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**CULTURAL HYBRIDITY AND DEPICTION OF BENGALI CULTURE IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S
*THE NAMESAKE***

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ABSTRACT

The present paper attempts to assess the consequences ensued due to the cultural hybridity of two generation of characters in Jhumpa Lahiri's novel *The Namesake*. The first immigrants - Ashoke and Ashima transmit the Bengali culture to their US born children Gogol and Sonia who in turn, transmit the American cultural patterns to their parents. The psychological writhe of the Indian mother Ashima trying to adjust herself in the American culture and endeavoring to inculcate the moral values archetype of India into her children, is the primary focus of the novel. The paper centers on the reflection of Jhumpa Lahiri's own inclination for Bengali culture and cultural hybridity through a variety of characters painted by her in the novel *The Namesake*.

KEYWORDS: cultural hybridity, annaprashan, payesh, Durga Pujo, bhalonam, daknam, luchis, Shashti, Saptami, Ashtami, Navami, Shakal Bela, Bikel Bela, Ratrir Bela, Basanta Kal, Varsha Kal, Marwaris & Lungi.

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CONCEPT OF "CULTURAL HYBRIDITY"

Cultural hybridity is the association of individuals belonging to different cultures and their plea to adjust themselves with others belonging to the culture other than their own. In the process, they encounter the crisis of dual identities, face the cultural dilemma and fear the loss of their ethnic identity while struggling to acculturate in the multicultural society. The first and second generations perform the role of cultural mediators between the adopted culture and the culture of their motherland. The paper focusses on Lahiri's depiction of Bengali culture in *The Namesake* ranging from the dress, food habits, festivals, customs, religious ceremonies, music and patterns of behavior of the first generation immigrants in America who unremittably strive to transmit them to the second generation individuals.

JHUMPA LAHIRI'S BENGALI BACKGROUND

Jhumpa Lahiri, a Bengali-American author, born in London in 1967 is the daughter of Bengali middle class Indian immigrants. Her family moved to the United States when she was three years old. Lahiri's mother wanted her children to grow up knowing their Bengali tradition and culture; therefore the family often visited relatives in Calcutta. Lahiri's writing frequently draws upon her own experiences as well as those of her parents, friends, acquaintances and others in the Bengali communities. She examines her characters' struggles, anxieties, and biases to present details of immigrant psychology and behavior. Her characters drift between their native culture and the culture of the host country resulting in their cultural hybridity.

DEPICTION OF BENGALI CULTURE IN THE FIRST GENERATION CHARACTERS – ASHIMA AND ASHOKE GANGULI

In Lahiri's *The Namesake*, Ashima and Ashoke Ganguli is the first generation couple who gets married when Ashoke is pursuing his doctorate in Electrical engineering at MIT, United States. After a brief period of marriage, Ashima becomes pregnant. Though barely two weeks remain for her delivery, she relishes the concoction of Rice Krispies combined with peanuts, chopped red onion, salt, lemon juice, thin slices of green chilli and mustard oil – a bengali “snack sold for pennies on Calcutta sidewalks and on railway platforms throughout India, spilling from newspaper cones.” (Lahiri:1) When Ashima feels a terrible pain in her abdomen, she calls out her husband Ashoke but doesn't say his name. It is customary in Bengal not to call the husband by his name. Ashima therefore utters the interrogative in Bengali language which translates roughly as “Are you listening to me?” (2) A taxi is called and she is taken to Mount Auburn Hospital where she is asked to remove her Murshidabad silk sari and asked to wear a cotton gown which to her embarrassment only reaches her knees. When the obstetrician Dr. Ashley tells her after examining her that labour can take twenty hours or more, she gets upset since there is nobody to console her at this difficult hour. She remembers the Indian tradition of daughter going to her parents' house on her first delivery. But in America, she is troubled at the thought of delivering the baby “so far from home, unmonitored and unobserved by those she loved.” (6) She starts going through the tattered copy of *Desh* magazine which she had brought to read on her plane ride to Boston. Though she has read it a dozen times, she does not want to throw it away simply because “the printed pages of Bengali type are a perpetual comfort to her.” (6)

When the child is born at five past five in the morning without presence of even a single grandparent or relative, Ashima pitifully her child as “she has never known of a person entering the world so alone, so deprived”. (25) Ashima is brought up in Calcutta in a joint family, therefore she is used to be surrounded by many relatives, but in America, she is feeling lonely and detached. The thought of raising

the child alone in a foreign country makes her feel more miserable. She emphatically tells her husband, “I want to go back”. (33) But it is not possible for Ashoke to abide by his wife's wishes as he is pursuing his engineering and so he has to stay in America.

BENGALI TRADITION OF NAMING THE CHILD

When a son is born to Ashima, she waits for a letter from her grandmother mentioning the name of the child. Though the grandmother has mailed the letter containing one name for a girl, one for a boy a month ago, it does not reach America. In India, parents take their own time in naming the child. But in America, the child has to be given a name before it is released from the hospital. So the problem of choosing the name of the child arises for Ashima and Ashoke. Mr. Wilcox, compiler of hospital birth certificates informs the couple that in America, a baby cannot be released without issuing a birth certificate and “that a birth certificate needs a name.” (27). He suggests to the couple to name their child after one of their ancestors. But this tradition doesn't exist in India; people do not name their son after father or grandfather and a daughter after mother or grandmother. “This sign of respect in America and Europe, this symbol of heritage and lineage, would be ridiculed in India.” (28).

Suddenly Ashoke remembers the fatal train accident he had met many years back and the way he was rescued with a page of Russian author Nikolai Gogol's book of short stories crumpled in his fingers. Since the book of this author helped him save his life, he has great reverence for him and his name. He suggests the name “Gogol” for his son and Ashima approves it. For Ashoke, Gogol signifies a beginning and a survival. So the name fills him with joy and a ray of new life. Gogol Ganguli is the name that is registered in the hospital's files of Boston. Gogol would be the *daknam* (pet name) and parents would think of *bhalonam* (good name) of their son at a future date.

It is significant in Bengali culture that every single person has two names, one pet name (*daknam*) and another good name (*bhalonam*). It is always the pet name by which the children are called by friends, family and other inmates at home. Even Ashima and Ashoke have pet names – Monu

and Mithu respectively. Good names are meant for the identification in the outside world; they appear on *"envelopes, on diplomas, in telephone directories and in all other public places."* (26) Good names represent dignified qualities; Ashima means *"limitless"* and Ashoke means *"he who transcends grief"*.

THE "ANNAPRASHAN CEREMONY" – FIRST RICE CEREMONY

The "Annaprashan" means *"the consumption of solid food"*; it is a ritual in Bengali culture to mark an infant's first eating of food other than milk. When a child is six months old, friends and relatives are invited. The mother prepares a variety of food especially *payesh*, a dish made up of milk, sugar and rice. The child sits in the lap of *mama* (mother's brother) who feeds him/her a spoonful of the *payesh* for the first time. Then the child is offered a plate containing the objects such as bangle, a symbol of wealth; a book symbolizing learning; a pen, a symbol of career and a clay pot containing soil, symbolizing property. Among all, what the child picks up, marks his future. There is no baptism or the naming ceremony of the child in Bengali culture but it is *annaprashan* ceremony of the child which is of prime importance. When Gogol's *annaprashan* is conducted, he is dressed *"as an infant Bengali groom, in a pale yellow pajama Punjabi from his grandmother in Calcutta"*. (39) The food is arranged in ten separate bowls. *"Ashima regrets that the plate on which the rice is heaped is melamine, not silver or brass or at the very least stainless steel."* (39) The last bowl contains *payesh*, a rice pudding. When Gogol's feeding begins, a handful of women start ululating- the tradition typical of Bengal. The child is given *payesh* three times. Then he is offered a plate *"holding a clump of cold Cambridge soil dug up from the backyard, a ballpoint pen and a dollar bill to see if he will be a landowner, scholar or businessman."* (40). But Gogol touches nothing. Celebration of *Annaprashan Ceremony* in America entails great importance for Ashoke and Ashima because such ceremonies mean a lot for them in a foreign land.

CULTURAL HYBRIDITY IN ASHIMA

Ashima is fond of practicing Bengali culture and traditions at home. She is an Indian mother who

is ready to sacrifice everything for her children. Though Ashoke dresses like an American, Ashima continues to wear Indian costume sari; cooks Indian food and takes care to keep her household meticulous. As her children grow up, she becomes more flexible and adopts new things. She periodically arranges parties on occasions of several festivals like *Durga Pujo* at her house; invites Bengali friends; serve them Bengali cuisine and try to preserve the cultural identity of her Bengali family. At these parties, the Bengali people sit on the floor; play various games of cards, sing songs of Bengali poets like Nazrul and Rabindranath Tagore and create an atmosphere replete with Indianness.

Fieldhouse rightly suggests, *"Food habits are an integral part of cultural behavior and are often closely identified with particular groups"* (Fieldhouse: 41) On the occasion of the fourteenth birthday party of Gogol, Ashima throws a party conforming to the Bengali cultural identity. She prepares *"lamb curry with lots of potatoes, luchs, thick channa dal with swollen brown raisins, pineapple chutney, sandeshes molded out of saffron-tinted ricotta cheese"*. (72) Gogol's school friends are also invited at the party. Ashima finds it very stressful to feed *"a handful of American children, half of whom always claim they are allergic to milk, all of whom refuse to eat the crusts of their bread"*. (72) For the sake of Gogol and Sonia, Ashima celebrates *"the birth of Christ, an event the children look forward to far more than the worship of Durga and Saraswati"* (64). At Gogol's insistence, Ashima makes him an American dinner once a week as a treat, *"Shake'n Bake chicken or Hamburger Helper prepared with ground lamb"*. (65) While in America she has become a culture hybrid struggling to maintain her Bengali cultural traditions and trying to adopt the American ways of life for the happiness of her children.

Subsequent to the death of her husband, Ashima decides to stay for six months in India and other six months in America. Ashima remembers when she first stepped in America, she missed India just as she now missed America after shifting to India after leading life as a wife and mother of two children. For Ashima, both Indian and American homes turn out to be alien to her. During her life of

thirty three years in America, she missed her life in India, now when in India, she misses her life in Pemberton Road.

CULTURAL HYBRIDITY IN GOGOL

Gogol is an American born Bengali child and in spite of his parents' continuous effort to enculturate him, he is not at ease with Bengali culture. Ashoke and Ashima speaks to Gogol in Bengali even if *"he's been lazy, addressing [them] in English"* (75) They are of opinion that their son will be able to learn the language of the host country when he moves out in the outside world, but the only way to learn the mother tongue is to speak it at home. When Gogol is to be admitted in the kindergarten, his father Ashoke convinces the principal of the school saying, *"My son is perfectly bilingual"* (58) He enrolls Gogol as Nikhil Ganguly in the school. But Gogol does not want a new name. He is *"afraid to be Nikhil, someone he doesn't know"*. (57) His parents tell him that all Bengalis have two names, one is pet name used by family members and the other good name used at formal occasions. His father consoles him saying, *"Don't worry, to me and your mother, you will never be anyone but Gogol"* (57) When Gogol is in third grade, his parents send him to Bengali language and culture lessons every other Saturday, held in the home of one of their friends. But Gogol hates it because he misses the Saturday morning drawing class he is enrolled in at the suggestion of his teacher. Gogol's attitude towards the culture of his parents and that of his American school mates and teachers makes him a cultural hybrid Indo American hovering between speaking Bengali at home and English at school, consuming American food like hamburgers at school and Indian food like rice, dal and fish at home.

By the time Gogol is ten, he is taken to Calcutta three times, twice in summer and once during *Durga Puja*. As he grows up, he desires to relate himself to American milieu but his name poses an obstruction in his way. Nikhil replaces Gogol when he enters Yale University.

"It is as Nikhil that he loses his virginity at a party at Ezra Stiles, with a girl wearing a plaid woolen skirt and combat boots and

mustard tights. By the time he wakes up, hung-over, at three in the morning, she has vanished from the room, and he is unable to recall her name" (105)

Even though he changes his name, *"he does not feel like Nikhil"* (105). In fact people who know him as Nikhil do not know that once he used to be Gogol. He feels as if he is playing the part of twins in a play, though identical to the naked eye, still fundamentally different. He experiences a feeling of being in-between. He is considered by Americans as 'ABCD' *"American Born Confused Desi."* Though he considers himself an American, the American society says, *"But you're Indian"* (157). He has an affair with Ruth and Maxine but he does not want them to meet his parents. He strives to be truly American, yet he fails to eradicate Gogol. But the death of his father produces a sea change in him. He understands that he cannot abandon the importance of either of the cultures – American and Indian, but must try to fuse the two. He experiences *"a sudden reconnect with lost Bengali rituals; this desire to return culminates in marriage to an Indian American woman"* [Moushumi] (Friedman: 115) After so many years, Gogol had learned that *"it was a Bengali son's duty to shave his head in the wake of a parent's death."* (179) For ten days after his father's death, he, his mother and Sonia eat a mourner's diet, forgoing meat and fish. They eat only rice, dal and vegetables, plainly prepared without much spices. On the eleventh day, friends are invited to mark the end of the mourning period. It is a religious ceremony conducted on the floor in one corner of the room; Gogol is asked to sit in front of a picture of his father, as a priest chants shlokas in Sanskrit. Immediately after the eleven days of mourning, Gogol breaks up with his American girl friend Maxine Ratcliff and decides to marry Moushumi, a Bengali American girl chosen by the family. The arranged marriage intends at binding Gogol and Moushumi together as a Bengali couple to ensure the promotion of Bengali culture. But a short time after their marriage, Moushumi starts an affair with a French man Dimitri Desjardins and when Gogol comes to know about it, it is *"for the first time in his life, [that] another man's name upset*

Gogol more than his own.” (283)Gogol and Moushumi are separated. Now “Gogol is thirty-two years old, already married and divorced.” (284) Lahiri has expressed the incessant struggle of Gogol, a man of cultural hybridity trying to find solace by experimenting with various American ways of life and at the same time, trying to adopt Bengali culture practiced at his house. The end of the novel is infact the beginning of the life of Gogol when in isolation, he remembers the moments spent with his father who is now no more and starts reading the book *The Short Stories of Nikolai Gogol* gifted on his fourteenth birthday by him.

BENGALI ATTIRES – REFLECTION OF BENGALI CULTURAL TRADITION

In order to preserve the cultural identity of Bengal, Jhumpa Lahiri makes her characters wear Bengali costumes at several occasions. Ashima continues to wear “saris and sandals from Bata.” (65) On the occasion of the celebration of Gogol’s fourteenth birthday, nearly forty guests from three different states visit Ganguly’s house. “Women are dressed in saris far more dazzling than the pants and polo shirts their husbands wear”. (73) On the wedding of Gogol and Moushumi, Ashima brings for him “a parchment-coloured Punjabi top that had once belonged to his father, a prepleated dhoti with a drawstring waist, a pair of nagrai slippers with curling toes.”(220) Ashima wears a pretty pale green sari, and a pearl necklace; Sonia also wears a sari with silver embroidery. Moushumi is dressed in a sari with a perfect make up of a Bengali bride. In this way, Lahiri has imparted the Bengali cultural identity to her characters by infusing in them the love for wearing Indian costumes.

EMPLOYMENT OF BENGALI WORDS

Jhumpa Lahiri has made a profuse use of Bengali words in the novel *The Namesake*. She uses the words ‘ma’ for mother and ‘baba’ for father - Gogol and Sonia address their parents as *ma* and *baba*. Also the words like *pishi*, *mashi*, *mesho*, *kaku*, *dida*, *didi*, *jamai*, *Boudi*, *maima*, *jethu*, etc.- the native expressions, are used by the author. Lahiri says,

“There are endless names of Gogol and Sonia must remember to say, not aunt this and uncle that but terms far more

specific: *mashi* and *pishi*, *mama* and *maima*, *kaku* and *jethu*, to signify whether they are related on their mother’s or their father’s side, by marriage or by blood.” (81)

There are other words such as *pajama*, *Punjabi*, *salwar-kameez*, *desh*, *chappal*, *daknam*, *bhalonam*, *kathakali*, *channa*, *ajowan*, *chanachur*, *nagrai*, *Tangail*, *Shashti*, *Saptami*, *Ashtami*, *Navami*, *Shakal Bela*, *Bikel Bela*, *Ratrir Bela*, *Basanta Kal*, *Varsha Kal*, *Marwaris*, *Lungi* etc employed by the author which are the typical coinages of Bengali culture. Gayatri Spivak opines that language allows us to make sense of ourselves as language produces identity. Through language, one translates himself – from their Indian self to their American peers and from American to their Indian families. Lahiri uses specific words to represent Indian society in America signifying all its sensibilities, rituals, traditions and superstitions. The words like *sari*, *bindi* etc. stand as an epitome of Indianness and they even suggest the holiness of Indian way of life. It is to be noted that using English terms for specific Indian words that depict Indian experience would be committing an act of violence, since there are no equivalents for them in one’s own language.

CONCLUSION

Though Jhumpa Lahiri belongs to second generation American, she has the first-hand experience of Indian customs, Bengali language and Bengali locale. She herself admits that many of her stories are influenced by her repeated visits to India and are based on her own experiences. Lahiri has set her fiction *The Namesake* in Calcutta, the city she knows perfectly well. The depiction of Bengali culture in the novel reveals her affection and bonding for Bengali culture. Through the character of Gogol, Lahiri has revealed her own quest of identity and cultural hybridity. In spite of the Bengali-oriented education children receive from their parents, they get integrated to the standard American culture by schooling, university education and other extracurricular activities fundamental to American culture. They are caught between two conflicting realities – one of the host country through the socio-cultural surroundings and the other of the cultural patterns of the country of their

parents. In the process, they get entangled between their native culture and the American culture resulting in cultural hybridity. Through the behavior of Ashoke and Ashima as well as that of Gogol and Sonia, Lahiri points out that Gogol and Sonia are more American than Ashoke and Sonia with respect to the language spoken and their behavior patterns.

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