school dance. And I was always aware my parents had married in a very different way. And when people asked me: "Oh, did your parents have an arranged marriage?" in a very bewildered and mildly horrified tone of voice, I was aware it was regarded as a sort of barbaric, unthinkable concept." (2007 *Seattle Reads* 4)

American, hardly, can accept or understand the concept of arranged marriages in which people are get married without seeing each other but Indian believes in it, its shows their faith in elders and love towards family. It all can be possible only because Indian believes in family value and great faith in their culture and tradition which lacks, in some way, in western culture. It's the basic culture difference between American and Indian culture.

Any country is complete within him. It's like a human being which bears a personality and reflects emotions. An immigrant comes to new country has two choice; one is to remains in or holds the value and tradition of his native culture or accept the personality of new culture. In her early days in Manhattan Ashima fights with herself to adjust in new environment. She is shy as any other Indian girl never comes out unnecessary from home. For even a minute work she calls Ashok to bring from market. She gets a lesson when rice of her home is empty and she goes to take from neighbour and gets some harsh words from her neighbour. There is basic difference in two cultures, in India people feel free in taking help of neighbour but it is not possible in America. Its hurts Ashima she throws rice and comes out at the streets of America to buy things for basic needs of her life. Ashima and Ashok are in their early days in America stick with their Indian culture but as time passes, they start adjusting themselves according to needs of new culture. They start celebrating Christmas, bringing Christmas tree in their home and decorate their house on Christmas Eve and enjoying other Christian festivals. Gradually they start shifting their personality from old culture to new culture.

Indian and American culture has some fundamental variance; one gives importance to his tradition and custom and provides less space for individual to improve himself, gives importance to greater good of society over individual. On the other hand American culture gives importance to individual's freedom to express him. It provides one to follow the consciousness of own even if it against the norms. Cultural norms are not strong and rigid as in India. But American society doesn't give the emotional support and protection as given by India of which Indian are used to and they miss this type of emotional bounding when they

are out of his land. This dilemma of acceptance and rejection of cultures, norms, traditions, values and many more things never ends till they are alive.

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