



Cultural Alienation Reflected in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*

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Abstract

Dissimilarity between two cultures often leads to dejection, vulnerability and disillusionment. Cultural alienation occurs when there is a dearth of interest towards the culture to which one belongs and due to an intense desire to be a part of a dominant culture. Displacement, dislocation and immigration are probable causes for this cultural alienation. The memory of the culture, religion, literature and language of the native place provides ethnic identity and this sense of self can also alienate one from the host culture. This incomplete assimilation gives rise to alienation.

This paper is an attempt to explore the cultural alienation reflected in Jhumpa Lahiri's debut novel and how the first generation and second-generation immigrants deal with the trauma caused by the disparity of culture. *The Namesake* published in 2003 portrays the plight of immigrants in America. Lahiri shot to fame with her first collection of short stories *Interpreter of Maladies* which won her the Pulitzer Prize. Jhumpa Lahiri who holds a prominent place among contemporary novelists belongs to the second generation of immigrants in America and hence can realistically portray their immigrant experience. She is also adept at bringing out the loss and nostalgia of the first-generation immigrants.

Key words: Culture, Alienation, Immigration, First generation, Second generation.

Culture is a way of life where a cluster of people acknowledge a set of beliefs, ethics and symbols unintentionally and it is conveyed by communication and imitation from one generation to the next. "Decoding from one culture to another, one often comes across prevailing words, concepts, ideas or values

in one culture, but totally alien to another culture or tradition” (J 38). Dissimilarity between two cultures often leads to dejection, vulnerability and disillusionment.

Encyclopaedia Britannica defines alienation as "the state of feeling estranged or separated from one's milieu, work, products of work or self". The English word 'Alienation' is a derivative of the Latin word 'Alienato'. Alianato is a noun which receives meaning from the verb 'alienare' which means to make a thing for others, to snatch, to avoid and to remove. In French language alienate and alienation, are used in the same sense as the English words 'Alienate' and 'Alienation'. The words 'Anomie' and 'Anomia' are Greek words and are used as synonyms of alienation. The meaning of 'Anomia' is self-alienation and 'Anomie' is alienation from society. 'Anomia' is an indicator of Personal disintegration of man from the society and 'Anomie' is alienation from society. Arnold Kaufman avers "To claim that a person is alienated is to claim that his relation to something else has certain features which result in avoidable discontent or loss of satisfaction" (3). Cultural alienation occurs when there is a dearth of interest towards the culture to which one belongs and due to an intense desire to be a part of a dominant culture. Displacement, dislocation and immigration are probable causes for this cultural alienation.

Jhumpa Lahiri who holds a prominent place among contemporary novelists belongs to the second generation of immigrants in America and hence can realise the plight of young generation caught between the ambitions of the parents steeped in the traditional Indian mould and the impact of the western peer groups. Jhumpa Lahiri's Bengali parents, her birth in the United Kingdom, and her life at Boston in the United States have equipped her with different patterns of thinking which enabled her to depict the miseries, sacrifices, struggles as well as the erudite life of the immigrants. Lahiri shot to fame with her first collection of short stories *Interpreter of Maladies* which won her the Pulitzer Prize.

The Namesake, Jhumpa Lahiri's debut novel published in 2003 deals with the life of an Indian immigrant family. Young and newly-wed Indian couple Ashoke and Ashima commence their life in Cambridge USA where Ashoke is doing research at the MIT. Ashoke and Ashima's first born baby boy is named Gogol. Years ago, in India Ashoke met with a horrid train accident and was saved by the rescue party when they noticed him through the movement of the pages of a book -a collection of stories by the renowned Russian writer Nikolai Gogol, held by the semiconscious Ashoke. This incident remained in his memory and he felt that the writer was his saviour. The letter sent by the grandmother suggesting a name for the new-born got lost in transit and as a name had to be given to the child as per hospital norms Ashoke suggested the name Gogol to the baby boy. The child's American friends and class mates made fun of this strange name as a consequence the boy resented his name. Gogol officially changed his name into Nikhil when he turned eighteen. Unfortunately, the name Gogol continued to stick to him and this neither American nor Indian name became a symbol of his struggle for identity and culture. Gogol did not find it difficult in mingling with Americans. He has a string of affairs starting with Ruth and then with Maxine but when his father dies unexpectedly Gogol due to his guilty complex over his neglect of his family refuses to leave his home and settle with Maxine resulting in another break up. Gogol's mother arranged a meeting with Moushumi, a Bengali girl, who hated Bengali culture and they got married in traditional Bengali style but

Moushami hated restrictions of any kind and due to her unfaithfulness, the marriage ended in divorce. Ashima meanwhile decides to spend six months in India and six in America.

The Namesake is primarily a diasporic novel and invariably there are issues of family ties, clash of values and cross-cultural relationships. It is also a story of “guilt and liberation; in this sense it speaks to the universal struggle to extricate ourselves from the past -from family and obligation and the curse of history” (Hallgren, as Qtd in Batra 46). As a story of immigrant experiences the first-generation Indian immigrants are pitted against their children born and brought up in an alien land. Even the choice of the name for the protagonist leads to the clash of cultures between the two generations. Moving away from one’s home amid settling elsewhere on a long-time basis result in a sense of loss and nostalgia. The memory of the culture, religion, literature and language of the native place provides ethnic identity and this sense of self can also alienate one from the host culture. This incomplete assimilation give rise to alienation.

The Namesake, Lahiri’s debut novel, has autobiographical elements as she portrays her own experiences as well as those of her parents, friends, acquaintances, and others. In this novel most of the characters experience agonies as well as happiness in their new country. The characters, Ashoke and his wife Ashima, first generation immigrants are unable to absorb American culture entirely which is clearly portrayed in the novel. For instance, when Ashima is at the labour ward of Mount Auburn Hospital in Cambridge there is no one around to offer succour and relief hence she feels alienated. Ashima is scared of raising her child in a country where she knows no one and where life seems so unpredictable. When Gogol is born, she expresses her wish to Ashoke that she wants to go back with her son Gogol to India. The language also causes problems as Gogol and Sonia grow up. Ashima and Ashoke, send their children Gogol and Sonia to classes to learn the Bengali language and culture but the impact of Western culture and language makes them disregard their own culture and language. Gogol falls in love with an aggressive American girl by name Maxine but after the death of his father Gogol values Indian culture and consequently the relationship between Gogol and Maxine suffers a setback.

The immigrants are well off but they are not at ease and feel alienated when they visit their homeland. Ashoke, Gogol, and Sonia earn fairly well in US. Ashoke enhances his educational qualification by pursuing Ph.D. in Electrical Engineering at MIT, in US and as a result he gets employment in a university and buys a house on Pemberton Road which helps his family lead a posh life. Due to this when they visit their country of origin, in spite of all the comforts provided there, they are not comfortable and feel alienated from their own culture. Ashima who cooks Indian food at the beginning of the novel prepares Christmas cake at the end of the novel thus for the sake of the children she adjusts with the host culture. Lahiri’s depiction of the immigrant characters in the novel vividly describes their pain of alienation and displacement even while leading a sophisticated life.

In this novel, the name Gogol itself is problematic, the protagonist is unable to relate himself to a sole cultural setting, be it American, Russian or Indian. The question of belongingness loomed large before him. Even at the traffic junctions he found the remnants of his name GO LEFT, GO RIGHT, GO SLOW etc” but an attempt to find the complete name proved futile thus denying him the opportunity of finding

consolation. On his visit with his classmates to the cemetery when other children scream with delight over having come across gravestones mentioning American names, he knows there would be no Ganguli here as his moorings are not in America and even after death his body will be burnt and will vanish from this country. The chaperone accompanying the children too opines that the name Gogol is strange, His friends called him Goggle or gargle and some turned the family surname Ganguli as 'Gangreen'-the name of a vile disease.

Gogol's father as well as his grandfather adored the works of Nikolai Gogol and felt a sense of belongingness with Gogol. As an immigrant in America, Ashoke found affinity with Nikolai Gogol as he too spent his life in exile. Ashoke's favourite story in *The Short Stories of Nikolai Gogol* is 'The Overcoat' which is about one Akaky Akakyevich who spent a life time copying documents written by others and suffering abuses from others. Ashoke could find an image of his father who was also a clerk in Gogol. But Gogol Ganguli failed to find any connection with this great writer the way his father had. Akay is not doing any creative work as he is just copying documents written by others. It is as if Gogol is leading someone else's i.e., Nikolai's life and that is not a genuine life. After becoming a major, Gogol applied for admission to the Yale university and undertook proper legal procedure for adopting another name -Nikhil thus eradicating the problematic identity attached to that name. Now everyone addressed him, Nikhil. While talking to his friends his parents used this name this led to a certain level of discomfort because they are no longer using his pet's name which indicates a significant change in their relationship, a more formal note has crept in. Gogol liked his name and felt that his name connected him to his family in the Indian way when his father explained to him about the circumstances and incident which led him in giving this strange name. For the world however it could not be possible for him "to reinvent himself fully, to break from the mismatched name" thus he shared the Indian distinctiveness and legacy through the name and found implicit refuge in it. In spite of his American surroundings, he had absorbed the nuances of Indian culture which became apparent when he gave up Maxine for the sake of his mother. After the death of his father when his mother planned to divide her time between India and America, Gogol is upset again for he realizes that nobody would call him Gogol now.

The first-generation immigrant, Ashima's pangs and anguish to preserve an old culture in a new country is portrayed vividly in the novel. She constantly compares things in the host country with the ones in her home country. For instance, when Ashima is admitted to the hospital for delivery she feels isolated even though there are three other American pregnant women in the same room but separated by curtains. she is conscious of the penchant for privacy of Americans. She is shocked to learn that the Americans do not take off their shoes before entering their house. Language posed another hurdle and her flawed English is noted by nurse Patty when Ashima says 'finger and toe' for 'fingers and toes' as in her native tongue Bengali the plural form and singular form are one and the same. For her, passing time in an alien land is a sort of exile but eventually she decides to spend half a year in America as she is emotionally attached to the place where her husband breathed his last and the other half in India as the ties with the native land is hard

to let go. Whereas the second-generation immigrant, Gogol attempts to merge into the host culture by finally settling down, by setting up his own firm producing his own designs in New York.

The Namesake effectively deals with the traumas of the first-generation new immigrants and the dilemmas of the second-generation immigrants who fail to become hundred percent Americans in their attitude towards life. The first-generation immigrants have such strong feelings about their native place that though they are far off from their country of origin they are unable to connect emotionally with the host culture which leads to alienation whereas the second generation of immigrants who lack the basic knowledge about the culture and customs of their parents can assimilate the new way of life better than their parents.

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