



Gogol Ganguli, a hybrid character in *The Namesake*

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Abstract This paper is designed to give direction to understand more about human coexistence in multicultural situations in India with Western cultures and how it influences the domination of one culture over the other. It is an effort to understand the personality problems of the characters from the socio-psychological perspective and to help thoroughly investigate the terms like Hybridity and spaces. This paper aims to examine the Hybridity in *The Namesake* and to understand the way protagonists cope with cultural issues in critical circumstances. As Hybridity has become a globalized issue, so it needs to be understood in the context of present and upcoming generations. Lahiri's works weave together the legacies of Hybridity. It also resolves the conflict between twin cultures.

For the past ten years, launched in part by the fervent international publicity of India's 50th-anniversary celebration of independence from British rule, academic and popular media critics in the U.S. persistently use the language of progress to define the trajectory of South Asian diasporic literature. Portraying this fiction as a new global influence ensures its common as both an alien and familiar literary tradition while also celebrating the field's success in terms of Eurocentric notions of progress and development. In the realm of South Asian diasporic fiction published in the U.S., no one author can currently lay as much claim to the imprimatur of renewal and reinvention as Jhumpa Lahiri. She has been advocated in the international critical arena as the quintessential.

Key Words: *The Namesake*, Gogol, Hybridity, Migrants, Twin Culture

Introduction

Jhumpa Lahiri herself, once in an interview said that the children of immigrants who had strong ties to their country of origin “feel neither here nor the there” (Friedman). *The Namesake* explores the story of Gogol as a second-generation Bengali born in the U.S. with hybrid characteristics, which will be explored in this section. Gogol Ganguli is an American Indian, born to a Bengali couple towards the end of the 1960s. His father Ashoke Ganguli comes to the U.S. to study at MIT and get his Ph. D in engineering. He goes back to India to get himself a wife and comes back married to his wife Ashima. About a year and a half after their marriage, Gogol is born. Starting from his birth, Gogol's life is full of accidental events that change the course of his life and shape him and his identity. Although his private and family life is very Indian, he inevitably has to live an American life outside this secluded space, a fact that is the reason for his hybridity. However, Gogol "the child of immigrants, does not feel dislocated, because he is at home in America" (Friedman 114).

He is born in a typical American hospital where his mother lies in a room alone, cut off by curtains from the three other women in the room. Ashima feels lonely because she has none of the members of her family with her. If she were in India, things would be different and her baby would be born at her parents' house surrounded by people taking care of her or things to be done, not in a place where people come either to suffer or to die. Thus right from the beginning, Gogol is not where he is supposed to be; at his grandparents' house instead of a hospital, and he is not born the way he is meant to be; surrounded by family members instead of nurses, doctors, and strangers. These are very heartbreaking and depressing facts for Ashima and she can't help but pity Gogol, as he has arrived in this world in such deprived circumstances. But not all is so bad about being born in America. Gogol has a couple of Bengali family friends of his parents, for visitors and they all bring him presents one of which makes Ashoke say “Luck boy, . . . Only hours old and already the owner of books”. This is so different from the childhood both Ashima and Ashoke have lived.

Right before they are ready to leave the hospital, Ashima and Ashoke are asked to give a formal name to their child, to complete the paperwork. Despite their great effort to explain the Bengali way, which requires the newborn to be named by an elder from the family and that a letter to tell them this name has not yet arrived, the hospital officials insist on a name to be given to the child immediately. Unwillingly, they name him after Ashoke's favorite Russian writer's last name, Gogol. However, they intend to keep it as their son's pet name to be used by family members and give him his proper name when the long-awaited letter, bearing the baby's name arrives from India. The letter is somewhere between U.S. and India. Hereby, Gogol is named the American way, that is, immediately after his birth. More important than Gogol's being named the American way is the significance of his name. He is a boy born to Bengali parents in America. However, the name he is given is neither American nor Bengali, but Russian. It is not even a name but a last name.

Once out of the hospital, baby Gogol and his mother Ashima start a very secluded life. Gogol sleeps listening to Bengali songs in a house filled with the smell of samosas and other Indian food. He grows up eating Indian food made with American ingredients because the necessary ingredients are not available in the U.S., thus creating 'hybrid' meals. Things are only "half true" as Ashima complains and she feels the worst when

they have to celebrate Gogol's Annaprasan. This ceremony is supposed to take place in the presence of close family members and the first solid food the baby is to taste is rice. This is supposed to be given to the baby by his uncle or grandfather but none of these people are present at Gogol's ceremony Annaprasana. So, they ask Dilip Nandi a close family friend to play the part of Ashima's brother, to hold the child and feed him rice. The service plates are also of melamine whereas they should be some sort of metal. Nothing is truly Indian or authentic. They are make-believe, only substitutes for what they are supposed to be. Gogol is in between two cultures right from the first day of his life.

As Gogol grows older, he gets to know the American way of living and is introduced to another culture and language by his parents alongside his Indian education at home. When he turns four, he starts going to nursery school for three days a week where he learns the English Alphabet. When the family has enough money to purchase a house they move to the suburbs, to "67 Pemberton Road" where the neighbors are all Americans. Gogol's mother Ashima is pregnant with her second child and because she is not fit to go outdoors, Gogol spends a lot of time indoors with his mother. These days are spent going over photo albums to teach the now almost six- year old Gogol names of family members back in India and other important things for his cultural education. His mother teaches him to memorize a four-line children's poem by Tagore and the names of the deities adorning the ten-handed Goddess Durga. She switches the television to the English Channel and tells Gogol to watch Sesame Street and The Electric Company, to keep up with the English he uses at nursery school.

Thus, he learns the American way of living, gets to know their culture, and becomes fluent in their language by attending nursery school or watching television, and the Bengali way through his mother's unceasing efforts. When Gogol was in third grade, he is sent to Bengali language and culture lessons every other Saturday where he is "taught to read and write in his ancestral alphabet . . . and read handouts written in English about the Bengali Renaissance, and the revolutionary exploits of Subhas Chandra Bose"(TN Lahiri 67). He goes from one culture to the other effortlessly, not yet questioning things. These lessons do not interest or disturb him but he prefers to attend drawing classes instead. Friedman asserts that the "children of immigrants do not always feel closely tied to their country of origin. . . They move fluidly between the private sphere of their Indian home life and the public sphere of their American experience" thus experiencing their hybridity effortlessly. (Friedman)

Gogol Ganguli has to start his formal education and his name poses a problem for the second time. As this will be his first interaction with the outside world and with others for the first time, officially, he has to conform to the Bengali ways and have a second name to be used by strangers, outside his circle of family and close friends. His parents choose the name 'Nikhil' for Gogol, but he does not want it. He does not respond to this name and insists on keeping Gogol as his only name. This is the first time he makes a manifestation of who he is. He does not understand the Bengali tradition which requires him to use his pet name at home and leave his formal name Nikhil outside the house. This is like taking the outdoor shoes off at the door upon arriving home, only to wear another pair of shoes or slippers exclusively for indoor use. He chooses the American way, who does not take their shoes off at home to wear slippers but stays in the same footwear all

the time. The tradition of taking shoes outside the house is used as a metaphor later on in the novel when Gogol, for the first time comes to his parent's house with his American girlfriend Maxine and both do not take their shoes off at the door. Gogol “walks in with his shoes on instead of changing into a pair of flip-flops that his parents keep in the hall closet” (TN Lahiri 109). Although this is a normal practice for Maxine and she thinks nothing of it, this is a conscious act of Gogol to show his parents his choice of identity.

He makes the biggest declaration about his identity, in front of his family by changing his name. He comes to hate his name so much that when he turns 18, he decides to change it, officially. Shariff points out that “Adolescence is commonly known as a time of peer identification. Situational and cognitive factors during adolescence create a disconnection and shift in the identification with an ethnic name”. (Shariff) Thus, Gogol chooses the name his parents wanted to call him outside his home when he first started his formal education, Nikhil, as his formal name. At the end of the day, this name sounds more American, it is easy to pronounce and can be anglicized as Nick. Shariff elaborates on Slavoj Zizek’s explanation of the difference between the Imaginary and the Symbolic to show us the difference between how we see ourselves and how others observe us. “In Imaginary identification, we imitate the Other’s at the level of resemblance, therefore identifying ourselves with the image of the Other. This is precisely why South Asians identify more with an anglicized nickname”. (Zizek) This generalization on South Asians applies to Gogol as well.

Although his parents do not completely agree with his decision, his father says “In America anything is possible. Do as you wish” (TN Lahiri 156). Thus right before he starts college he becomes a new person. With this new name, he is more American and more self-confident. After he has his new name, he feels that it’s easier to ignore his parents, to tune out their concerns and pleas. His name given to him by his Bengali parents is a symbol of everything he despises. Thus by getting rid of his name, he hopes to erase everything Indian in him and become more Western “purposefully and studiously” (Kuortti 208). According to Zizek, who bases his ideas on Lacan “A decision to change our name, in effect, is our effort to resemble our ego” (Shariff 461).

Gogol's ideal is someone with no traces of Indianness. This is the most important and conscious act of mimicry in Gogol's life. Although he is very impressed with the results of his innocent mimicry, he is yet to experience his ambivalence. Based on his research on second-generation South Asians in Canada, Shariff notes that “Many South Asians experience similar dissonant and conflicting feelings associated with their nicknames and the accompanying new identity that comes with trying to negotiate multiple identities that are highly dependent on situational factors.” (Shariff). They usually strive to identify themselves in connection with their family and the two unique cultures, starting in adolescence way into adulthood.

At school, where he learns numbers and the English alphabet, Gogol is also required to pledge allegiance to the American flag. But when he is at home he goes back to being a Bengali and especially the “weekends are almost always the same, spent with his parents’ close friends: . . . thirty-odd people in a three-bedroom suburban house, the children watching television or playing board games in a basement, the parents eating and conversing in Bengali their children don't speak among themselves.”(TN Lahiri)

These gatherings are quite frequent throughout the novel. The Bengali people gather for birthdays, Durga puja, or weddings. The community is so large that they sometimes have to rent large halls in schools or churches. It becomes a necessity for the people living in the diaspora to get together. As Ladha notes “As Indians have moved to the United States, they have brought with them many of the cultural prescriptions . . . from their home country. These immigrants work hard to recreate a sense of Indian community in the United States, and often attempt to construct an Indian community based on their notions of what it means to be a good Indian” (Ladha 5). Friedman sees the immigrants’ homes as “a place where India is created, albeit in a diluted form”. (Friedman)

Homi Bhabha, in “Dissemination” explains the gatherings of immigrants from his own experience:

“I have lived that moment of scattering of the people that in other times and other places, in the nations of others, becomes a time of gathering. Gathering of exiles and émigrés and refugees; gathering on the edge of ‘foreign’ cultures; . . . gathering in the half-life, half-light of foreign tongues, or in the uncanny fluency of another’s language; gathering the signs of approval and acceptance, degrees, discourses, disciplines; gathering the memories of underdevelopment, of other worlds lived retroactively; gathering the past in the ritual of revival; gathering the present.” (Bhabha)

The Ganguli family is very keen on these gatherings as well, mostly initiating or organizing them for some of the reasons listed above by Bhabha. They are all in the U.S. to gather degrees, speak in their mother tongue in these gatherings, etc. Especially Gogol’s mother is very conscious of her roots and as well as trying very hard not to lose her connection with her past and her identity, she is also trying to bring up her children as good Bengalis. But it is very difficult to stay resistant to the American life around them. Just like most of the Bengali people around them, they try to adapt to certain things, at least for their children’s sake, if not as a result of their children’s demands. The following excerpt shows us to what extent the Gangulis have attuned to their new home country:

And yet to a casual observer the Gangulis, apart from the name on their mailbox, apart from the issues of India Abroad and Sangbad Bichitra that are delivered there, appear no different from their neighbors. Their garage, like every other, contains shovels and pruning shears, and a sled. They purchase a barbecue for tandoori on the porch in summer. They learn to roast turkey albeit rubbed with garlic and cumin and cayenne at Thanksgiving, to nail a wreath to their door in December, to wrap woolen scarves around snowmen, to color boiled eggs violet and pink at Easter and hide them around the house. For the sake of Gogol and Sonia they celebrate, with progressively increasing fanfare, the birth of Christ, an event the children look forward to far more than the worship of Durga and Saraswati. where they are required to throw marigold petals to a cardboard effigy of a goddess and eat bland vegetarian food. It can't compare to Christmas, when they hang stockings on the fireplace mantel, set out cookies and milk for Santa Claus, receive heaps of presents, and stay home from school.

It is worth noting how the Gangulis, and all the other Bengalis in America, consciously or unconsciously create hybrid things around them by employing mimicry. Shariff notes that: "Immigration from one country to another is a complex psychosocial process with lasting effects on an individual's identity. The dynamic shifts resulting from a mixture of 'culture shock' and mourning over the losses inherent in migration, gradually give way to psycho-structural change and the emergence of a hybrid identity." (Shariff 459)

The problems Gogol faces throughout his life- we know about his life from the moment he is born are different from those who are natives. Judith Caesar says that Gogol's story can be read simply as "another account of the difficulties of a first-generation American trying to "find himself". . . and It may seem merely unexamined documentation of the confusion of its main character, a confusion which itself has become a bit of a cliché."(Caesar) She continues by saying that Gogol's story is much more an elucidation of the causes and the meaning of that confusion, which comes not only from having multiple cultural identities but from some of how people in modern American society tend to view identity.

Thus Gogol's problems do not stem only from his multiple cultural identities, but also from the way the American society sees identity and how individuals identify with, as William James argues, "with material self, one's surroundings, clothing, food and possessions, and the social self, the loves, and friendships that surround us". (Caesar 104) For Caesare, this is Gogol's primary problem. In the same line as Caesare, Friedman also observes something other than 'only assimilation' at the heart of immigrant fiction and assumes that Instead of shedding the trappings of the home culture and throwing himself headlong into the work of Americanizing, the protagonist of the contemporary immigrant novel- whether an immigrant or a child born to immigrants- is more concerned with his dual identity as it manifests itself in America and the shrinking global community.

Based on his first-hand experience and awareness of the fact that a good education will open many doors to an immigrant and will grant him a relatively easier life as an immigrant, Ashoke Ganguli wants his son Gogol to follow the tradition and expects him to, if not an engineer, then a doctor, a lawyer, an economist at the very least. These are the fields that brought them to America, the professions that have earned them security and respect. Gogol does not follow his father's advice and in an attempt to rebel and move away from his ancestral ways, he chooses a completely different profession and studies architecture at Yale.

Conclusion

Apart from these incidents taking place in America, we are given a picture of the difficulties he faces when he is visiting India with his parents. Apart from the first trip he made to India with his parents when he was a baby, he never wants to go back there. Living a dual life does not go well with Gogol. He finds it difficult and wants to be able to live only the American way. He does not want to be a 'hybrid'; embodying traces of Indianness and Americanness at the same time and forming a completely new identity, occupying a unique 'Third Space'. He somehow wants to turn his back on his heritage and become like the others. Thus, his hybrid situation becomes a burden for him and a source of some kind of pressure and as Caesare puts it "unnecessary unhappiness".

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