

CROSS-CULTURAL IDENTITY: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF JHUMPA LAHIRI'S NAMESAKE

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Abstract

The question of identity in literature has been the focal point of most writers in every age. Whether religious or cultural, the identity crisis is always a creative force. The migration to other countries can be forced or self imposed, but in both ways the Diaspora writers experience the two worlds, culturally and emotionally different from one another. The present paper partly deals with the theoretical discussions of Cross-cultural identity and partly with its application on the novel *Namesake*. It attempts to examine Jhumpa Lahiri's *Namesake* as a representation of the Diaspora predicament of Indians abroad, and analyzes the cross-cultural identity of its characters which are frayed between the old home in India and present in America. The novel is a narrative about the assimilation of the Ganguli's family, an Indian Bengali Family from Calcutta into America, over thirty years (1968-2000); 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 effort to settle "home" in the new land. The novel shows how the immigrants face cultural predicaments in the foreign land, and their gusto to stick to their own cultural beliefs and customs steadily imbibe the cultural ways of the host country too. In this paper, the approach will be to illustrate from the diverse perspectives of theorists the concept of the 'culture', 'identity' and 'home' by focusing on the text of the novel *Namesake*.

Keywords: Diaspora, Identity Crisis, Cross-cultural Relationship, Culture, Home, Nostalgia, Assimilation etc.

The question of identity is not pellucid and easy to define; rather it is fluid and ever-changing, and "a 'production', which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation" (Hall 222). Our identity is always related to some particular place and time, history and culture. Like everything else, our identity is placed and *positioned* in specific contexts. If the context (history, time, space, culture etc.) is itself so enigmatic and impenetrable, how can it be easy to define or locate our identity? Cultural identity,

according to Stuart Hall, can be defined in two different ways: one, the shared culture, “a sort of collective ‘one true self’, hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed ‘selves’, which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common” (Hall 223). In these terms a stable, unchanging, common and shared culture figures before our eyes. Since Jhumpa Lahiri in this novel is dealing with the other sense of cultural identity which, in the words of Hall, is “a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being’ it belongs to the future as much as to the past” (Hall 225). Here, the identity has been defined in terms of Derridian *difference*: ‘what we really are’ and ‘what we have become’. In the novel, the present (life in America) is continuously being differentiated with the past (life in India), and this tension between present and past complicates Hall’s idea of ‘being’ and ‘becoming’. Their new identity is continuously subjected to ‘play’ of their past history and new culture. Their identities are ‘framed’ by two axes or vectors, which are simultaneously operative: the vector of similarity and continuity; and the vector of difference and rupture (Hall 226-227). Similarly, the identity of Jhumpa Lahiri is itself the result of the relationship between these two axes, her past and present, and her old and new home.

Jhumpa Lahiri, a second generation Diaspora writer and the winner of Pulitzer Prize for *Interpreter of Maladies*, has expressed her cross-cultural identity, which is torn between the present American life and nostalgia of the past Indian life, in her all works. Jhumpa Lahiri by and large writes about the human condition, difficulties of existence, cross-cultural identity, hybridization, cultural Diaspora of the people, and about the loss, nostalgia and homelessness. As an India-American born immigrant, Lahiri has been always writing about the problems concerning the identity and belongingness, because, as pointed out by Meenakshi Mukherji, Indianess of Indian English Writer is a matter of identity. The diaspora experience, in the writings of the third world writers, is not always conscious. Their identity which is “at once plural and partial (Rushdie 15),” is sometimes expressed unconsciously, as an aeration of suppressed emotions and nostalgia for their own homelands. In this context and about her personal experience, Jhumpa Lahiri claims, “When I first started writing I was not conscious that my subject was the Indian- American experience. What drew me to my craft was the desire of force the two worlds I occupied to mingle on the page as I was not brave enough, or mature enough to allow in life” (qtd in Das 12), and this corroborates the claim of unconscious infatuation of these writers towards homelands. Jhumpa Lahiri had earlier in her life made her reputation by writing some short stories; later, her collection of stories, *Interpreter of Maladies*, which won the Pulitzer Prize, marked her position in the circle of major contemporary Diaspora writers. Her experience of moving from short story to novel was ‘liberating’ and at times ‘overwhelming’ for her (qtd in Das 3). “The original spark” of *Namesake*, as she herself says, “was the fact that a friend of my cousin in India had the pet name Gogol”(qtd in Das 13).

The novel begins with Ashoke’s migration to the USA, with his recently wed wife Ashima, to complete his Ph. D. in Boston, researching in the field of Fiber Optics. Ashima has to leave her original homeland, “the country in which she has grown to know and love her husband” (Lahiri 16), and she is now living in the host country, where there is “not a soul on the street” (Lahiri 30); where she bore her son, Gogol—grown up there and “takes the occasional pranks and pinpricks of some native chauvinistic classmates in his stride”(Lahiri 44). Ashima sees USA having “another culture” and “another history” which is totally alien to her and with which she cannot be commingled. Varied strands of marginalization, acculturalization, hybridization, contra-acculturation and assimilation constitute their life experience in the melting pot of the USA. Most of all, the ‘motherhood in a foreign land” was terrifying experience for Ashima, and

afterwards 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” was awfully hunting her all the time (The Namesake 5-6). In the novel, Ashima’s perpetual insecurity and a constant burden of being a foreigner is revealed as:

...being a foreigner... 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 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. (49-50)

The other characters in the novel also mirror a double vision, at once ‘yearning backward’ and ‘looking forward’ which makes them the victims of dual identity, displacement, and cultural disorientation as well. In this matter ‘memory’, enhanced by the imagination, has a greater importance in recalling the past, which has been observed by Rohinton Mistry as: all writers go down the memory lane and “look at the past, at lost moments, lost opportunities, lost loves” (Qtd in Das 15). They feel and experience the sense of loss and longing, of dislocation and nostalgia, for their native land. Although the second generation character, Gogol, like Jhumpa Lahiri herself, had not physically experienced the ‘lost world’, but he could imaginatively feel nostalgia for his ancestral homeland. Hence, the ancestral homeland becomes the “imaginary homeland” for the second generation writers who remarks “the past using memory as tool” (Rushdie 2010); then they exercise their imagination, and create a “new memory”.

Namesake is a Diaspora novel about cultural negotiations, and as Rupkatha says, “an excavation of roots, rootlessness, uprooting, re-rootings, tracking roots and routes to discover oneself at home in many homes in the world, despite a single or dual citizenship” (Rupkatha 533). The characters try to sustain and preserve their identity and ‘home culture’ in their new homes by different ways; one of ways is the ‘food’. Food serves as a metaphor or symbol of their culture which they have lost only physically, however, psychologically it remains with them in every moment. For example, rice, the staple food of Bengalis, plays an important role in Ashima’s life in New York and even at *Annaprashan* ceremony of her children. Food acts as a ‘supplement’ or ‘substitution’ for the things they are missing (Culler 11). It is the supplement that recalls them of India. The Ganguli family in USA is cooking the Bengali food as a ‘substitute’ for their lost culture. This symbol of Food has been also used in many stories of *Interpreter of Maladies*. Wearing saris and ‘Sandals from Bata’, and the use of Bengali language, occasionally, in her home are other elements of cultural supplements.

There is a continuous nostalgia for a “mystic place of desire” called ‘home’ (Avatar Brah 1997: 192). ‘Home’ is a metaphor for security, love, care, and above all a sense of belonging, which eventually is inextricably connected with one’s identity. The ‘identity’ is expressed through one’s losing ‘home’ or by looking for a ‘home’. In Diaspora, one attains home only through the imagination and past experience (Chakrabarty 31). The concept of ‘home’ is far removed from the actual home in material form; it is the notion of some integrated elements—“disjunction between past and present, between here and there, make ‘home’ seem far removed in time and space, available for return only through an act of ‘imagination’” (Mcleod: 2000: 211; Quoted in Das 10). The ‘home’ is ‘primarily a mental construction build form the incomplete odds and ends of memory that survives form the past. It exists in a fractured, discontinuous

relationship with the past' (Quoted in Mcleod 2000). The Diaspora experience is both spacial (nation/ culture) as well as temporal (past and present). Remembering is totally different and painful from the introspection and retrospection.

Sometimes our names define our identity and existence. Hence, the controversy remains, even, with the name of Jhumpa Lahiri herself: of what should we call her? Is Lahiri a Bengali writer? Or, An Indian, Asian-American, Postcolonial, American, Global writer etc., or, all of these—amalgamation of these; or, none of these. So, this controversy with the naming remains with every Diaspora writer. Brati Biswas has quoted from her internet-interview, in which Lahiri has discussed her own experience and points out its significance in the larger context of the rest of such expatriate Indians. She says:

In fact, it is still very hard to think of myself as an American. 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. On the other hand, the problem for the children of immigrants, those with strong ties to their country of origin, is that they feel neither one thing nor the other. The feeling that there was no single place to which I fully belonged bothered me growing up. It bothers me less now. (187-8)

Similarly, the protagonist Gogol, born in USA, has been given such a name, that has the same dilemma; it signify his identity that is torn between the two worlds and yet belonging to none of them simultaneously. Gogol is neither the American name, nor an Indian one, but a namesake of his father's favorite Russian writer. In a train accident wherein his father has a hair's breadth escape and he believed that he was saved only by a page, which was caught in his hand, torn off from a short story book by Gogol (Nikolai Gogol, a Ukrainian-born Russian dramatist, novelist and short story writer) that he was reading just before the accident. Therefore, when Gogol is born, his father gives him the name 'Gogol' as a lucky token which had once saved his own life. But Gogol hates this name and his hatred for his name has been explained in the novel as: "For by now, he's come to hate questions pertaining to his name, hates having constantly to explain. He hates that his name is both absurd and obscure, that it has nothing to do with who he is, that is neither Indian nor American but full of all things Russians" (Lahiri 72). Late Edward Said, the renowned cultural theorist, spoke about being caught into two names or identities—names which in literal presence and cultural connections are for removed from each other:

Thus it took me about fifty years to become accustomed to, or, more exactly, to feel uncomfortable with 'Edward', a foolishly English name yoked forcibly to the co-mistakably Arabic family name 'Said'. (1991: 1)

Gogol, like Edward Said, is also caught between two names—Gogol and Nikhil, of two nations, with which he feels uncomfortable, or more exactly unaccustomed. His name is given to him accidentally, partly because of the lost of the letter, after the death of Ashima's grandmother, and partly because of his father's superstitious belief of saving his life in the train accident. Gogol's hatred for his name is a kind of 'anxiety of influence' in the terms of Herald Bloom, whereby latter could not bear the influence of the former one, which defines his identity. As a diasporic writer, Lahiri deals with multi-cultural society—partially form 'inside' and partially form 'outside'. She often strives for native identity and yet simultaneously endeavors to evolve a new identity in an adopted Anglo-American cultural landscape. Accepting permanent condition

of human existence, she herself, as an immigrant, faces the condition of dislocation and displacement (Kadam 121-122).

The third world immigrants couldn't fiddle with in the culture of 'first world', which eventually results in psychological problems and they become neurotic, schizophrenic, ambivalent, and suspended between the two worlds. They can't cast off their inherited cultural legacy; also, they are not able to encapsulate themselves in the new socio-cultural environment. Gogol, Sonia and Moushumi Mazoomdar in the novel are the second generation Indian-Americans, who like Lahiri, find it difficult to identify themselves either with the people at home or with the present society outside. The central character Gogol is the true child of cultural disorientation who loses all his interest towards the lessons on his native culture. Gogol's life also has been interwoven between past and present, however, he struggle to escape from this life of in-betweenness and from his cultural roots into his US girlfriend's life. He is fascinated by the American life and he wants to be different from his parents and makes a conscious effort to escape from the Bengali culture, customs, history and even his name (by changing Gogol to Nikhil) which is associated with his father's past history. It is his father's sudden and unfortunate death that brings him close to the family. This cultural distortion or disorientation is truly realized when Moushumi breaks off her relationship with the American Graham. Gogol and Moushumi resemble each other in many aspects. In their personal life "they want to settle life like their parents but their conflicting identities interact with each other and put them dismantled." (Lahiri 234) This conflict in the lives of all the characters of the novel remains constantly bruising their hearts. At the end of the novel, Gogol is not so anti-Gogol anymore. He accepts the fate of Indian-American Identity, accepts the Bengali customs without envying the American ways of living. He is saddened by the fact that his mother is going to India soon, the loss of his family home, and finally, the loss of the personal, familial side of himself that the name Gogol came to represent.

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