RESEARCH ARTICLE

Cultural Delineation and Identity Crisis in Jhumpa Lahiri’s The Namesake

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ABSTRACT

Cultural alienation and deracination experienced by the immigrant diaspora has always been a constant source of contemplation, of people who get torn between two lands, cultures and languages. The paper uses the lens of Jhumpa Lahiri’s ‘The Namesake’, a modernist novel that strives to build an emotional cross connect with the above mentioned ideas through the story of two generations of a Bengali family settled in America. The paper lapses critically by analysing the novel especially in context of the cultural alienation and identity crisis faced by the protagonist. It seeks to map the cultural miasma and second generation moral conflicts in an ever evolving cultural space. The paper also analyses the usage of food as a narrative trope to enhance the cultural dichotomy. The paper also seeks to view and analyse the autobiographical baritones of the novel. The paper discusses in general the cultural disillusionment and in specific, the identity crisis of second generation immigrants.

Keywords: Alienation, Immigrants, Deracination, Identity crisis, Culture, Second generation dilemma, Longing.

“For being a foreigner Ashima is beginning to realize, is a sort of lifelong pregnancy -- a perpetual wait, a constant burden, a continuous feeling out of sorts.”

A poignant tale of two generations of a Bengali family settled in America, The Namesake progresses through the moral conflicts and identity crisis experienced by people moving about in a land they know and do not know. A novel that seeks to question our very basic notions on identity, longing, familial bonding, homeland and life as such. It examines the life of all those who end up being foreigners to both their home land and host land. Jhumpa Lahiri brilliantly presents a nuanced story layered with events from her own life and what she experienced as an immigrant.

Born into a Bengali family settled in US as Nilanjana Sudeshna, she had a rather modest ‘Indian’ upbringing. She was called “Jhumpa” in school as her American teacher found it easier to pronounce it and hence she was known as “Jhumpa Lahiri” throughout school and university. It was a constant source of embarrassment to her to be called her ‘pet name’ in school, Lahiri recalls, “I always felt so embarrassed by my name.... You feel like you’re causing someone pain just by being who you are”. Coupled with the mental conundrum of being torn between Indian and American culture, she has experienced everything that a second generation immigrant would go through, something which later went onto deeply manifest itself when she was sketching the characters in ‘The Namesake’.

A Pulitzer Prize winner and Man Booker Prize nominee, all her works deal with deep emotional conflicts arising out of a sense of alienation usually fuelled by cultural disparities. An immigrant herself, she beautifully portrays their lives, their aspirations and the conflicting cultural ethos. Her parents were adamant that she should always maintain her connect with India and their family in Calcutta. Lahiri later wrote, “When I first started writing I was not conscious that my subject was the Indian-American experience. What drew me to my craft was the desire to force the two worlds I occupied to mingle on
the page as I was not brave enough, or mature enough, to allow in life” (64). It is this style of lucidly putting into paper what she saw in front of her, that allowed her carve a place of her own as one of India’s most prolific writers. A thread that runs common in all her three major works is how she goes on to explore the various permutations and combinations of human emotions and familial relationships. Her stories, especially The Namesake and The Lowland dig deep into human conscience, the intricacies of man woman relationship and self-realization.

Deeply inspired by the works of Alice Munro, William Trevor, Mavis Gallant and Tolstoy her tales follow unusual trajectories and paths. Despite overarching themes of displacement and cultural delineation, they imbue a sense of universality. She calls herself an imposter in the literary world. “I wanted to please my parents and meet their expectations; I also wanted to meet the expectations I placed on myself to fit into American society. “It’s a classic case of divided identity, but depending on the degree to which the immigrants in question are willing to assimilate, the conflict is more or less pronounced. As a young child, I felt that the Indian part of me was unacknowledged and therefore somehow negated, by my American environment and vice-versa” (75).

The Namesake, traverses non linearly through the vantage points of two generations of the Ganguli family. The narrative moves through the perspectives of Ashoke, Ashima and most importantly Gogol. Ashoke migrates to America after a train accident that altered his life forever. Once upon his feet, he decides to follow the last advice that he got before the accident. “You are still young. Free. Do yourself a favour. Before it’s too late, without thinking too much about it first, pack a pillow and a blanket and see as much of the world as you can. You will not regret it. One day it will be too late” (89). During his doctoral programme in MIT, he gets married to Ashima and they have their first child, Gogol. Ashoke names him after his favourite author Nikolai Gogol whose story “The Overcoat” he was reading when the train derailed. He truly believes that it is because of him that he is still alive. They go by the Bengali tradition of giving a child a Bhaalo naam (formal name) and Daak naam (pet name). They wait for a letter from Ashima’s grandmother giving a ‘good name’ for Gogol but she suffers a stroke and they end up giving it as ‘Gogol’ in his Birth certificate. Ensuing turn of events ensure that Gogol becomes his official name used in both his school and outside. Gogol doesn’t respond to the name ‘Nikhil’, the official name that his parents finally decide upon. With time he feels isolated, alienated, and his name becomes a source of constant consternation. He is unable to deduce the logic behind being named neither an American or Indian name but a Russian name in a foreign land. Finally before joining Yale he changes his name to Nikhil. There begins the tussle between Gogol and Nikhil, an identity conflict that ultimately goes onto reveal to him himself.

Ashima thinks that Gogol’s alienation began from the very moment he was born. “She has never known a person entering the world so alone” (102). Gogol hates his name and all the cultural baggage that he grows up with. Unlike his parents who dream and aspire to ultimately go back and breathe their last in India, Gogol sees no logic in genuflecting to a land he barely knows. A nascent sense of hybridity is constantly reflected in his character. He cannot be completely termed as an ‘ABCD-American Born Confused Desi’ as his dilemma revolves more around the natural attachment to the nation in which he was born and bred than with respect to being sandwiched between two cultures. He thinks of India as how all Americans do-as India. He is an Indian in America and an American in India. There is a constant self-seeking for confirmation about his culture and identity. Though his parents feed him to doses of ‘Indian culture’, he grows resentful and with time hates everything Indian about him. In college he deliberately stays away from Indians as it reminds him too much of his parents, their friends and the shared past that they carry. For Gogol like all other second generation immigrants, America is not just a host country. It is where they dream and hope to see their dreams, aspirations and lives manifest. But despite their emotional attachment to the country, they are often betrayed by their skin colour and Indian origin and are treated as outsiders in the land in which they were born. They are torn between two cultures. A perpetual feeling of rootlessness.

For Ashoke and Ashima, acclimatisation to America is a slow process. It
takes them long to finally feel at home in America. They constantly long for India and seek out to other Bengalis and all elements that remind them of India. During her pregnancy, it is a mixture of rice krisspies, planters peanuts, chopped red onion and mustard oil, a modest approximation of the street food in Calcutta that keeps her company and gives her comfort. Gogol believes that this constant craving for anything ‘Indian’ pulls them backwards and makes them restrained in their decisions. Even after twenty years they still cannot ‘refer to Pemberton road as home’. It is the vacillating condition of the first and second generation Bengali immigrants; their vain endeavours to tie with the particular tradition and to carry the pure identity coalesce with the vain attempt of creating true home elsewhere (Dutta).

Gogol’s narrative arc is significantly influenced by the internal conflict he goes through as ‘Gogol’ and ‘Nikhil’. The two names slowly grow into two varied identities and this dichotomy presented by his name haunts him throughout. As Nikhil, he is more confident, rebellious, and more assertive. The first time he goes to a college party, he introduces himself as Nikhil and later when he ends up kissing a girl that he met there, he remarks to his friends that it was ‘Nikhil’ who kissed her and not Gogol. The Gogol he knows will never be able to do that. Before joining college he decides to officially change his name to ‘Nikhil’ and believes that by doing so he is correcting a mistake that his parents made. ‘It is as Nikhil ... that he grows a goatee, starts smoking Camel Lights at parties and, while writing papers and before exams, discovers Elvis Costello and Brian Eno and Charlie Park’. He enjoys a newfound independence with his new name. A nascent rebellious rebirth. A similar duality is played out when they go to Calcutta. In Calcutta, Ashoke and Ashima, now Mithu and Monu become less complicated, confident versions of themselves. The two names represent two lives and two cultures. Two different versions of the same man. Every time he goes home, he is back to being Gogol. ‘Nikhil evaporates, Gogol re-enters’. Nikhil is the Indian American who is completely acclimatized to the American culture and racing towards the American dream. Gogol is the immigrant who is still battling with himself for a niche in a foreign land. Gogol is the truncated outsider.

When his father gifts him a collection of short stories by Nikolai Gogol on his fourteenth birthday, he keeps it aside and doesn’t even bother to flip through the book. To read the book he believes would be equivalent to paying tribute to his namesake and accepting his name. Gogol never gets to realize the actual essence behind Ashoke naming him so. For Ashoke it reminds him of everything that followed post the accident. It signifies his rebirth in his home in Calcutta, his convalescence, being able to walk on his feet again, settling in America with Ashima and all good things that happened afterwards.

Our identity is the result of constant negotiations, compromises and introspection. It is the cumulative sum of a multitude of forces of varying tenor and capacities. Gogol takes long to reconcile with himself. It takes him nineteen years to finally accept his namesake, to read the book his father gifted him on his fourteenth birthday. He goes through a transformation after his father’s sudden death. His thought process gets realigned and for the first time he is pained for having neglected his parents, his Indian lineage and past. It is the coming of age of a man who has been his own enemy. Then begins a journey “to rediscover his roots, his self, his hyphenated identity and to revitalize the in betweenness of cultures, the alternate culture” (Fernandes).

The two major woman characters are of multifarious complexities. Ashima goes through various phases moving from India to Cambridge with a man she has never talked before. Together they explore and create a world of their own, a miniature of the Bengali cosmos they love and rather aloof from the American diaspora. Ashima is definitely one of the most well etched and rooted of all characters. She yearns to be back in India with her large family especially after Gogol’s birth as she doesn’t want to raise him in a land where they know no one. She keeps rereading a tattered copy of the Bengali weekly that she brought with her, yearly goes through all the letters from India revisiting the cries and joys of her homeland, keeps separate address books for her friends and relatives in India and America, talks to her children about Durga Puja and host frequent gatherings for their Bengali friends. Despite all this, she ultimately accepts that her children are more tuned to the American culture and allows them to find their own paths. They allow Sonia to wear short
dresses and on birthdays throw two parties, one ‘American’ for Gogol’s friends and another ‘Indian’ for their Indian friends. She cooks an elaborate meal when Gogol comes home with Maxine and is at peace with Sonia marrying an American. She deals with Ashoke’s untimely death in Ohio with great maturity. “He was teaching me to live alone”. She finds peace in America and refuses to go away from the country in which Ashoke breathed his last. A stark contrast to Ashima is the other major woman in Gogol’s life, his wife Moushumi Mazoomdar. Ashima, all her life tries to stay true to her Indian values, morals and upbringing. Juxtapose this with Moushumi who deliberately tries to break free and drift apart from her Bengali culture and upbringing. It’s in France that she finds peace. It is where she “reinvented herself, without misgivings, without guilt”. Her relationship with Gogol is more of a compromise with her Bengali family post her American fiancée calling off their engagement. Their relation was never deep enough to cover up their ever diverging interests and aspirations. Their initial emotional connect was just the result of their common hatred for their shared Bengali past. Moushumi is unapologetic about having an extramarital affair with an old unemployed friend. Even her affair is just a way of reassuring herself that she is still free and has not turned into a ‘Bharatiya Nari’ like her mom whose entire life revolves around her father. Both Ashima and Moushumi are presented in hues that completely outstrip each other at times. One is a woman, who all her life strives to ensure that she remains the ideal Bengali housewife, while the other is ready to escape that bondage even at the cost of cheating on her husband. Jhumpa Lahiri’s brilliance lies in putting together both these characters and presenting it in a manner that enhances the thematic confluence.

The house at Pemberton Road is the seat of all tensions, emotions, dilemmas and happiness of the Ganguli family. Jhumpa Lahiri orchestrates the intricate familial relationships and the complex emotions within the house mellifluously. She beautifully portrays the triumphs and tribulations of an ordinary Bengali immigrant family. There is a certain distance between Gogol and his parents. It might be the extension of Gogol’s desire to stay away from everything that deems him Indian and makes him remember his Indian past. With time he drifts further from his parents especially Ashoke. He tries to stay away from them and the Bengali culture they stand for. He is apprehensive of Ruth or Maxine meeting his parents. He is more at peace with Maxine and her family. Their lifestyle and thought process makes more sense to him. He becomes attached to his mother only after Ashoke’s death. If ‘The Namesake’ is about the emotional conflicts and haunting identity crisis of a Bengali family trying to find a place for itself, in ‘The Lowland’ it is about two brothers whose life converge and diverge at the most complex of points. It is her take on the moral complexities in families, human relations and shared identities that makes her universally so relatable and her tales so heart warming. Her works carry the reminiscence of the opening lines of Tolstoy’s saga ‘Anna Karenina’, “All Happy families are alike, every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.” Of families painted in various hues pursuing an elusive notion of happiness and self-content.

Her writing style reeks of a certain warmth and tenderness that soothes and moves you. Food acts as a very important narrative trope that is extensively used for signifying homeland, longing and cultural dilemma. The kitchen in Pemberton road connected Gogol and Sonia to India more than anything else. Ashima’s insistence on having a proper Bengali style Annaprasan, of cooking grand meals during functions at home are all part of attempts to console and reassure themselves that India is not too far away, But with time she concedes to her children’s demand for pizza parties, shake and bake chicken and all American meals. The novel itself opens with Ashima making a humble American version of a Bengali snack. It easily jettisons you to the cultural morass and longing for homeland that runs throughout the novel.

Jhumpa Lahiri’s writing style is poetically enchanting and her narrative succinctly flows sweeping across a wide gamut of human emotions in its tide. It is her acute precision in sketching ordinary lives and their myriad idiosyncrasies that make her tales stand out and as The Times articulated, “spin gold out of the straw of ordinary lives”. As put by Julie Myerson in The Guardian, ‘Lahiri is barely more than three decades old herself, and won a Pulitzer Prize for her short-story collection Interpreter of Maladies. It’s easy to see why. She has a talent - magical, sly,
cumulative- that most writers would kill for. Peer closely at any single sentence, and nothing about it stands out. But step back and look at the whole and you're knocked out’.
References


