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From Alienation to Assimilation: Exploring Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*

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Abstract

Jhumpa Lahiri's novel *The Namesake* is a kaleidoscope of the different shades of the individual relationships, the conflicts and confusions of the characters along with the cultural dilemma of the immigrants. The novel explores the diasporic conflict of the hyphenated identities of Indian-Americans. The immigrants in the novel live a confused existence as Indian-American, American-Indian and Overseas-Born-Indian. Being a foreigner is a sort of lifelong pregnancy for Ashima- a perpetual wait, a constant burden and an on-going responsibility. The novel focuses on cross-cultural conflicts, trauma and aspirations of the two generations of expatriates, Ashoke and Ashima who are not inclined towards getting Americanised, while Gogol and Sonia, the second-generation migrants face the intense pressure to be loyal to the old world and fluent to the new.

Keywords: Forced Diaspora, Voluntary Diaspora, Dual identity, Hyphenated Identity

Diaspora evokes the specific trauma of human displacement. To be in diasporas (*dia* means through and *sporno* means scattered community) means to be in an unbelonging room. Diaspora is today an undeniable fact of world ethnicity. It is important to distinguish between the political use of the term ‘diaspora’ and its conceptual meaning as exile. ‘Diaspora’ today refers not to permanent exile, the range and diversity of transnational communities across the world articulates a universal global ethnicity for disparate population. When we speak about the ‘Indian Diaspora’ writers, it generally refers to the persons of Indian birth or ethnicity living abroad. Other than the Greek word ‘Diaspora’ which was applied for its meaning ‘to disperse’, the term now has been extended to include other displaced population due to slavery, colonialism and forced migration. Emmanuel S. Nelson defines the Indian Diaspora as the “historical and contemporary presence of people of Indian sub continental origin in other areas of the world” (Nelson 15).

The novel *The Namesake* by Jhumpa Lahiri definitely has an autobiographical link as Lahiri’s experience of growing up as child of immigrants resembles that of her protagonist, Gogol in the novel. In an interview she says: “I wanted to please my parents and meet their expectation. I also wanted to meet the expectation of my American peers, and the expectation I put on myself to fit into American society. It’s a classic case of divided identity.” (conversation with Mira Nair) The immigrants experience is complicated 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 new world.

The novel is all about the cultural assimilation of the first-generation migrants (Ashoke and Ashima) and second-generation migrants (Gogol and Moushumi) into the alien culture towards which they feel uprooted at times. *The Namesake* prolongs to expand and advance the themes of cultural alienation and assimilation depicted in the last story of *Interpreter of Maladies*, ‘The Third and Final Continent’. Before going into the details of the plot, let us first discuss the theme of diasporic conflict of dual identity in *The Namesake*, In Lahiri’s own remark in an interview with Mira Nair in which she says that the novel is definitely about those “who are culturally displaced or those who grow up in two worlds simultaneously.” (Conversation with Mira Nair) Talking about the predicament of immigrants, Jhumpa Lahiri says: “I think that for immigrants, the challenge of exile, the loneliness, the constant sense of alienation, the knowledge of and longing for a lost world are more explicit and distress than for their children.” (Conversation with Mira Nair)

The novel narrates the saga of Ganguli family in Calcutta and Boston. The Gangulis, as educated, cultured and elite Calcuttans, are the lovers of Russian and English literatures. They love to read the authors like Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, Dickens, Graham Greene and Somerset Maugham. Through their readings Gangulis have had an opportunity “to travel without moving an inch” (*The Namesake* 16). Ashoke Ganguli is a doctoral Candidate in Electrical Engineering at MIT, USA where he is engaged in “earning a Ph.D. in Boston, researching in the field of fibre optics” (*The Namesake* 9). The saga of Ganguli family began in the imperial times of pre-independence era. Ashoke’s grandfather, former professor of European literature at Calcutta University, used to say, “Ganguli is a legacy of the British, an

anglicized way of pronouncing his real surname, Gangopadhyay” (*The Namesake* 67). Ashoke’s career in America made him a prospective groom in Calcutta where the Bhaduri family got attracted to this ambitious Ganguli as “he was slightly plump, scholarly looking but still youthful, with black thick-framed glasses and a sharp, prominent nose. A neatly trimmed moustache connected to a beard that covered only his chin lent him an elegant, vaguely aristocratic air” (*The Namesake* 8). After his marriage, Ashoke moved with his wife Ashima Bhaduri to Boston. While he remained busy in career building as an architect, Ashima spent her days in nostalgia in a Boston apartment. Pregnancy was a hard time for her for there was no one to soothe her. Motherhood is glorious for a woman but for a migrant in foreign land, loneliness and strange surroundings nearly kill such feelings.

Assimilation is the process through which a person forsakes his or her own cultural tradition to become a part of a different culture. Ashima and Ashoke as first-generation migrants tried their best to assimilate into non-Indian, non-Bengali and American culture. And also they are providing the comfortable ground for their children to assimilate. They made a friendly zone with the other Bengali families living there. With time they became Mashis and Maushas of kids. Gangulis never made their biased social interaction. Being the first-generation migrants, it has been difficult for them to assimilate into dominant culture. They try their best to assimilate their kids by memorizing them four-linekids’ poem by Tagore, and the name of deities, ten handed goddess *Durga*, *Saraswati* and her swan, *Laxmi* and her owl, *Ganesh* with his mouse. In the meantime, Ashima insists Gogol to watch *Seesame Street* and *The Electric Company* (television programs) in order to keep up with the English. Ashoke and Ashima keep on bringing up their kids as any other American parents do, no infiltrations, no over protectiveness and supportive to their decisions. They are helping them to grow into good human beings. Other than this Ashima and Ashoke never take interest in their love life. Although, Sonia and Gogol had peer group of their own ethnicity, Ashoke and Ashima never bothered about to whom Sonia or Gogol is dating.

Gogol and Sonia did not have much difficulty to assimilate as their parent had. Jhumpa beautifully conveys how a mother of Indian background feels when her small kid is taken to graveyard by school on painting trip. This is due to anticipatory socialization, which is a process of socialization in which a person rehearses for future position, occupation and social relationship. Ashima is sensitive about the place where people are taken after death; the burning ghats are the most forbidden place (in India) where women and children are not allowed. She finds it strange how American’s culture is so different from her own as she says ‘What type of field trip was this? It was enough that they applied lipstick to their corpses and buried them in silk-lined boxes. Only in America (a phrase she has begun to resort to often these days), only in America children are taken to cemeteries in the name of art. What’s next, a trip to the morgue?’ (*The Namesake* 70).

Ashoke and Ashima had to give Gogol a new name when he was to be admitted in the kindergarten. It was the time to choose a good name (bhalonam) for their son, they chose Nikhil ‘perfectly respectable Bengali good name, meaning he who is entire, encompassing all, but it also bears a satisfying resemblance to Nikolai, the first name of the Russian Gogol’

(*The Namesake* 56). But kid Gogol could not feel related to his good name Nikhil and he loved to be called Gogol. He was just trying to find his root and try to get the meaning of his name in the American context as Jhumpa connects to it as ‘As a young boy Gogol doesn’t mind his name. He recognizes pieces of himself in road sign; GO LEFT, GO RIGHT, GO SLOW; (*The Namesake* 66). He became ‘Giggle’ ‘Gargle’ for his school friends. Gogol decides to change his name as there was no other way out. His parents too realized the need of it. But somehow he felt himself associated with the name GOGOL, when he went for the certification of his new name to the Family Court and clerk called his name ‘Gogol Ganguli, he is aware, with a twinge of sadness, that this is the last time in his life he will hear that name uttered in an official context.

Although Gogol is the protagonist of Jhumpa’s novel, but Ashima could be easily seen as ‘women in exile’. Ashima is a first-generation migrant, one who simultaneously straddles between two worlds, the past and present, through the attachment and commitment to two nations at the same time. Ashima looks for her identity by associating her to many grounds, her parental home in Calcutta as well as with the changing location of her husband.

Ashima has lived in only five houses: her parent’s flat in Calcutta, her in-laws house for one month, the house they rented in Cambridge, living below the Montgomery’s, the faculty apartment on campus, and, lastly the one they own now. One hand, five homes. A lifetime in a fist (*The Namesake* 167).

Lastly, as a middle-aged mother and a widow she finds herself dangling in-between. All through her life she tried locating herself, trying to find association and her identity.

Gogol can be linked to Jhumpa Lahiri herself with respect to their identities, even though they both maintain ethnic identity, their self-identification as immigrants have faded. However, unlike Jhumpa Lahiri, Gogol, with his strange name, feels insecurity both in his homeland and host land. As the novel ends, however, Gogol learns that the answer is not to fully abandon or attempt to diminish either culture, but to mesh the two together. Gogol is not fully in tune with his identity until he realizes that it is embellished by both cultures. He does not have to be one or the other; he does not have to choose. He is made up of both, and instead of weakening his pride is strengthened by this. Though the novel wraps up with more downfalls occurring in Gogol’s life, he is able to stand on his feet. He is no longer ashamed of himself or the way he has lived. He is proud of who he is and where he comes from. And he is proud of his name and all that it means.

Caught between two worlds with an ever-increasing multiplicity of identities, Jhumpa Lahiri examines and defines the conditions of the diaspora people. Her novel, *The Namesake*, and two short story collections provide the reader with picture of the life of expatriates. Lahiri explores the idea of cultural and personal isolations and identities through her various characters. Her stories also depict her Indian background. Jhumpa Lahiri herself is a second-generation migrant, and hence she does not face explicitly the challenges or loneliness of exile and longing for the lost world. But like many immigrant offsprings, she too felt the intense pressure to be loyal to the old world and fluent to the new. She was torn apart, between the hyphenated identities of Indian-American, which has become a part of

vocabulary in the beginning of this century. In *The Namesake* one can easily see this hyphenated identity so closely. The need to connect to one's origins and yet to be part of this new land is important to all the characters in the novel. Jhumpa Lahiri admits that as the novel conveys the experiences of alienation of the migrants from their roots, it is to some extent autobiographical.

Like Gogol, Jhumpa's pet name inadvertently becomes her good name. She has two other names on her passport and her birth certificate. But when she was enrolled in school the teachers decided that Jhumpa was the easiest of her names to pronounce. Talking about the diasporic crisis of dual/hybrid identity, Lahiri, in an interview, reflects: "The original spark of the book was the fact that a friend of my cousin in India has a pet name Gogol. I wanted to write about a pet name/good name distinction for a long time. It is almost too perfect a metaphor for the experience of growing up as the child of immigrants, having a divided identity, divided loyalties etc." (Interview with Mira Nair).

The example of the name of Nikhil Ganguli/Nikolai Ganguli/Gogol Ganguli is problematized at length and all attention is fixed on the need to carefully evaluate what risk a casually picked up name from a whole world of available and coinable names could ultimately lead to. For quite some time the reader is confronted with the insistent question so skilfully raised in *The Namesake*, namely, how indispensable is a name in the recognition, success and satisfaction in one's life. In other words, how inseparably intertwined with one's name is one's entire identity? How, like the body-soul or body-shadow duo conception, does name-identity duo stay in a kind of unimaginable inseparableness? As if this were not enough Lahiri brings in a few more maladies in *The Namesake* that afflict us in our postcolonial, postmodern and (post) globalised situations. We leave the old backward places of our birth for new metropolitan centres for better living conditions while our fascination for the old traditions and customs in our new worlds variously makes us virtual misfits, and this burden is transferred to our children who due to their upbringing in and adoption of new world cultures have hardly any patience to understand some distant culture's attraction and greatness. The enigmatic situation arises because the land distanced in time, place, and memory still enjoys its hold and pull over those who had left it for its inability to feed their hopes and ambitions sumptuously. With a sleight of hand, as it were, Lahiri interprets the problems the educated Indians face whose fortunes draw them to the West, beckoning them with a promise of prosperity that India almost never could bring them. She interrogates this unreasonable and undesirable interest of ex-Indians/NRIs in Indian tradition, values and customs. In *The Namesake* the parents Ashoke and Ashima, following Indian practices, await the choice of a name for their new-born baby from its grandmother in Calcutta. Since no intimation reaches them until the time the American hospital has to discharge Ashima and the baby, an alternative name is assigned to the baby, rather instinctively by Ashoke. This attempt at perpetuating a tradition by transplanting it (unsuccessfully though) in an alien culture extracts its price in the book. Well placed and successful people's misplaced priorities and the sorry outcome of such uncritical exercises and fond fascination for lost motherlands are also some of the maladies in Lahiri's judgement.

One of the most significant traits of the immigrant existence is the striking of balance between the two worlds—the homeland and the adopted one. The love and reverence for one's culture and roots is never out of mind and the first generation migrant always expects his/her children also to revere the same roots and culture which he/she is an offshoot of. For that reason, the child is made familiar with the cultural products of his country by the parents—the myths, stories, literature, etc. But the importance of the cultural shades of the adopted land can't be negated.

The Namesake starts with the same note of self-imposed exile through migration but Lahiri is broader in her conception and negotiation of the diasporic experiences. While Anita Desai confined herself to the dislocation and displacement woes of the earliest economic migrants to the Western harbours, Lahiri, owing to her own diasporic writer status, has taken into account the consequences of such migrations and self-imposed exiles. Anguish and nostalgia give way to creations of identities and transformations. Lahiri seems to thrive on the post-structuralist notion that identity is a discursive formation and undergoes numerous mutations. The contamination of cultures leads to new subjectivities.

Ashoke Ganguli comes to America under the same brain drain syndrome of the 60's with his wife who is the greatest casualty of this migration. She rues the distance from her home country and the people therein but in the end familiarizes herself to the new life-stream and gets fitted herself into new roles but not before deluges of longings and nostalgias for her country. It is this transition which characterizes a diasporic existence—formation of new identities, subjectivities and personalities. Not only such personalities lead to evolution of their own existence but also their conjunction in the form of marriages and alliances with other nationalities, whether of dominant culture or of other diasporic communities leads to formation of new identities or “hybridity”. ‘Instead of thanking God after the accident, he thanks Gogol, the Russian writer who had saved his life’ (*The Namesake* 21) Ashima metamorphoses into a new existence as that of an Indian-American. Thus, she grows confident of charting a new course—a “route” of her own—the “route” of bicultural identity which is a transition from her “roots.”

Gogol's plight is every second-generation immigrant's heartrending saga. The lure of the no-holds-barred life of the west is fetish for every young Gogol. But the disillusionment arises from a sort of inability--the inability to un-equate oneself with one's western counterparts. The second generation forgets that the American or the English enjoy contentment in their existence only by virtue of their continuity of relationship with their land, the sense of belonging which an immigrant can't achieve.

Over the past few decades, there have been major changes in expatriate and immigrant literature. There is a need to recognize the evolution of the diasporic sensibility in terms of its continually changing consciousness. Expatriate writing is not only the nostalgic reminiscence of place, but also of time. Time is the most important dimension in that it is the passage of time that leads to the development of groups and sub-groups within the diaspora. It is the second-generation diasporic writer, who, having gone through similar experiences, is in a position to articulate these experiences with empathy. This is precisely what Jhumpa

Lahiri's *The Namesake* does. It explores and analyses the difference and assimilation between the first and second-generation diaspora.

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