

ISSN: 2395-4132

THE EXPRESSION

An International Multi-Disciplinary e-Journal

Bi-Monthly Refereed & Indexed Open Access e-Journal

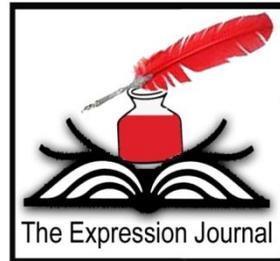


Vol.1 Issue 5 Oct. 2015

Editor-in-Chief : Bijender Singh

Email : editor@expressionjournal.com

www.expressionjournal.com



CULTURAL-CLASH AND HYBRIDITY IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S *THE NAMESAKE*

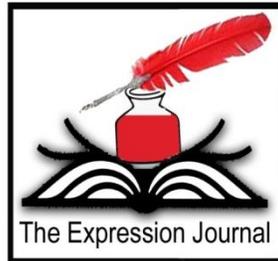
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Abstract

Present paper is an attempt to explore and analyse twin themes of diaspora i.e. cultural-clash and hybridity in Jhumpa Lahiri's novel *The Namesake*. The paper highlights the problems of a Bangladeshi couple and their two children's problem of adjustment while living in the U.S. Due to cultural clashes, this immigrant family faces the problem of adjustment in the alien country. The characters try to assert their identities in America where they find a totally different environment from India. Even the second generation characters Gogol and Sonia are hybrid characters and they try to find their roots in the U.S. but in fact, they belong to nowhere. Neither the native country nor the host country is able to accept them. The people of both countries find them an outsider and thus, they are just outsiders for them. Gogol does not only become a butt of mockery in his school but he himself also dislikes his name just because his name neither has roots from India nor America, it has been taken from a writer from Russia. Both Gogol and Sonia discard their Indian roots and try to assimilate in the American culture but they have to face many problems there. Thus, this paper is a plausible attempt to probe some burning issues like cultural clash and hybridity.

Key-Words

Cultural-clash, Diaspora, Hybridity, Identity, Rootlessness, Placelessness.



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Home is where one dreams of the world.

— (Irvin Schick 26)

The above citation by Irvin Schick beautifully depicts the concept of the home. Home is always considered the coziest and most comfortable place in the world. The people of the world are busy in the rat race of the materialistic pursuits. People migrate from one place to another and from one country to another. In the postcolonial perspective, the word 'diaspora' has very vital significance. This word can be depicted very beautifully in the following lines:

The word diaspora comes from a Greek word meaning dispersal, and was originally applied to the condition of the Jewish people living outside Palestine. With the development of postcolonial theory the term has been extended to cover a range of different cultural and ethnic groups held together by shared cultural or religious commitments and having some sense of exile from a place or state of origin and belonging (Hawthorn 78).

Jhumpa Lahiri is an Indian Bengali diasporic writer whose childhood name is Nilanjana Sudeshna Lahiri. She was born in London but her family moved to the United States when she was only two years old. Her father, Amar Lahiri was a librarian at the University of Rhode Island. She lived in Kingston, Rhode Island. She completed her B.A. in English literature from Barnard College. Lahiri has received M.A., M.F.A., and Ph.D. from Boston University. She got married with Alberto Vourvoulias-Bush. He is now the Senior Editor of *TIME* Latin America. She presently lives in Italy with her family. Her well-known works are *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), *The Namesake* (2013), *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008) and *The Lowland* (2013). She has received O. Henry Award in 1999 and Pulitzer Prize for fiction

in 2000 apart from several other awards.

She faces the problem of her name in Kingston as her teacher could not pronounce her childhood name properly that's why he started calling her by her nickname Jhumpa. Her novel *The Namesake* (2003) seems autobiographical in this context. In this novel the second generation protagonist, Gogol is not satisfied with his Russian name, Gogol and he officially changes his names from Gogol to Nikhil.

In the beginning, the novel depicts the migrant couple Ashima and Ashoke Ganguli and their life in America. When readers are introduced to Ashima, she is shown as pregnant woman. She lives in America but she has the respect for the Indian ethics and values. She does not call her husband by his name like other traditional Hindu wives. Ashima's labour pains start and both rush to the hospital. The starting of the cultural clash is explicit in the novel at this point. Ashima feels very lonely in an American hospital where she is left alone as her husband goes outside and she lives among the strangers and the people who are from different country. She has to stay in the hospital as the hospital nurse tells her that delivery will take time. She has to spend her night and sleep alone in the hospital. It was a very strange experience to her in her lifetime, "It is the first time in her life she has slept alone, surrounded by strangers; all her life she has slept either in a room with her parents or with Ashoke at her side. She wishes the curtains were open, so that she could talk to the American woman" (3). She tries to talk with other ladies in the hospital but they seem taking no interest in her. "She has gathered that Americans in spite of their public declarations of affection, in spite of their miniskirts and bikinis, in spite of their hand holding on the street and lying on top of each other in the Cambridge Common prefer their privacy" (3). She feels very dejected, hapless and hopeless that night. She misses her country, India very much. She thinks if she had been in her own country she would not have felt so alone and disappointed. She would have been surrounded by her relatives. Thus, she has to face this serious problem in an alien country.

After the birth of her son in the morning she is not discharged from hospital to go back home as the hospital administration asks for the name of the newly-born baby. Ashoke does not get any response from his home. Thus, he puts his name on the name of his favourite Russian writer. Ashima's experiences in the United States are not according to her expectations. Only two or three Bengali families come to visit them:

"Ashima thinks the same, though for different reasons. For as grateful as she feels for the company of the Nandis and Dr Gupta, these acquaintances are only substitutes for the people who really ought to be surrounding them. Without a single grandparent or uncle or aunt, at her side, the baby's birth, like everything else in America, feels somehow haphazard, only half true. . . . She has never known of a person entering the world so alone, so deprived" (24-25).

She does not want to bring up her son in America. She requests her husband to return to India. She has her own reasons for it, "I'm saying, hurry up and finish your degree." And

then, impulsively, admitting it for the first time: "I'm saying I don't want to raise Gogol in this country. It is not right. I want to go back." (33)

But Ashoke does not want to return as he thinks that returning to India may affect not only his career but the career of his son and daughter also. He does not decide to imply his wife's words and ignores her suggestion. He remembers how his friend, Ghosh has to repent after his return from England for the sake of his wife. He remembers Ghosh's words, "It is my greatest regret coming back" (33). When Ashoke gets his job and they shift as new residents, they find a very strange environment there. They have to move to the University town outside Boston, "The Gangulis have moved to the University town outside Boston. As far as they know, they are the only Bengali residents." (48) Life for Ashoke does not change but it is Ashima whose life is affected to a great extent. She feels again more disappointed. There was dearth of basic amenities like sidewalks, streetlights, transportation, stores etc. ,and it is not only Ashima, but both understand it well that their life is being affected by the alien environment and their children also have to face the problems of rootlessness and placelessness.

Their son Gogol faces many problems of adjustment in America. He faces the main problem with his name. When Gogol is sent to the Kindergarten, his parents tell him that his name will be changed from Gogol to Nikhil. Gogol is shocked to learn it. He does not want to have his new name; he asks this question from his parents. His parents tell him that his teachers and classmates will call him by this new name just for formality, "Don't worry... To me and your mother, you will never be anyone but Gogol." (57). Gogol does not want any change in his name and he revolts immediately:

"Why do I have to have a new name?" he asks his parents, tears springing to his eyes...but they tell him that the new name will be used only by the teachers and the children at school. He is afraid to be Nikhil, someone he doesn't know. (57)

Nikhil faces this problem when he goes to his elementary school. His principal, Mrs. Lapidus welcomes him in the school with his new name, Nikhil. They face this problem at the time of his admission in the school. When principal checks Gogol's birth certificate and the immunization records, she finds his name Gogol written on the records. She is confused to see child with two different names. That's why she asks Ashoke Ganguli regarding it, "According to these documents your son's legal name is Gogol" (58). Ashoke Ganguli does not want to enroll his son with his old name. When the principal asks whether Nikhil is a middle name or a nickname, at this Ashoke gets perturbed and he replies, "No, no, it's not a middle name...he has no middle name. No nickname. The boy's good name, his school name, is Nikhil" (59). Sujata Rana writes how Bengali children are given two names by their parents. She contends:

Bengali children are given two names: one that is a pet name, used only by family and close friends, and one that is good name, used by the rest of the society. At birth, Gogol is given a pet name as his official name sent in a letter by his great grandmother in India, gets lost in the mail. Upon entering kindergarten, Gogol is told by his family that he is to be called Nikhil, a good name, by teachers and the other children at school. Gogol rejects his proper name and wants to be called Gogol by society as well as his family. (Sujata 180)

This was not the end of his problem. It was the turn of his life where his problems start taking shapes. In his school his name Gogol becomes a problem for him. His classmates make fun of him and even his teacher also staggers to pronounce his name. His teacher has to think a while before pronouncing his name and Gogol feels much embarrassed. His friends call him Giggle or Goggle:

Though substitute teachers at school always pause, looking apologetic when they arrive at his name on the roster, forcing Gogol to call out, before even summoned, "That's me," teachers in the school system know not to give it a second thought. after a year or two, the students no longer tease and say "Giggle" or "Goggle" (67).

Gogol does not feel comfortable in the environment of the U.S. He has to throw a separate party to his American and Bengali friends at the occasion of his fourteenth birthday. He does not like signing his name Gogol at the bottom of his drawings just because he belongs to India having the American citizenship but his name is Russian. Thus, he finds himself rooted neither in India nor in America:

He hates that his name is both absurd and obscure, that it has nothing to do with who he is, that it is neither Indian nor American but of all things Russian. He hates having to live with it, with a pet name turned good name, day after day, second after second (76).

He feels that his father has chosen the most degrading name for him. He thinks that, "Alexander, shorted to Alex, he would have greatly preferred. But Gogol sounds ludicrous to his ears, lacking dignity or gravity" (76). He fails to understand the love of his father for the Russian writer. Ashoke has special association with this writer because he thinks that like him Russian writer also has been outside his homeland during his adult life. Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli want him to adapt to the Bengali culture. That's why they send him to attend Bengali language and cultural classes every other Saturday. But adjusting in Indian culture or environment was not so easy for their children. When Ashima and Ashoke return to India with their son, Gogol and daughter, Sonia, they could not adjust in this environment and terribly fall ill:

Upon returning to Calcutta, Gogol and Sonia both get terribly ill. It is the air, the rice, the wind, their relatives casually remark; they were not made to survive in a poor country, they say. They have the constipation followed by the opposite. Doctors come to the house in the evening with stethoscope in black leather bags. (86)

Gogol wants to assimilate in the new culture. He does not initially date with any girl but later he has his relationships with many girls. He has his first relationship with a girl named Kim. His friends do not believe it. One of his friends says, "I can't believe you have kissed her, Gogol" (96). He has his

affair with Maxine and he finds the environment of her home much different from theirs.

After the death of Ashoke, life becomes very difficult for Ashima. Gogol stays with his family at this crucial time and he ignores all his affairs for the sake of his family. But after his father's death he faces very bad phase of his life as he fails almost in all of his ventures of life. He marries with a Bengali girl, Moushumi but it also could not prove a happy marriage. She also proves treacherous to him and she starts having an extramarital affair with her friend. Thus, their marriage falls apart.

Ashima also does not want to live permanently in the United States. She plans to spend six months in the U.S. and six months in India. Her daughter, Sonia also has to be married soon. She finds her roots firm neither in India nor in the U.S:

True to the meaning of her name she will be without brothers, without a home of her own, a resident everywhere and nowhere. But it's no longer possible for her to live here now that Sonia is going to be married. (276)

She wants to capture some moments of her present life so as to cherish these memories later on. She enjoys her Christmas and says to Gogol to have some pictures, "Take some pictures tonight, please? I want to remember this Christmas. Next year at this time I'll be so far away. (287) This was neither an escape nor an adherence; it was the situation of rootlessness and placelessness she felt inside some corner of her heart.

Thus, Ashima also neither fits in the American environment nor she wants to reside permanently there. Her son, Gogol also adapts to American culture but the natives think him an outsider. Both Gogol and Sonia are not fit for the Indian environment as they fall ill there. They try to search their roots in America but they are not fit in that environment. It is all due to the clash of two different cultures.

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