

**DIASPORIC EXPERIENCES: A TRAUMA OF PERPETUAL IDENTITY CRISIS IN
JHUMPA LAHIRI'S *THE NAMESAKE*.**

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Abstract

Writings of India Diasporic writers have shown an alternative vision and different realities of the people living in the state of Diasporic condition. The writers like Jhumpa Lahiri, Kiran Desai, Salman Rushdie and few others have shown different realities of the Diasporic people from the commonly accepted ones. The glorified versions of cross-culturalism and hybridity have been ingrained with perpetual identity crisis. The crisis does not simply belong to the first generation people as they are the ones who leave their respective country and set their feet on the foreign land. Indeed, this foreignness troubles them throughout their lives coupling with permanent longing of roots.

*In this paper I have studied Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* from the perspective of identity crisis. The novel presents both the first generation identity crisis and the second generation identity crisis. In fact, the second generation identity crisis proves to be more traumatic than the first generation as the second generation actually faces the obligations of traditional culture inherited from the parents and the culture of the foreign soil. Being born on the foreign land, the second generation quite naturally gets inclination to the foreign culture and hence, the oscillation between the two cultures resulting into more traumatic identity crisis is the subsequent outcome Diasporic experiences. In this paper, I will show the oscillation between the process of Americanization and the halting forces of Indianization.*

The Namesake is typically known for its picturization of the diasporic experiences. The feelings, complexities, and troubled lives of the Indian hearts in American are excellently portrayed by Lahiri in her novel. Lahiri concentrates upon globalization and multiculturalism and through these terms complexities of identity. In the very beginning of the novel Lahiri presents a character who, though living in the U.S. craves for Indian spicy food. The incident presents the idea of Indian craving in the hearts of India diaspora living in the States. In spite

of living in America where American culture is dominant, Indian diaspora prefer their own culture. Ashima is a perfect example of it. As per the Bengali culture the name of husband can't be spoken by wife for the reasons of intimacy and propriety. She uses the interrogative both in actual saying and her thoughts.

At the same time Lahiri presents the ways of American culture. She seems to be laughing at American people's concept of privacy. In their way of living life they do things openly; whether it is a case of their declaration of affection, or canoodling in public places. They expose even their body by wearing short skirts and bikinis. In a way there is nothing to be kept in secrecy and though they highly prefer privacy. How pleasing and enjoying a memory of India can be is to be understood by pain relieving experiences of Ashima who instantly forgets her pain of pregnancy once she is lost in her memory of India. For Indian diaspora their earlier life in India is much more pleasing than the present circumstance they live in. For Ashima pain of being in the foreign country is much more severe than the pain of pregnancy. Further, "motherhood in a foreign land" (6) intensifies her tension of being in a foreign country. To be a mother in a country which is not one's own motherland is more terrifying than any other thing. Thus, the missing of intimate relationships and ingrained cultural traditions prove to be a cause of growing discomfort. In order to get rid of this growing discomfort Ashima reads the magazine *Des* repeatedly. Moreover, the incident when Ashima makes a grammatical error, while she speaks, "as long as there are ten finger and ten toe" (7)- here she makes a grammatical error - intensifies her pathetic condition as the American nurse laughs at her grammatical error.

Adapting the different culture from that of one's birthplace is rightly equated as having new birth filled with the trauma of the endless process. The differences among the cultures resulting into hybridity on a foreign land are reconcilable. Lahiri rightly describes him as, "he (Ashoke) was born twice in India and then a third time in America" (21). Indians are used to living with crowded relatives. Hence, the missing of the typical Indian atmosphere in the foreign country haunts them every moment. Even at the happiest moment like the birth of a child they miss the Indian stuffing. On the contrary such happier moments intensifies the missing of relatives and Indian culture and traditions. Thus, the birth in America feels like half true or haphazard. And the birth is described as the entering into the world which is full of loneliness and deprivation.

Relationships are revered and given an utmost importance. It is relationships which bind Indian diaspora with India. Ashima can be a perfect example for that. Though physically she lives in America, she breathes Indian air. The sweet memory of India is indispensable from her mind. Similarly having a pride in culture and following it strictly are virtues. Consequently, deviation from it might result into betrayal. Hence, Indian diaspora form their own community. For the same reason they prefer to marry with Indian boys and girls. They celebrate festivals and cultural activities of Indian culture in America. In this way they try to compensate with the loss of their heritage. In the novel Ashima and Ashoke invite all their Bengali friends on several occasions like Gogol's annaprasan and rice ceremony. However,

the missing and loss of one's own follow like a shadow. There is always an irresistible feeling of loss which gets dominance over the compensation of the artificial relationships.

Lahiri projects both feminine and masculine points of view of being on a land of foreigners. There is a stark difference between what a male experiences on a foreign land and what a female experiences on a foreign land. Indian woman suffers more than a man. Because it is woman who suffers loneliness and distress by being a housewife. Whereas he husband enjoys the achievements that fall on his lap due to his perseverance. Ashoke feels a sense of pride and achievement when he is offered a post of an assistant professor of Electrical Engineering at the University of Boston. Whereas Ashima suffers a life of loneliness and distress. Ashima realizes that being a foreigner is a sort of "lifelong pregnancy – a perpetual wait, a constant burden, a continuous feeling out of sorts" (49). She believes, like a pregnancy being a foreigner is something that "elicits the same curiosity from strangers, the same combination of pity and respect of loneliness and distress" (50).

Moreover, Ashima does not understand the sense of independence. In other words, she falls short to doing things on her own and living on her own. She misses the dependence on relatives; the luxury she had in India. As a result of that she becomes despondent and unaccustomed when Gogol starts going to nursery school and she is left alone at home. The raising of Gogol is given an extra care. On the one hand the parents see that he knows his origins and on the other hands they see that he knows the foreign language. The conflict between the two cultural identities and the effort to balance between the two identities are the effects of multiculturalism and globalization. The original cultural identity is threatened by multiculturalism. The novel focuses upon personal identity, cultural identity and the self. Generally, identity has two sources: persons own self-concept and cultural background.

The first generation people are emotionally attached with their relatives in India. Hence, they are constantly haunted by the news of death of their parents, uncles and relatives. Such incidents intensify their feeling of isolation and loneliness. Lahiri contradicts the second generation with the first one. The second generation has nothing to do with the Indian relatives. They have no emotional attachment with their relatives in India. Gogol and Sonia become spectators when their parents cry and perform rituals. It is a sign of the second generations' detachment with India.

Ashima and Ashoke know that their relatives are out of their reach and it is impossible for them to reach to their relatives. They are completely invisible to them and hence, the distinction between dead and alive dwindles. It is their voice in telephone which makes them aware that they are still alive. They undergo two different types of experiences when they visit Calcutta and return to America. Their arrival in Calcutta meets with a strange feeling; as the people they are grown up with are no more there and new generation has replaced them. Therefore, Ashima and Ashoke pass their time in Calcutta like a dream. When they come back to America, their modest house seems to them like a 'mammoth' as the houses in Calcutta are normally small and traditional.

In spite of the fact that there are hundreds of Bengalis who live in America, Ashima and Ashoke feel that they are the only Bengalis in the world. In order to wipe out the feeling of

loneliness they try to be in touch with other Bengalis in America. Even before taking a minor decision they consult other Bengalis. Such activities give them a sense of security. However, the second generation has been completely different and does not imbue the quality. It grows in an American atmosphere. They are more interested in the celebration of the birth of Christ than the worship of Dunga and Saraswati. They are attracted and mesmerized by the American culture. They have developed the same accent as the American's have. The seemingly deviation of the second generation is unlikely to be accepted by the first generation. The children are sent to learn Bengali language and culture. Hence, there is a run and chase game between the two generations. The second generation runs after American culture and the first generation chases them to stop and remind of their own culture.

Diasporic experiences are not pleasing ones. Indian diaspora face many stumbling blocks in their aim to get settled in a particular country. The rejection and hatred of the local people resulting into discrimination make their life more difficult. There are many incidents in the novel through which Lahiri points out the discriminating aspects in the behaviour of the white people. She presents the in a very subtle manner. Local people smirk at the parents of Gogol's accents. They avoid talking with them. Such incidents are common in the novel. Lahiri explores the matter psychologically bit by bit. She explains Gogol's psychological problems occurring due to his odd name. Gogol knows that he is named after a Russian writer. But he is not able to understand the rationale of his parents after choosing such an odd name until his father's death. As he grows the absurdity and obscurity of his name makes him more and more disturbed. Every incidents associated with making him use or remember his name proves to be a cause for his distress and frustration. At the subconscious level he puts some limitations and restrictions on his behaviour and action. In other words, he develops inferiority complex, which stops him doing things which other boys do without any hesitation, i.e. dating with girls. Lahiri explains the derogatory influences of a namesake which is so ludicrous in nature. Gogol develops all sorts of psychological complexities in his mind. It is important to point out that Gogol is completely unaware of the reason why he is given a Russian name. However, the problem of identity is elucidated by Lahiri with a psychological touch. To some an extent it seems that this problem of identity is different from the problems of Diasporic experiences. The reason is that the namesake is not based on an Indian name. But this is not true. Considering the title it seems that Lahiri does not merely present an individual's problem with his name but the problem of all Indian diaspora for having the problem of identity. That their identity is in danger and is overpowered by the others identity. Here, the Namesake can be applied to American culture replacing and suppressing Indian culture.

It is interesting to point out how the second generation feels about going to Calcutta. For the first generation people like Ashima and Ashoke going to Calcutta is like going to their real home after a long time. But the case is different with the second generation people like Gogol and Sonia. They detest the idea of going to Calcutta. The reason is simple that they are not directly connected to them. The journey is something like an imposed one. They go to Calcutta because their parents go and have no personal attachment with the Indian relatives.

This difference is enough to put them into the category of Americans visiting India. Thus, they look the parts of India from an American eye. Their attention is caught by the sights which they find unusual in America i.e. poverty and population.

The period of transition stays with them throughout their lives. The period is the most excruciating one. As Lahiri puts it, "They still feel somehow in transit, still disconnected from their lives, bound up in an alternate schedule, an intimacy only the four of them share" (87). In India they are surrounded with people and hence, have to get used to noises. But in America they have to cope with silence which is more dangerous than noises. However, for the second generation it is easier to forget their pastimes in India as they quickly get tuned in American way of life and the pastime soon turns into irrelevance.

Gogol finally changes his name and gets freedom from all the disturbing psychological complexities. The new name Nikhil gets him freedom to indulge in all the activities including sex and smoking. He starts realizing his potentials. But the fact is that he gets a psychological freedom from the earlier repression. Though in the novel the name 'Gogol' is named after a Russian writer, it bears the connotations of Indianness. Whereas the name "Nikhil" bars the connotation of Americanness. In the process of becoming Nikhil the ghostly impact of Gogol continuously lurks into his life. Just the same way in his adoption of American culture his own culture plays the same role. It keeps on putting a break on Gogol's life.

The first generation people like Ashoke always fear that the next generation will forget the significance of their culture and traditions. Therefore, they are always worried about their children's behaviour and life style. They try to put all sorts of pressures and restrictions on them so that they remain typically Indian boys or girls. As we can see that Ashoke and Ashima are always worried about what Gogol does. However, the case is different with girls. They put more restrictions on girls. For example, Ashima tries to restrict Sonia that she does not colour a streak of hair blond. There is a kind of conflicting situation between them.

It is hard for parents to make their children behave like Indian boys and girls. American culture is a tempting one. The freedom and luxury of romantic life it offers without any constraint is a symbol of American Culture. Such things are highly neglected and denied in Indian culture. The restrictions of parents work little against the attractiveness of American culture. Both Gogol and Sonia start dating with their partners. In fact, they cross all the boundaries drawn by Indian culture. Gogol's first love affair starts with Ruth, an American girl. Despite his parental disapproval, he keeps the relationship going. As Lahiri puts his feeling, "He longs for her as his parents have longed, all these years, for people they love in India" (117).

Lahiri explains a complex identity of an American born Indian. The term American born Indian is itself confusing. Gogol is neither truly American nor truly Indian. Lahiri describes a panel discussion about Indian novels written in English. The panel discusses about the issue of American born confused "deshi". The word "deshi" is used for Indians. Indians refer to India as 'des' and hence, are called as "deshi". But Gogol refers to the country as India. He tries to be different from other Indians living in America. He wants to separate his identity

from other Indians, which he fails to do. In effort of this he avoids people of his community. He is not a member of the Indian association. In fact, he has an urge to be like an American and called as an American. But his roots follow him as his shadow. His affair with Ruth is to be categorized as an effort to be recognized as an American. However, they part with each other sensing each other's deferent mindsets which represent different cultures. Many critics have identified the conflicts between the cross-cultural influences affecting the second generation. Lahiri, a critic, has indicated this problems of second generation people who have to pass through the canon of hybridity:

The lived experience of the children of first generation migrants to which Jhumpa Lahiri belongs is characterized by their participation in the American mainstream culture available in the larger social space, outside the limited, 'sanctified' family space. This their parents often disapprove. They, in their turn, disapprove of their parents' proximity to the ancestral 'home' culture which the Indian American community tries to replicate in the new space. The family space and the community space, however, cannot remain pure as change of places inevitably brings in its train hybridization. The birth of children, which happens in the early part of Jhumpa Lahiri's novel *The Namesake*, initiates conflictual relationship in the family space. (Lahiri, "Individual - Family Interface").

Again he falls back on his family. He realizes his parents' problems. He understands his father's reticent nature. Revealed by his father about his train mishap and the importance of the Russian writer Gogol, he understands the reason behind his naming. He views his namesake from an altogether different eye. In fact, he feels sorry for his decision to change his old name. His coming back to family and understanding the significance of the namesake just after the end of his love affair with Ruth prove the point that he is oscillating between the two cultures. He becomes a victim of two ends: Indianization and Americanization.

This oscillation continues in his life. He hates the word "marginality", a category under which Indians fall in America, Gogol feels it as an incurable disease. He has a desire to get a medicine for this incurable disease. Raised in America Gogol has a mindset which does not fit in Indian culture. Everything has changed in Gogol except his inheritance of culture which follows him like his own shadow. He doesn't want to attend his father's alma mater. He doesn't want to go home on the weekends, to go with them to 'pujos' and Bengali parties, to remain unquestionably in their world. Therefore, Massachusetts stands for Indian culture as their parents live there and have a nostalgic view upon the city. Whereas New York is the place where Gogol chooses to live and the city stands for American culture, the beauty of which can't reach to his parents' eye.

Lahiri also highlights the issues related to globalization. The world has become so small that nothing is hidden. The rise of media uncovers everything happening in the world. For instance, Hindu fundamentalism, which is a current issue of India, is a subject of curiosity for an American named Gerald. Bit by bit, it seems that Lahiri uncovers India as a nation. Similarly, she scrutinizes both the cultures for example, she appreciates Indian hospitality at

the dinner with Maxine, Gerald and Lydia, Gogol misses the typical nature of his mother while eating food with a foreign family.

Gogol's relationship with Maxine is a significant one. He mixes completely in the American way of life style. Gogol accepts and loves everything the surrounds Maxine's world. The coveted things like her cultural background, which has no constraints and her grace of accepting life as it is, are some of the areas which he himself has missed in his life. However, there is always a sense of betrayal troubling his mind. Living with Maxine's family which is a secured family instead of his parents who are never secured and always desire his presence in the home create a sense of betrayal in him. In other words, mixing with American culture creates a sense of betrayal of showing a back to his own culture. He lives in a complex situation where he can neither live in his own culture nor enjoy living in the coveted culture. This sense of betrayal is a modern phenomenon. Modern men face it indifferent ways. Some writers present the sense of betraying one's own self. Lahiri adds to it some cultural connotations. She says, "his immersion in Maxine's family is a betrayal of his own" (141). So immersed is Gogol in American culture that he completely neglects his own duty to his parents. Though he is conscious of his betrayal towards his duty, he submits himself to Maxine's world.

The first generation people like Ashima find it difficult to cope with loneliness and solitude. Since they have lived a considerable time in India where they have shared intimacies with relatives, they find the present condition troublesome. However, the second generation can cope with it without any problem. And hence, it pains Ashima when her children tell her, "Everyone should live on their own at some point" (16). In fact, the purpose behind celebrating the festivals like Christmas is to revitalize the feeling at home.

The death of Ashoke is the most pathetic and moving incident in the novel. It invokes a sense of guilt in the mind of Gogol. The feeling of betrayal turns into guilt. His mind is occupied by two feelings: shame guilt. His earlier avoidance of his parents when they dearly needed him, haunts his mind severely in the form of guilt. He is pained to see the dreadful condition in which his father lived. He feels the same guilt which his parents used to undergo when their relatives in India died. His parents' guilt for not being able to do anything is transplanted into Gogol. Lahiri presents the same kind of suffering in both the generations.

Guilty about his failure in performing his duties to family, he resists the temptation of Maxine's world. He tells to Maxine, when she calls him back, "I don't want to get away" (182). He realizes his duty as a Bengali son and performs all the rituals of Bengali culture. Hence, he keeps on oscillating between the two cultures. He remembers his duty as a Bengali son and performs all the rituals of Bengali culture. Hence, he keeps on oscillating between the two cultures. He remembers his father telling him the truth of being in a foreign country, "remember that you and I made this journey, that we want together to place where there was nowhere left to go" (187).

So long as Gogol remains completely absorbed in Maxine's world, the relationship keeps going. But his realization of his duties to family puts his relationship in tension. The impossible task of remaining faithful to both the worlds creates an odd situation for him. The

absurd task results into an absurd possibility. Moushumi's earlier suffering and her revolt against her cultural background adds another dimension to the story. Like Gogol, she has also been a victim of cross-culturalism. She has been burdened with restrictions and duties. However, it is important to note that she determines from her childhood to revolt against duties and restrictions. Hence, she decides to refuse parental interference in her marriage. We can note that the guidelines of Indian culture circumscribes freedom of the second generation. It is the irrelevance of these guidelines which force Moushumi to revolt against the Indian society in America. On the one hand she hates dating with Indian boys and on the other hand she is forbidden to date with American boys. The result is that she harbours many infatuations without its turning into reality.

The American culture stimulates her desire and Indian culture forbids and restricts her actions. Moreover, her subconscious fear of being married to someone she does not love haunts her all the while. The same conflicting situation pervades throughout her life until she finds her refuge in an altogether different culture or French culture. All that years' repressions and infatuations give its way in France. In France Moushumi's countless infatuations, which once used to be repressed, take a form of countless affairs. She indulges into affairs without any guilt or inhibition. Her break-up with Graham reiterates the same problem of cross-culturalism as that of Gogol's life. The cultural differences resist any possibility of a union between the couple of two cultures.

The marriage between Moushumi and Gogol takes place in a Bengali fashion. Yet there is a stark contrast between the marriage of this second generation and the first generation. Though the marriage can be categorically described as an arranged marriage, there is a physical attraction responsible for the marriage. Whereas in case of first generation people like Ashima and Ashoke who did not know each other at the time of their marriage and yet, they understood commitment, responsibility and seriousness of marriage and such things are completely missing in the second generation. The quality of this missing Indian virtues can be attributed to the influence of American culture.

The shaky ground trembles soon. As they both go to Paris on account of Moushumi's dissertation, Gogol feels helplessly useless. All the decisions are taken by her and he is passive all the while. He feels like an outcast when the conversation is going on between Moushumi and her friends. He soon starts missing the earlier Moushumi whom he admired and not the one who is lost in the world of Paris. Lahiri, at the same time, projects the reflections of American culture among Indian diaspora. For example, the parties arranged by the first generation people is having Indian cultural projection. Whereas the parties thrown by the second generation is nothing but the reflection of American culture. Hence, there is a complete deviation in the second generation. Lahiri continues to contrast the second generation with the first generation. According to Indian tradition wife normally depends upon her husband. But Moushumi has different ideas. As Lahiri puts it, "she had privately vowed that she'd never grow fully dependent on her husband as her mother has (247).

This is the reason behind ignoring her husband on several occasions which she privately does on her own. Contrasting to this is her mother who does not know even driving and does not have a job. Yet she is perfectly intelligent woman and was an honour student in philology at Presidency College before she was married off at twenty two. Here, Lahiri discusses the matter from the point of view of an Indian culture. Moushumi often associates him with a sense of resignation. In fact, he was not who she saw herself ending up with, he had never been that person. She continuously feels, “a breach of her own instinctive will” (250). Her former desire to marry other than an Indian boy continuously haunts her. This feeling puts her commitment in question. She instinctively feels a kind of joy when he is away or out of reach. Therefore, her chance meeting with Demitri Desjardins turns into an illicit affair. He is the person with whom she had harboured a feeling of infatuation when she was in high school. She indulges into an illicit affair without any guilt or inhibition. “She wonders if she is the only woman in her family ever to have betrayed her husband, to have been unfaithful” (266). This is what upsets her most to admit that the affair causes her to feel strangely at peace, the complication of it calming her, structuring her day. Her conscious seems to have been turned into the frame of American culture but her tradition or her own culture continues to pinch her and ask the justification of what she does. Hence, Lahiri has rightly mentioned the conflict of the second generation:

In the early years after the immigration, it has been stated earlier, the stranglehold on the young members is usually very strong. The children are acutely aware of their parents’ expectations but are usually rebellious. Some like Moushumi internalize, with some element of violence, the duality between the expectations and their unwillingness to give in to the cultural demands. The resultant schizophrenia sometimes disintegrates them psychically. Gogol reacts against the parental influence but he seems to be more balanced than Moushumi whose desperation is evident in her own sexual involvements with a great number of partners in Paris. It was as if she was taking revenge upon herself (Lahiri, “Individual-Family Interface”).

According to Indian culture marriage is a sacred thing. But on the foreign land this sacred thing has been desacralized and hence, it has lost its value which is still present in the first generation. This is perhaps the price that Indian diaspora have to pay that their own cultural values have been subverted in favour of the other one (American culture). In other words, they have to bear this social dislocation and it continuously merges into the dominant one. The tragedy of Indian diaspora is that they try to adjust with both the cultures and fail completely in doing so. The case of Ashima is suggestive of the element of tragedy upon her decision to live six months in India and six months in America. Lahiri puts it, “she will be without borders, without a home of her own, a resident everywhere and nowhere (276).

They waver between the two extreme poles: - Indianization and Americanization. Hence, there is a continuous struggle between the prevalent American identity and the identity of their roots. The roots are entrenched upon their hearts and as a result of that they are not able

to adjust with the dominant identity. They are permanently fixed in the oscillating condition. The second generation has their own concept of “ideal of happiness” that they do not want to compromise with. The American common sense proves to be a reason behind the failure of the marriage of Moushumi and Gogol who are divorced. He finally understands the significance of his roots. He realizes that he cannot cut himself from his roots. In fact, he sympathizes with his parents’ suffering. He understands that the name Gogol stands for his roots. Therefore, he realizes its significance. And with her mother going to India there will be no loved one to call Gogol and hence, the name, once and for all, will be vanished. Gogol fears that his roots will be hidden.

Outwardly it seems that the end is a desirable one. But it has dangerous consequences. Finally, Gogol pays tribute to his father by starting the reading of the short story *The Overcoat*. He understands the significance of his roots which his parents had. Hence, he will lead the same longing and lonely life his parents lead. The collision between the cultures continues for yet another generation. After all the years of struggling to go away from his roots or detach himself from his roots, he finally recognizes his roots. Even after years’ struggle he could not adopt completely the American culture on account of a perpetual disturbances from his roots. But now he realizes his truth in his roots. In fact, the discriminatory aspect will also haunt these Indian diaspora and it will intensify the feeling of rootlessness until they unify themselves with the dominant culture. Furthermore, Moushumi is driven by the desire of starting a new life. Hence, she decides to move to France. The decision is suggestive of her escapism from the prevailing confusion of identity. Her decision breaks all her connections with her roots and she heads for a new life without any guilt and constriction. It is her sense of freedom which compels to start a new life.

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