

Cultural and Generational Conflicts in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*

Dr. S. Samivel

Guest Lecturer

PG and Research Department of English

H. H. The Rajah's College (Autonomous)

Pudukkottai 622001

=====
Abstract

First generation Indian-Americans are acutely aware of readily apparent cultural differences. The family becomes a battlefield where modernity clashes with tradition, where Indian culture clashes with American culture, and where theory clashes with practice. American culture becomes the basis for interactions outside the home. Inside the home, first-generation Indian-Americans attempt to preserve their cultural and religious heritage and expect to live according to Indian cultural values. For second-generation Indian Americans, "the sensation of being the in-betweens is particularly accentuated." Like their parents, the second-generation Indian American also compartmentalizes his/her life. At home and within the local community component, they are governed by the compromised Indian lifestyle developed by their parents and the broader community. Conflicts typically arise from the cultural clash of American Individualism vs. Indian communitarianism. This paper focuses on this cultural conflict in Lahiri's *Namesake*.

Introduction

This paper focuses on the first-generation and second-generation immigrants' adherence to the old and new lands as can be found in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* (2003). In this novel, Lahiri has explored the psychic condition of the first-generation immigrants, Ashima and Ashoke and the second-generation immigrants, Gogol, Sonia and Moushumi. The novel critically demonstrates how the concept of homeland creates an atmosphere to construct home and identity of proximity. In this age of transmigration, 'home' signifies its impermanence, displacement, and dispossession. For many critics, the idea of home is more conveyed as a sense of being between the two places instead of rooted one. In the novel, Ashima's sense of being at home is connected with the original homeland, i.e. India. And the selves of Gogol, Sonia and Moushumi are supposed to be attached with the USA, their birth place. The questions however arise as – is this land for which they seem to negate the Indian ideological values and principles? And how far they are able to create the true home?

In an unknown city of Massachusetts, Ashima's pang for abandoning the home country is emphasized through imagining the picture of the family in Calcutta. And the feeling of nostalgia seems to mitigate the pang and anguish of Ashima. When she is about to give birth a child, her

Indian ethnicity reminds her of the conventional social code and customs of the Indian Bengali culture: "...women go home to their parent to give birth, away from husbands and in-laws ad household cares..." (p.4). again the solitary atmosphere in the hospital makes her recapture the particular moment of the domestic life of the Calcutta. The reference of the 'fractures of memory' can aptly be mentioned in this context. Ashima's anxiety over giving birth and rearing up the child in the alien land is poignantly revealed: "...it was happening so far from home, unmonitored and unobserved by those she loved, has made it more miraculous still" (p.6).

In Lahiri's novel, the first-generation immigrants, both male and female, who share one history and culture, also share the similarity of experience in adjusting to life in a foreign land. They are aware of, what Hall calls, their 'being'. They allow the host culture only partially to intrude at home. The Gangulis maintained their ties with the Indian culture through the perpetuation of traditions and rituals alongside gatherings with their Bengali friends and occasional visits to India. Food constitutes one of the many factors that help to establish the link between Ashoke, Ashima and their desh. Whenever Ashoke and Ashima have to make an important decision, they consult the members of their community: "each step, each acquisition, no matter how small, involves deliberation, consultation with Bengali friends" (64). In an attempt to preserve their identity, they hold on to their group and culture. Like all first-generation settlers, they want their children to learn American English, get good education and pretty jobs; at the same time they insist them to practice the Indian moral and cultural code at home. They go to the Kathakali dance performance or a Sitar recital at memorial hall. When Gogol is in third grade, they send him to Bengali language and culture lessons every other Saturday, held in the home of one of their friends.

The first-generation migrants try a negotiation with their cultural dilemmas and sense of displacement by a juxtaposition of received idea from their home culture and host culture and assume new "hybrid identities." In Lahiri's novel the idea of "hybridity" exhibits a belief in assimilation of cultural components without downplaying the diversity of culture. Ashoke's total self is akin to Sura P. Rath's diasporic identity in a third space. Rath writes:

The first-generation migrants try a negotiation with their cultural dilemmas and sense of displacement by a juxtaposition of received idea from their home culture and host culture and assume new "hybrid identities." In Lahiri's novel the idea of "hybridity" exhibits a belief in assimilation of cultural components without downplaying the diversity of culture. Ashoke's total self is akin to Sura P. Rath's diasporic identity in a Third space. Rath writes:

I am constantly assured of who I am: a middle class, tax-paying, white-collar worker. Like the other roles I play in my private life as a husband, a father, a neighbour, a friend, a son and son-in-law, a brother and brother-in law, etc., I take these public roles seriously, and obviously my total self emerges from a composite of all these over-lapping roles and images. (para1)

For the second generation the question of identity is a conflicted one. At home Indian culture and value system are adhered to, while in public the American code of conduct is followed.

It is through the eyes of the first generation and sometimes through the unwilling occasional visits to India with parents that the second generation learns about the homeland. They are not attached to their cultural past and find it easier to accept America's culture. The children's "Americanization" is evident from Gogol and Sonia's preference for burgers, tuna sandwiches and Christmas over Indian food and festivals.

Generational differences are thus projected through juxtapositions of the two social spaces. For the first-generation immigrants like Ashoke and Ashima the change of geographical location is the first shock. Ashima, for instance, encounters, after her arrival in the USA the differences in the landscape – "heaps of broken snow" (Lahiri 30), "the frigid New England chill" (ibid.) "leafless trees with ice-covered branches" (ibid) "not a soul on the street" (ibid) but more than that she realizes the intensity of the loss of the family and community support. On the basis of her experience for the eighteen months in the country she knows that it will be difficult for more than one reason. It signals the entry of a member of the second generation who will represent a hybrid generation. He will resent his parents' culture and rue his name Gogol that will sound unfamiliar to others in the public spaces like school and college. Nevertheless it will lead to the family formation—"suddenly a family" (Lahiri 32). It will be a family like that of Alan and Judy and their daughters whose house they rented. Secondly, travails of the birth metaphorically represent the travails she undergoes for process of the birth of a self that can cope with the new American space, absorbing the shocks in her journey for acculturation that will at one a process involving new knowledge formation against the overwhelming backdrop of memory of the recent past, of the old culture and families and community. This knowledge includes the trivial like "Americans eat their chicken in its skin" (5) to the vital like how to raise children in a lonely country without the help of family members. Thirdly, Ashima associates the pregnancy with her own condition of being a 'foreigner'.

Nikhil Gogol is a second-generation immigrant who is fascinated by the language and culture of the Americans. The English language seems to have a fascination for him (while the Bengali language is the mere vernacular) and the American culture allures him so much that he has scant respect for Indian culture. His relationship with Maxine makes him feel at home with American life. The Kenyan novelist Ngugi Wa Thiong observes:

...language carries culture, and culture carries, particularly through culture and literature, the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world. How people perceive themselves affects how they look at their culture, at their politics and at the social production of wealth, at their entire relationship to nature and to other human beings (*Beginning post colonialism*, 18).

Nikhil's problem is precisely this. He begins to perceive his Indian culture from the point of view of American culture which he has imbibed and to a certain extent assimilated also. The conflict within the family is due to the mixed perceptions of Indian and American cultures. Gogol is confused about his name, because his name is neither Indian nor American. "He hates that his name

is both absurd and obscure, that is has nothing to do with who he is, that it is neither Indian nor American but of all things Russian” (*The Namesake*, 76)

Migration can be seen as an act of voluntary or involuntary movement of people from one place to another. Some people voluntarily migrate to another country for endless opportunities that the new country offers. Some people are forced to migrate consequent on the political and economic crisis in their land. Migrants are always seen as aliens and find it difficult to belong to the place of their stay, their ‘new home’. The culture belong to the language of their origin are reviled at and they are also subject to racial discrimination. The most unfortunate thing is that they cannot reclaim the place they have left behind. So they are forced to create new identities and new relations to fill the bewildering vacuity of insecurity and loneliness. Engulfed by ennui, they desperately seek a home. Though they attempt to absorb the culture, history, traditions of the new land, they are plagued by the memories of their own culture and traditions that they have either willingly or unwillingly left behind. They are caught in a limbo, and their indeterminate state of being envisions a home, which is, more often than not, an imaginary land. It remains, to their chagrin, a mythic place of desire often located in the cultural landscape of diasporic imagination. Salman Rushdie, commenting on this cultural phenomenon, says.

...our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely those things they were lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible one, imaginary homelands, Indians of the mind (*Beginning post colonialism*, 211).

The second-generation diaspora, in its attempts to assimilate, suffers a dual loss. On the one hand, they lose their cultural moorings and become outsiders within their own home and ‘foreign’ to relatives in their homeland, on the other; they remain outsiders to the mainstream into which they try so desperately to merge. Caught between two worlds – one unacceptable, the other an accepting, they ultimately become outsiders to themselves. This is the unique predicament of the second-generation diaspora. It is not brought about by an idea of the superiority of the modern west over the rustic east as is commonly portrayed through the stereotyped ABCDs who are making alarmingly frequent occurrences in popular culture.

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 problematic of difference and assimilation between the first and second-generation diaspora. The smooth and natural transition from past to present to future which was the norm in rooted societies, as well as its inherited idea of cultural identity does not apply to diaspora., As Derrida says: “The present is no longer a mother form around which are gathered and differentiated the future and the past... The necessity of the idea of a distinct cultural identity conflicts with the symbols and signs that mask the actual day to day life of the diasporic individual. According to Edward Said, it is the centre that wields the power to de-essentialism identity, and this should be resisted. “...twentieth century society has destroyed identity in so powerful a way that it is worth a great deal to keep the specificity alive”.

We find this characteristic in Ashima and Ashok who consciously try to hold on to their Indian-Bengali selves. However, they cannot pass this on to their children Gogol and Sonia. Gogol, in his affairs with Ruth and Maxine, emerges as the Lyotardian amnesic who thinks that by forgetting his distinct cultural identity, he will be able to merge with the mainstream. As a result, he starts living on the surface. Later on, overpowered by his father's death, he attempts to follow the life of his parent, exemplified in his marriage to Moushumi. The failure of this ideal marriage arranged by his mother makes him realize the futility of both styles of life attempted by him the former of total rejection and the latter of total acceptance. Th is only after going through both these experiences that Gogol begins his self-discovery.

Gogol discovers that there is a vast difference between identity his father preserved after coming to the foreign land, and the identities that he attempted to create for him. The unraveling of his dilemma begins with the realization that in spite of his dilemma begins with the realization that in spite of all visible differences, the identity preserved by his father and the ones created by him belong to the same larger reality. Gogol realizes that neither Said's rigid adherence to identity nor Lyotard's 'amnesia' would work for him. Gogol is thus an embodiment of the 'disjunctive temporality described by Homi bhabha. The resolution of Gogol's predicament lies in remembering that he is a fragment of a larger reality. It is only with this remembrance that he will be able to define, forge and justify his identity to himself and to the would thus exemplifying the words of Walter Benjamin: "Fragments of a vessel in order to be articulated together must follow one another in the smallest details although they need not be like one another.

Conclusion

Lahiri's novel, through the suggestive use of two graveyards, creates the implication of belonging of (or lack of) the social space and the familial space. It takes time to enroot oneself in a new soil through generations. Gogol does not have any scope of availability of these spaces in the new land in the sense in which they ate employed. But second-generation Indian Americans, like Gogol and Moushumi, are caught up in a critical cultural juncture at a particular moment in the history of Indian American immigration. By not privileging any particular cultural positions-either of Gogol or of Moushumi-Lahiri, in fact, indicates the many possibilities of Indian American existence in the new (im) migrant space.

Works Cited

Lahiri, Jhumpa, *The Namesake*. New Delhi: Harper Collins, 2003. Print
Rushdie, Salman. *Imaginary Homelands*. London: Granta Books, 1991. Print
Rushdie, Salman. *Imaginary Homelands*. London: Vintage Books, 2010. Print
Said, Edward. *The Politics of Dispossession*. London: Vintage, 1995. Print
Said, Edward W. *Reflections on Exile*. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2001. Print.