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Negotiation of Identity and Interstitial Space Between Two Cultures, Nations, and Generations in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*

Dr. Surekha Dangwal

Professor,

Department of English,

H.N.B.Garhwal Central University,

Srinagar(Garhwal), Uttarakhand

&

Ashish Ghildiyal

Research Scholar,

Department of English,

H.N.B.Garhwal Central University,

Srinagar(Garhwal), Uttarakhand

Abstract:

This paper attempts to negotiate the shuttling identities tossed-up in the air at the rate of the shocks and shakes of cross-cultural encounters, viz. Language, ethnicity, religion, traditions, ideology, culinary habits, family set-up and emotional make-up of the Indian immigrants in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*, especially that of Gogol Ganguli (who find himself in between his American culture where he was born and brought up and his ethnic Indian culture deep rooted in his parental upbringing along with the trauma of his name's Russian connection that gives an impression of a fractured identity by being named, unnamed and re-named) and Ashima Ganguli (who resists all things American and pines for an Indianness throughout her stay in America.) Both Gogol and his mother Ashima experience the diasporic state of '*trishanku*' while in their own significant individual progress from 'being' to 'becoming'. It also attempts to outline the adherence the first generation immigrants Ashima & Ashoke, and the second generation immigrants Gogol, Sonia, and Moushumi bound among themselves individually and to the 'home' and 'host' culture collectively and the way they overland the geo-political boundaries while 'being multicultural' to 'become trans-national'.

Keywords: Diaspora, Assimilation, Hybridity, Mimicry, Identity, Interstitial space, Acculturation, Multiculturalism, Homelessness.

Migration is a process which people usually undergo in the hope of a better tomorrow as the source of their inspiration. But in this movement it gets tough for the migrants as they replace everything 'habitual', 'known' with all things 'new' and 'strange'. In the Indian context, although the big migratory movements are governed by different reasons yet the term 'Indian diaspora' has become a phenotype to describe the migration of people from Indian territories to foreign lands and their subsequent struggles to acculturate.

The first wave of the diasporans were uneducated, coarse labourers, the '*girmityas*' during the colonial period who were forced to im(migrate) to work in the British colonies like Figi, Trinidad, & Mauritius. But the second wave belonged to the literate, qualified professionals who willingly "went to the United States, as part of the brain drain" (Spivak 61) in the early sixty's. Their aspiration and perspiration eventually helped them to mark their convincing presence in the foreign lands as presently it is largely the "success story" of the Indian IT professionals in the Silicon valley. In *The Namesake*, Gogol's parents

Ashoke and Ashima belong to this second wave of immigration to the United States whereas Gogol, Sonia, & Moushumi belongs to the second generation of Indian immigrants which are referred as “ABCD’s or American Born Confused or Conflicted Desis”(The Namesake 119)

As the Indian diaspora is one of the most varied, representing “half a dozen religions... seven different regions of India... nearly a dozen castes”(Parekh 105). Thus, the writers of Indian Diaspora explores & interpret the context of Indianness in myriad exciting ways. Jhumpa Lahiri “an Indian by ancestry, British by birth and American by immigration”(Nayak 206) is well acquainted with the lives of the Indian immigrants in America; about their emotional and bi-cultural make up represents the multi-cultural and di-spatial shades of two distinct nations, i.e. ‘home’ and ‘host’ country with a new freshness. As the classification ‘they/us’ differentiates the immigrants from the rest this leads to the germination of the consciousness of ‘interstitial space’ among the diasporic community that is both individual at one moment and collective at another with respect to two nations, cultures, and generations where the identity is frequently negotiated. In *The Namesake* Lahiri presents an apt exposition of this with an interview released by Houghton Mifflin Company that the novel is all about those “who are culturally displaced or those who grow up in two worlds simultaneously.”

In all of Lahiri’s fictional works India continues to be the background for her fictional landscape whereas America become the foreground where most of the action is performed. Lahiri draws dis-placement, re-placement, and challenges in acculturation with a new freshness by writing minutely about the emotional psyche of Indian diaspora. Her characters moves in different planes (cultural, national, generational) with no fixed co-ordinates in the globe attempting the interweaving of the national territories with “transnational contingencies of routes”(Gilroy 215); and it is there that Lahiri clicks a 3-D picture highlighting the struggles that arises with these encounters that defines and negotiates their identity.

The Namesake is a novel that harmoniously oscillates in-between the memories and events in Calcutta, Boston, and New York City respectively with the pendulum of ‘identity, belongingness, and alienation’ and examines the ‘gestures’ that evolve due to the two conflicting cultures and territorial spaces. Also, like a see-saw the novel swings up and down resting on the fulcrum of ‘generational gap’ between the first generation of Indian im(migrants) in America and their second generation Indian-American children.

This paper is an endeavour to show how ‘one’s identity and interstitial space’ is negotiated between two nations, cultures, and generations in *The Namesake*. It is a novel about the migration of a newly married Bengali couple, the ‘Ganguli’s’ from Calcutta to Massachusetts, U.S.A during the sixty’s and their long stay of over some thirty years in America depicting their struggle to simultaneously practise and preserve their Indian culture as well as getting familiar with the host culture. The novel also discusses the paradox arising due to the generational gap between the Indian born and brought up first generation immigrants and American born and brought up their second generation immigrants who are known as People of Indian Origin.

As the Ganguli couple, Ashima and Ashoke Ganguli moves from Calcutta, a place having hot climate to New Cambridge with its cold freezed climate they experience the coldness not only in the outer air but also noticed the lack of warmth (which in Indian communities is in abundance) in relationships which are generally freezed. From the very

opening paragraph of the novel the cross-cultural issues starts to tickle with the different culinary habits of two different nations, viz. India and America tasted. As Ashima Ganguli standing in her kitchen at Centre Square Apartment pines “for a mustard oil to pour into the mix”(1) of rice krispies, peanuts, chopped onion, salt, lemon juice. This tasty craving of Ashima for *bhel puri* which is sold for pennies on the Calcutta streets in abundance symbolises the tasteless life lived by her in America.

The story moves in the flashbacks where Ashima recalls her experiences of India of the sixty's; where marriage is arranged by the parents, and where the husband's name is known only after the betrothal, and the husband is personally known only after the marriage as in the novel: “It was only after the betrothal that she (Ashima) had learned his name.”(9), and “Eight thousands miles away in Cambridge she (Ashima) has come to know him (Ashoke).”(10). A Bengali tradition that forbid a wife to call her husband by his name as Ashima always refers to Ashoke as “Are you listening to me?” (2), although “She has adopted his surname but refuses, for propriety's sake, to utter his first.”(2) All this in American terms would be a violation of democracy, a subjugation of the personal freedom of an individual.

As the past of an individual carves his/her future, in the same way the identity of the immigrants is constructed by their shared past, i.e. their native culture: “It is something-not more a trick imagination. It has its histories and histories have their real, material and symbolic effects. ...It is always constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative, and myths” (Hall 257). Therefore, the rubric diaspora negotiates the hybridity and heterogeneity pertaining to culture, ethnicity, and nationality.

The pain caused by the maternity labor to Ashima connects perfectly with the pang in her heart for her ‘home’ (India). She is distressed by ‘motherhood in a foreign land’(6), ‘where she knows so little, where life seems so tentative and spare’(6) The separate compartments in the maternity floor that denies communication with the other expectant mothers appears to Ashima as the outcome of frozen social relationships built on the rubbish concept of individualism as she realizes that “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, Americans prefer their privacy.”(3). This is highly ironic as while Americans believe in open eroticism for their sensual gratification but when it comes to open emotional and mental support during the entirely new experience of pregnancy they make it a private affair. It is just the opposite of India.

As home is a ‘a mystic place of desire’ in the immigrants imagination (Brah 192) Ashima who always feels nostalgic compares pregnancy with immigrant experience as both “elicits the same curiosity from strangers, the same combination of pity and respect”(50), she realizes “for being a foreigner... is a sort of lifelong pregnancy--- a perpetual wait, ...a continuous feeling of sorts. ...only to discover that previous life has vanished, replaced by something more complicated and demanding.”(49).

Ashima who feels lonely and alienated is delighted to greet the Nandi's and Gupta's the only Indian acquaintances in an American hospital. She imagines these Indian acquaintances as the substitutes for her family back in Calcutta, and thus finds a nourishment for her interstitial space in an alien land. The reference of a small Bengali group in the novel shows a very superficial intimacy with each other: “They all come from Calcutta, and for this reason alone they are friends”(38) As Bhiku Parekh comments upon their networking and sense of solidarity with each other as:

The diasporic Indian is like the banyan tree, the traditional symbol of the Indian way of life, he spreads out his roots in several soils, drawing nourishment from one when the rest dry up. Far from being homeless, he has several homes; and that is the only way he has increasingly come to feel at home in the world. (Parekh 106)

The naming of their newly born son as Gogol is suggestive of two viewpoints. Firstly, the parents trying to establish a close bonding with their child, as his father survived a fatal accident by attracting the attention of the rescuers with Nikolai Gogol's book *A Collection of Short Stories* and secondly, it interpretes the transnational identity of the immigrants that is thoroughly mapped and re-mapped. As name of an individual is the instant conveyer of a cultural heritage one belongs to; a name that neither suggests any Indian origin nor an American origin rather a Russian connection germinates the problems of naming, un-naming, and re-naming. These are indeed the facets of a diasporic identity: "our identity is at once plural and partial", "sometimes we feel that we straddle two culture..." (Rushdie 15).

With Gogol's *annaprasan* (feeding) ceremony, the exorbitant Bengali culture which is constantly practised and preserved by the immigrants is represented. A tradition still followed by the highly educated Bengali's where a child of six months is forced to be confronted with his destiny by simply picking up one of the objects from a plate. For Americans who frequently consults career counsellors, this would appear a silly act which could drastically mould the psyche of a child irrationally. But for immigrants "their belief, tradition, customs, behaviours and values along with their 'possession and belonging' are carried by migrants with them to 'new places'." (Mc Lead 211).

Like his mother is never been comfortable in America, Gogol too becomes uncomfortable at a young age of fourteen as he has started to hate the questions related to his name. On more psychological grounds he has started to feel the questions related to his identity where his own self seems to be ambivalent. The embarrassment of the boy Gogol due to his name is evident from: "... other boys of his age have begun to court girls already, asking them to go to the movies or the pizza parlor, but he cannot imagine saying, 'Hi, it's Gogol'... He can't imagine this at all." (76). Although Gogol doesn't date with anyone till his High School (a big issue with an American child and parents) but he feel the crushes inwardly. But for his parents born and brought up in India Gogol's not having a girlfriend happens to be quite normal: "His parents does not find it strange that their son doesn't date... They have never been on a date in their lives and therefore they see no reason to encourage Gogol, certainly not at this age. (93)

The 'strangeness' of the name of Gogol started creating problems for him since his childhood as "... substitute teachers at school always pause, looking apologetic when they arrive at his name on the roster" (67). This often used to leave Gogol anguished as simply the utterance of his name creates problems for others. Similarly, Moushumi also hated her name at school as she tells: "... that a name like her is a curse... complains that no one can say it properly... "I hated being the only Moushumi I knew," she says." (239).

When Gogol like an argumentative American boy questions his parents about the strange name of himself. (100) This argumentation of Gogol is a shock to Ashima who never assimilates with the American culture. However, Ashoke finally permit Gogol to change his name saying, "In America anything is possible. Do as you wish." (100); this shows the enriched cultural acumen of an experienced first generation immigrant.

As 'identity' is always challenging for those who are 'culturally di-spaced' (placed in two spaces), the amplitude of Gogol's identity keep on changing as with his growing years "Nikhil evaporates and Gogol claims him again" (106). This stands for his fluid identity as Gogol is firstly named (with a connection that doesn't claims him culturally although it does emotionally), then gets un-named as Nikhil as during this phase he wants to get recognized and referred to as Nikhil but the rest address him by his former identity (very suggestive of the diasporans who are judged with the native country although they breathe and live in the host country), and finally re-named as Gogol again who is one with his native Indian- Bengali identity (again relative to the frequent negotiation of identity and space of diasporans that ultimately binds them stronger to their roots).

Gogol becomes conscious of his 'otherisation' through "the salesmen who prefer to direct their conversation to Gogol, as though his parents were either incompetent and deaf."(68) due to the Indian accents of his parents. Consequently he also notices how differently his parents react and spends their life when they are in India and when they are in America. He observes how at Dum Dum Airport: "Within minutes, before their eyes Ashoke and Ashima slip into bolder, less complicated versions of themselves, their voices louder, their smiles wider, revealing a confidence Gogol and Sonia never see on Pemberton Road."(81) This corresponds to how much relaxed and confident they feel while staying in India. This confidence is symbolic of their association with their own identity which in America always torments and shakes them due to the dissociation.

But on the contrary when Gogol and Sonia, visit India, they feel alienated as: "[T]hey stand out in their bright, expensive sneakers, American haircuts, backpacks slung over one shoulder"(82). This denotes the difference amid the first generation and the second generation immigrants as:

Culture is a concept that includes a refining and elevating element, each society's reservoir of the best that has been known and thought, ... In time culture comes to be associated , often aggressively, with the nation or the nation or the state, this differentiates 'us from them' almost always with some degree of identity, and a rather combative one at that... (Said 12)

The Bengali couple keeps on getting new insights about the American way of life when Mrs. Lapidus sends a message to them "...explaining that due to their son's preference he will be known as Gogol at school. What about the parents preference? Ashima and Ashoke wonders shaking their heads."(60). Moreover, the field trip organized by Gogol's school is a big cultural shock as she exclaims: "Only in America are children taken to cemeteries in the name of art"(70) whereas in compliance with India she astonishingly remarks: "In Calcutta the burning ghats are the most forbidden of places, she tells Gogol"(70). Further, the differences in societal & governmental set-up are illustrated when Ashima loses her bags full with gifts on a train and thinks of those bags to be lost until Ashoke comes and calls MBTA lost and found which returns the bag the next day with everything intact. Ashima amazingly tells her friends that this can happen: 'Only in this country'(42).

Jhumpa Lahiri deals with the multiple experiences of immigrants like the constant sense of alienation and nostalgia on one hand, and the struggle to acculturate on the other. As the Ganguli couple while enthusiastic about their own cultural beliefs gradually soak the cultural ways of the host country: "For the sake of Gogol and Sonia they celebrate, with progressively increasing fanfare, the birth of Christ, an event the children look forward to far more than the worship of Durga and Saraswati." In this way the migrants, "through their

daily activities and social, economic and political relations, create fields that cross national boundaries”(Linda, Schiller: 1-2) As Ashima at one moment teaches Gogol ‘to memorize a four line children poem by Tagore, names of deities’ and the next moment tells Gogol to watch ‘sesame street’ and the ‘electronic company’ on Channel- 2 “in order to keep up with the English he uses at nursery school”(54).

The novel constantly deals up with the contrasting tastes and experiences of the two generations. While Ashoke and Ashima are not interested in getting Americanised, on the contrary Gogol and Sonia feels the urge to belong to America. As one day Gogol hears an abbreviation ABCD in a panel discussion on Indian novels in English and through his experiences defines it as American Born Confused Deshis or Conflicted Deshis (119) to whom Gogol avoids: “He has no ABCD friends at college. He avoids them, for they remind him too much of the way his parents choose to live, befriending people not so much because they like them, but because of a past they happen to share.”(119). With Gogol’s second girlfriend Maxine, issues related to culture are addressed in a clearer way. At Maxine’s home Gogol finds out some of the minutest differences between Maxine’s parents and his own, between American and Indian culture. While Gogol shares the bed with Maxine yet being unmarried to her; still her parents Gerald and Lydia are not bothered (137) whereas on Gogol so much questions are putted on by his parents related to his whereabouts.(144) Also he realises: “Unlike his parents they pressure her to do nothing, and yet she lives faithfully happily, at her side.”(138).

Furthermore, comparing the parties at Maxine’s and his own home Gogol notices: “Unlike Gerald and Lydia, who preside at the center of their dinners, his parents behaved more like caterers in their own home... waiting until most of their guests plates were stacked by the sink in order to finally help themselves.(140-41) But what appears to be ‘caterers’ for Gogol, it is the rich Indian legacy of “*atithi devo bhava*”.

Maxine greeting Gogol’s parents by calling out their names: “It’s so nice to finally meet you, Ashima”(146) is a kind of shocking experience to them. Moreover, when Gogol meets Pamela, a middle aged white woman in New Hampshire who insists on viewing him as an Indian, despite his denial that he is from Boston as she says “...you’re an Indian... I’d think the climate wouldn’t affect you given your heritage”(156). Although initially Maxine’s mother Lydia tries to assert that Gogol is American, but finally even she questions his belongingness to the United States as she asks if he was actually born in the United States(157). In a nation where the Statue of Liberty stands uprightly, whose first President is known for fighting the discrimination on the basis of colour and ethnicity there too individuals are identified according to their ethnicity. For e.g besides Gogol’s being born and fostered in US, plus his US citizenship is not sufficient to the native Americans to identify him as an American.

As death is believed to be beginning of new life in Hindu mythology, in *The Namesake* the death of his father leads Gogol through a transformation : “Years later Gogol had learned the significance, that it was a Bengali son’s duty to shave his head in the wake of a parent’s death.” (179). Like Ashoke associated Gogol’s birth with his new life similarly Gogol imbibes a new life after his father’s sudden demise. Although Maxine tries to show her condolence but she lacks the sensibility which an Indian girl would have shown at a time of crisis in Gogol’s life She is concerned about her own self as she says, “What about New Year’s Eve?”(182) and tries to persuade Gogol that it will help him “[T]o get away from all this.”(182) This is the reason why Gogol recently transformed and feels one with his ancestral roots ended relationship with Maxine. However, Maxine despite

inclined towards her own happiness is loyal in her relationships whereas Moushumi, a girl with an Indian origin has numerous secret sexual liaisons and is utterly disloyal and shows a paradox of being an 'ideal Indian partner' than Maxine.

In the process of criss-cross of cultures both the immigrants as well as the native residents of the host country gets effected. As Graham, an American refused to marry Moushumi, a girl of Indian origin after he visited Calcutta as he too was shocked as he tells "Imagine dealing with fifty in-laws without alcohol. I couldn't even hold her hand on the street without attracting stares", he has said.(217)

As the second generation immigrants hate their identity 'being' associated with the shared cultural past of their ancestors thus they attempts to escape that ambivalence germinating due to their 'otherisation' regarding bicultural hybridity by undergoing the process 'becoming' multivalent/multicultural. For an instance Sonia marrying Ben (a half-Chinese boy) and Moushumi having close cultural & sexual liaisons with French, English and American shows the multiculturalism propagated by the second generation through "reterritorializing the nation boundaries." (Bill, Griffiths, Helen)

Also, Ashima who has retained her native culture during her thirty two years of stay in America as she "...continues to wear nothing but saris and sandals from Bata.."(65) is changed as she tries to imbibe the American culture after the death of her husband for her self-dependence, and for the sake of happiness of her children. She tries to neglect the cultural nuances and rather assimilates as now she doesn't bother at all about Sonia marrying Ben as earlier she used to get annoyed by Gogol's relationship with the American girls. The path of self-dependence makes her grow more confident and liberate her from her extra caring due to her Indian heritage concerning her children as now she decides to divide her time every year between Calcutta and America. This perfectly connote with Avtar Brah's positive remarks on diaphora as he holds:

The word diaspora often invokes the imagery of traumas of separation and dislocation, and this is certainly a very important aspect of migratory experience. But diasporas are also potentially the sites of hope and new beginnings. They are contested cultural and political terrains where individual and collective memories collide, reassemble and reconfigure.(Brah 193)

The present article intends to conclude that while portraying the theme of cultural dilemmas and dislocations of the migrants, Lahiri does not remain confined to the territorial dislocations of migrants alone, rather philosophically she presented dislocation as a perpetual natural phenomenon as all beings on this temporal world are transient. Similarly in this era of trans-nationalism one may have a home in the native nation, may construct a 'home' in an alien land, but ultimately the concept of home gets replaced with homelessness like Ashima in the novel who as per her name "...will be without borders, without a home of her, a resident everywhere and nowhere" (276).

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