



CROSS-CULTURAL IDENTITY OF SECOND-GENERATION IMMIGRANTS IN JUMPHA LAHIRI'S *THE NAMESAKE*

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ABSTRACT

Immigrating to a new homeland needs to face challenges. One of the important challenges in the process of assimilating and acculturating is that individuals hardships on a daily basis. Adapting to a new culture changes how individuals act and feel, and influences one's cultural identity. This study focuses on second-generation Gogol, the only son of Ashima and Asoke Ganguli, and the carrier of their family name, struggles incessantly to find his identity while attempting to mould his family's expectations and the expectations of American society. The study explores the influence of ethnic identity on Second generation's feelings of belongingness, especially in regard to partial or total affiliation with either their ethnic or host community.

Keywords: Immigration, Cross-cultural Identity, Ethnic Identity, American society.

Introduction

Immigrating to a new homeland needs to face challenges. One of the important challenges in the process of assimilating and acculturating is that individuals hardships on a daily basis. Adapting to a new culture changes how individuals act and feel, and influences one's cultural identity. This study focuses on second-generation Gogol, the only son of Ashima and Asoke Ganguli, and the carrier of their family name, struggles incessantly to find his identity while attempting to mould his family's expectations and the expectations of American society. The study explores the influence of ethnic identity on Second generation's feelings of belongingness, especially in regard to partial or total affiliation with either their ethnic or host community.

Jhumpa Lahiri other than being a popular novelist and an eminent writer, is an excellent anthropologist. She observes the feelings of the individual and studies their problems in an efficient

manner. Her interest mainly centres around the problems of the displaced migrants and their attachment to the settlement. She mainly focuses on cultural displacement and immigrant experiences in her novels.

Jhumpa Lahiri has brilliantly portrayed the dilemma of uprooted individuals through her novel *The Namesake* (2003). Lahiri is concerned with the lives of Indian immigrants in America. The experience of exile, cultural conflict, human relationship and existential problems which are the common problems in the twentieth century literary scene are visibly dealt with in this novel. The novel explores the existential problems of alienation, adjustment, rootedness and the final decision in the lives of the three major characters - Ashoke, Ashima and Gogol.

Although the immigrants in this novel find it initially a little difficult to adapt to the way of life of the host country, they lead a sophisticated life

which makes their stay in the alien land more comfortable. They earn as much as possible and are contented with their income. Lahiri has explicated in *The Namesake* the enthusiastic life, some of her characters lead. They get slowly adapted to the alien culture. In the beginning, Ashima prepares her favourite Indian food and at the end of the novel she has learnt to prepare Christmas cake. As an immigrant in the USA, Ashoke enhances his educational qualification by pursuing Ph.D. in Electrical Engineering at MIT, and as a result he gets employment in a University.

In course of time even he purchases a house on Pemberton road which helps his family lead a comfortable and sophisticated life. His immigrant status has helped him to promote his academic and professional pursuits, resulting in intellectual and economic gain. While Ashoke is pursuing his studies at MIT, most of the days, Ashima is alone in her apartment feeling lonely. And then again she feels the pangs of loneliness when she is admitted at the maternity ward, with no known persons around her either to comfort or to console. She is exceedingly afraid of raising a child in a country where she is related to no one, where she knows so little, where life seems so burdensome and worrisome that she fumes with indignation: "I'm saying I don't want to raise Gogol alone in this country. It's not right. I want to go back"(33). Ashima has language barrier which needs critical attention. Ashima finds difficult to cope up with the nurse and doctor in the maternity ward. Ashima and Ashoke send their children, Gogol and Sonia, to learn the Bengali language and also to attend culture classes every Saturday. It shows their parents "fails to unsettle them that their children sound just like Americans, expertly conversing in a language that still at times confounds them in accents they are accustomed not to trust"(65).

Children who are second-generation immigrants grow up "exploring the relationship between acculturation and identity" (Schwartz & Montgomery, 2006, p.3). Most individuals find themselves living with two identities or perceiving that one culture is better than the other. American cultural assimilation is arguably unique because of the idea that the United States is "the land of the

free," and the numerous opportunities available for individuals who live there regardless of their background. When immigrants come to the United States with this mindset, most of the time these individuals are let down by the newcomer acceptance.

Gogol's name, given by their parents is a collision between ancient Bengali custom and the American rush into informality. He has given this name after the 19th-century Russian writer, and it follows the full career of this family in America. From his earliest consciousness, Gogol hates it, the constant perplexed looks it elicits, the unappreciated tie it represents to his parents' native customs, the reference to this weird Russian writer that no one reads. In perhaps my favourite vignette in the book, poor Gogol squirms through an English class when the saturnine teacher narrates the events of his namesake's brief life. "Not your ordinary guy, Nikolai Gogol," the teacher says. "Gogol's life," he continues, "was a steady decline into madness." Not surprisingly, Gogol refuses to read a word of the assignment that night, Gogol's "The Overcoat." The name 'Gogol' is selected by his father Ashoke based on some reason.

Ashoke as an Indian young man moves to America after a suggestion given to him by a stranger on the train in India who had the experience of living in England for a while: "Do yourself a favor. . . . pack a pillow and a blanket and see as much of the world as you can. You will never regret it. One day it will be too late" (Lahiri 16). Although, this meeting was short - the man died in the train accident a few hours after they met- the idea given to Ashoke remained with him until he eventually made the journey to America together with his wife. His rescue from the train- by holding a page of Nikolai Gogol's book and dropping it to attract the attention of the rescuers - was a strong and constant memory for him which later caused him to name his son after the Russian writer. It was an affectionate relic of his personal life, told to Gogol, the protagonist, by the time that he had already begun to hate his name and had changed it.

Gogol hates his name, feels alienated, especially when he realizes that no one in India or

America or elsewhere in the world bears his name. When Gogol is fourteen he starts hating his name and he responds rudely when he is asked about his name. At the college party, Gogol is reluctant to introduce himself to Kim as Gogol, so he asserts that his name is Nikhil. Gogol considers himself an American whereas American society considers him an Indian. His name symbolizes the problem of his identity. Nikhil enters Yale as a freshman. Here nobody knows his earlier name. He feels relief and confident. He can now relate himself with American environment.

He starts doing many activities which he wants to do. He goes on keeping girlfriends, having live in relationship but he is not satisfied from within. He lives his life in American style, away from his parents, working to sustain himself. He keeps this life secret and does not allow his parents know about it. "After eighteen years of Gogol, two months of Nikhil feels scant, inconsequential." (105) He hates everything that reminds him of his past and heritage. But the loss of the old name was not so easy to forget and when he visits his home on alternate weekends, "Nikhil evaporates and Gogol re-enters again." (106).

As Nikhil, his romantic relationship is suffered, a lot. The novel spends relatively little time discussing Gogol's friendships, although he is recognised to have some friends. His romance focuses with three women: Ruth in college, Maxine in New York, and, finally, Moushumi, his wife. Each woman, in turn, marks a stage in Gogol's development. These female characters are emotionally bond with Gogol at various dimensions.. In particular, Gogol seems not to recognize that Maxine truly loves him, and wishes to know his family's practices in detail. By contrast, Moushumi, who is of Gogol's world, wants constantly to leave that world, to make a new, more intellectually "rich" life for herself among her cosmopolitan New York friends. Through these romantic relationships, then, Gogol suffers from different identities and assimilated to their foreign land.

This is an evident for recent academic debate, researchers found that some children follow the straight-line assimilation model (Waters 1990;

Alba and Nee 1997), arguing that more immigrant children are losing their parent's culture and are becoming more influenced by the new culture. However, some of these theories have been challenged by the ethnocentric tendencies displayed by other individuals (Alba and Nee, 1997). Emerging research is starting to explore how individuals may construct and affirm their ethnic background.

Conclusion:

First generation immigrants establishes a temporal understanding for the situation of a person in a diaspora, or even a person who doesn't participate in a diasporic community, but instead chooses assimilation. When it comes to the second-generation immigrant, about the children of the one's who have left the known and arrived at the new. He leaves them, however, with a task: "a new generation arrives on the scene with its own time, over determining and thereby re-evaluating [...] temporality in a new round of conflicts and convergences". Ashima and Ashoke don't have many friends when compared to Gogol. Gogol's connection is much strong with America.

Since he was born and brought up in America. He could find his root in America and also in India. He was not introduced to Indian culture as he was living and leading his life in America. He found differences in American way of living. He felt like a foreigner where he was born. The concept of contradiction is represented by Nikolai Gogol who has two contradiction feelings toward object, subject and action. The object, subject and action are American society and the Indian society around him. Gogol's experience leads him to have ambivalence through his namesake. He wants to have a name that really represents his identity. The two contrast feelings occur from his desire to have a name which represents him as Indian or American. The other contradiction feeling occurs when Gogol confronts the clash culture between Indian, his parents' culture, and American, his society's culture.

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