

MIGRATION, ETHNICITY AND CULTURAL HYBRIDITY IN
JHUMPA LAHIRI'S *THE NAMESAKE*

SHASHIKANT MHALUNKAR

B. N. N. COLLEGE,
BHIVANDI, (M.S.), INDIA

Abstract

Every country has its own social cultural and ethnic cryptograph, but no culture has remained homogenous in the present era. Due to the mobility of human beings across the borders of a nation, the socio-cultural values of a society are becoming heterogeneous and hybrid. The social values, customs, religious beliefs, technologies, food habits and products are mixed with the cultural traits of nations and their ethnic values. The present paper attempts to bring out migration, ethnicity and multiculturalism in the novel, The Namesake by Jhumpa Lahiri. Migration and international space facilitate cultural hybridity in the behavioral pattern of the characters who are caught between the cultures of two nations. The paper will also touch upon two different generations and their responses to multiculturalism and international space. Jhumpa Lahiri captures both the cultural encounters and the resultant psychological and emotional crises in the lives of her characters. Lahiri uses her novel as a medium to negotiate the borders of society and culture to implicate identities that move across continents, communities and cultures. The cultural complexities of the second generation migrants are explored by her. Lahiri being a second generation migrant explicates the notions of cultural hybridity and international space. The ethnic markers of the first generation migrants are thrown away by the second generation immigrants and they embrace the culture of the host nation. The ethnic bonds of the homeland are strong with the first generation migrants which are evident in their attempt of celebrations and community gatherings which showcase their ghettoism. The second generation of the migrants, on the other hand, prefers liberty, free sex and mongrelism. Cutting lose from their Indian ethnicity, the second generation migrants attempt to assimilate with the culture of the host nation but they fail to do so. They are seen with a hyphenated identity.

Key words: migration, culture, society, ethnicity, cultural hybridity

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Since the dawn of civilization man has been migrating from place to place in search of food, clothing, shelter, security and comfort. This mobility is found not only in terms of geographical shift but also it is evident in the cultural transformation and ethnic changes of the migrants. After crossing the borders of a nation, an ethnic group struggles hard to preserve its ethnic and cultural ties. These ties, according to them keep them together. The culture of the homeland the migrants preserve in the host nation through ghettoism. The migrants maintain the language, customs, values, norms, tools, technologies, products, organizations and institutions of their homeland in the unaccustomed earth. These cultural markers cater them a sense of comfort. But migration affects the institutions family, education, religion, work and health-care.

Ethnicity and culture in a dynamic society are not monolithic. They are often defined by the economic classes that operate in that particular society. This leads to the idea of the interrelationship between capital and culture. Jhumpa Lahiri has her specific views on materialism, ethnicity and culture. These views, though not always overt, are seen scattered in the social behaviour of her characters. Even relationships, both sexual and familial, in her fiction are conditioned by the idea of social exchange theory – implying the cost and benefits to each concerned party. Using this theory, one can analyze to see how economic terms of cost and rewards can be applied to understand the give-and-take aspects of interpersonal relationship. Jhumpa Lahiri is seen implying in varying degrees that the social, cultural, ethnic and familial interactions of her characters are dictated by this necessity to exchange. Thus, it would also an interesting exercise to consider the economic base of society, migration, ethnicity and culture as configured in Lahiri's novel, *The Namesake*.

Different cultural backgrounds, variant ethnicities and memberships to different communities generate encounters of different worldviews which eventually shape the emotional life in multiethnic, multicultural societies like those of India and the United States. The novel by Jhumpa Lahiri captures both the cultural encounters and the resultant psychological and emotional crises in the lives of her characters. Lahiri also uses her novel and short stories as media to negotiate the borders of society, ethnicity and culture to implicate identities that move across continents, communities and cultures. The present paper attempts to examine migration, ethnicity and cultural hybridity as depicted in Jhumpa Lahiri's novel, *The Namesake*. Jhumpa Lahiri can be studied as a multicultural writer who depicts, in her works, cultural institutions which are conditioned by different nationalities and religions. If culture suggests particular institution and customs of a certain group of people or a nation, multiculturalism tries to cross this distinguishing specificity of society and culture. Multiculturalism, Debarati Bandyopadhyay defines, is a feature of pluralistic society which is the product of migration:

'Multiculturalism' suggests the coexistence of a number of different cultures. It does not prescribe homogenization and conformity directly, nor does it encourage overtly ethnic, religious, lingual or racial constituents of a particular society to denigrate and alienate each other to such an extent that the fragile balance of such a society is damaged or destroyed permanently. (Bandyopadhyay: 2009: 98)

Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* could be analyzed to see her compatibility with Bandyopadhyay's notion of ethnicity and cultural hybridity.

Responses and attitudes of human beings to the material objects which surround them also determine their culture and ethnicity. In fiction, the way the characters experience material objects and find meanings in such objects is a significant way in which the novelists articulate and externalize the culture of these characters. Further, the material objects that surround the characters are often the products of economic system and the responses of characters to these products betray the ideologies by which they make sense of the world. Jhumpa

Lahiri explores this complex link between the ethnicity and cultural hybridity of the characters and the commodities which surround them.

Food and dining are important components of ethnicity and culture. Cultural expressions in fiction and films delve deep into these social practices to show how these instances could be considered as the defining parameters of one's cultural experience. Food and dining occupy significant space in the fiction of Jhumpa Lahiri to show how these metaphors are markers of cultural specificity and at times, the markers of cultural hybridity. This paper will also look closely at these cultural and ethnic objects in order to make an assessment of the migration, ethnicity and cultural world views of Jhumpa Lahiri.

Lahiri's *The Namesake* deals with more complex ethnic and cultural issues as it depicts the life and problems of immigrants in the host nation with a closer scrutiny of Indo-American cultural links. The novel showcases experiences and cultural dilemmas of about thirty years of life of the Gangulis in the United States, dealing with two different generations. It is in the case of Gogol that the psycho-pathology of biculturalism gets manifested very overtly. Ashoke, who represents the first generation of migrants and his wife, Ashima, have more rooted sense of home and the culture of homeland. Ashima, for instance, tries to re-live Bengali culture when she reads Bengali stories, poems and articles which she has brought with her. These magazines represent the cultural baggage that the migrants carry with them. She also perceives the society in the United States from the point of view of an Asian female subject in Diaspora. As a woman, who has given birth to a child in a foreign land, her basic idea of community and support is linked to the terrifying experience of her delivery. She longs to go back to Calcutta and raise her children there mainly as she feels that she would get the support of her family members in bringing them up. Gradually, she learns to move about in the markets of the alien land, trying to make herself comfortable in the host nation. Even then, the feeling of being alone haunts her and the best way that she can relate this experience is to think about a life without a community as an extended pregnancy. Lahiri explores through the metaphors of pregnancy and alienation the social aspect of migration:

Being a foreigner is a sort of life-long pregnancy. A perpetual wait, a constant burden, a continuous feeling out of sorts. It is an on-going responsibility, a parenthesis in what had once been ordinary life, only to discover that previous life has vanished, replaced by something more complicated and demanding. Like pregnancy, being a foreigner Ashima believes, is something that elicits the same curiosity from strangers, the same combination of pity and respect. (Lahiri: 2003: 49-50)

Ashoke and Ashima try to build up a circle of Bengali acquaintances when they settle down in Pemberton. They try to build friendship with other Bengalis for the only reason that they all come from Calcutta. Lahiri points out how in Diaspora common ethnicity can bring people together to form a community of ethnic network though they do not share professional interest. Mita Biswas discusses the cultural strategies that Ashoke and Ashima deploy to feel at home or to be in a group:

They celebrate these as per Bengali customs, wearing their best traditional attires, thus trying to preserve their culture in a new land. In fact, their “beliefs, traditions, customs, behaviours, and values” along with their “possessions and belongings” are carried by migrants with them to “new places.”² They sit in circles on the floor, singing songs by Nazrul and Tagore...argue riotously over the films of “Ritwik Ghatak versus those of Satyajit Ray. The CPIM versus the Congress Party. North Calcutta versus South”. (Biswas: 2008: 30)

Ashoke and Ashima, who represent the first generation immigrants, attempt to hold on to their ethnic and cultural past in an effort to preserve a cultural heritage that is slipping fast in an alien land. Mita Biswas explains how these first generation immigrants try to cultivate a cultural tradition in their

children. These efforts, she observes, touch upon language, religion and literature:

In order to preserve their culture in the foreign land, the first generation immigrants train their children in the Bengali language, literature and history and expose them to their religious customs, traditions, beliefs, food habits, and social mannerisms. Along with this, they also train them in the ways of the new land and social customs. In the novel, Ashima teaches Gogol to memorise a children's poem by Tagore and the names of deities adorning the ten-headed Durga. (Biswas: 2008: 31)

Food and religion are two significant markers of culture in *The Namesake*. Lahiri projects the changing food habits of the Gangulis to trace a corresponding cultural change. She also focuses on the way religions and myths get hybridized in the context of the second generation immigrants. Lahiri chronicles:

They learn to roast turkeys at Thanksgiving, to nail a wreath to their door in December, to wrap woolen scarves around snowman, to colour boiled eggs violet and pink at Easter. 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. (Lahiri: 2003:64)

Both the first generation migrants, such as Ashoke and Ashima, and the second generation immigrants such as Gogol, Moushumi and Sonia, add to the longer cultural drama that unfolds in the host nation. Their respective generational differences in culture indicate the fact that society and culture are in a state of flux and these socio-cultural dynamics are best understood when they are examined in the context of the multicultural ethos of the United States.

The immigrants portrayed in *The Namesake*, in their own ways, add to the multicultural mosaic of the United States by showing evident signs of

socio-cultural evolution, besides their psychological progress in the direction of assimilation. Ashima, for instance, begins as a culturally rooted Indian immigrant but her long sojourn in the host nation forces her to call her own cultural and religious beliefs into question and to modify them in an attempt to strike a balance between two cultures. The same person takes a drastic decision after Ashoke's death and goes back to Calcutta, to settle down in India. This decision emphasizes the point that one's notion of culture is also caught in the contingencies of life and it is constantly reshaped in every changing situational frame.

Gogol too has a complex cultural journey. He begins as an Indo-American subject who tries to erase the first part of his hyphenated identity. To establish this cultural statement, he embraces American girls and life style alike. However, he too takes a sharp turn in his life and when his marital life with Moushumi goes for a toss, he returns to the cultural practices and familial values which he had been avoiding so far. His journey is a cultural enterprise as it takes the readers through different communities such as that of the Asian Americans, the students of American Universities, the community of artists, white American communities and the Bengali Americans in Boston. He also moves through the communities which represent different geographical locations such as those of Boston, Paris and Calcutta. His affiliation to these communities is a temporary matter and it indicates how, like cultural identity, one's feelings for community also change across time.

The Namesake, though popularly considered as a novel that deals with the identity of Diaspora subjects, can also be read as a record of the life of an entire community that is caught between India and the United States. Lahiri seems to be concerned with the larger social problems of the members of the community besides looking into their subject positions. Her focus in the novel is on the expatriate Bengalis in the Boston area – their peculiar lives and their extended make-shift families made up of fellow expatriates. Lahiri also tries to show, by sketching the lives of Ashoke and Ashima, how the customs and world view of such a community condition their own everyday experiences. The urge for seeking identity in Ashoke and Ashima is nicely balanced with their urge to

affiliate with Bengali American community. What Lahiri tries to project in the novel are the social factors that determine an immigrant's identity – nationality, occupation and gender. For instance, Ashoke and Ashima shape their respective identities in Boston as subjects of two different genders, though of Indian origin. Ashoke's identity is also determined by his occupation in MIT as he has an affiliation to the community of research scholars. Ashima's social circle on the other hand, is limited to a group of women of both the races, who had helped her during her pregnancy and childcare. While Ashoke's social connectivity is determined by his professional needs, Ashima's is conditioned by her personal and emotional needs. Gender, thus, plays a significant role in designing the social circle, especially among the first generation immigrants. Ashoke being a male has a wider network of social relations. Ashima, as a housewife, is mostly confined to the domain of household and her social circle also has a limited radius.

However, this norm is violated in the second generation of immigrants. Moushumi for instance, seems to have a wider social network as she is connected to a number of male friends of different races and nationality. Gogol, on the other hand, progressively gets confined to a limited social group as he eventually gets back to the Bengali American community. This reversal of the visibility of genders in socio-cultural spaces indicates the dynamic nature of identity formation and the strategies which the Asian Americans adopt to come to terms with the throes of Diaspora existence.

In discussion of Diaspora, the dimension of class is often left out. Its inclusion is an important contribution that Lahiri makes which recognizes the fact that Diaspora subjects belong to different classes – struggling professional middle class, the wealthy and working class. The life of Ashoke and Ashima in the first part of *The Namesake* shows the typical realities of the lower- middle class. Ashoke as a research scholar at MIT has limited earnings and hence, he has to find an accommodation in the far away suburbs. A similar hardship is experienced by Gogol and Sonia as children. They are aware of their parents' relative economic inferiority as they find themselves not taken seriously in the school. As the novel progresses, Ashoke improves his socio-economic

status and moves into more cosmopolitan locations.

Customs often hold a culture together. Lahiri seems to imply this idea when she traces the life of Bengali Indians in *The Namesake*. Ashoke and Ashima, especially in their initial days in the United States, try to make a circle of Bengali acquaintances. They also get connected to these Bengalis on the occasions of festivals and rituals. Dr. Amar Singh explains how the Bengali families in Diaspora make a sub-culture and community by holding on to certain customs and festivals:

These Bengali families gather together on different occasions like the rice and name ceremonies of their children, their birthdays, marriages, deaths, and Bengali festivals like navratras and pujos. They celebrate these as per Bengali customs, wearing their best traditional attires, thus trying to preserve their culture in a new land.⁸ (Singh: 2009: 81)

Political dimension of Diaspora also needs a close examination. Jhumpa Lahiri depicts, while describing the socio-cultural realities of migrant subjects, their political status, too. In *The Namesake*, though the migrant Bengalis get together and sing songs of Nazrul and Tagore and talk about the political rivalry in Bengal between the CPM and the Congress Party, the irony is that they are disenfranchised in America. Lahiri brings out this political invisibility of the migrant Bengalis with a touch of irony, "For hours they argue about the politics of America, a country in which none of them is eligible to vote." (Lahiri: 2003: 38)

In Diaspora, social relations often become compensations for the deprived familial ties. Ashima tries to connect herself to women in Boston mainly as substitutes for her family. She is largely upset at the thought of her son being deprived the first look of his grandparents. Having brought up in a Bengali joint family and subsequently translocated to a land where people prefer their privacy over relationship, she feels a bit lost. She pities her son who has to take birth without his grandparents around. Lahiri captures Ashima's feelings:

Without a single grandparent or parent or uncle or aunt at her side, the baby's birth, like most everything else in America, feels somehow haphazard, only half true. As she stokes and suckles and studies her son, she can't help but pity him. She has never known of a person entering the world so alone, so deprived. (Lahiri: 2003: 24-25)

Lahiri also uses the trope of name to indicate the private and public world of Bengali Americans. According to a custom in Bengal, one has two names—a 'daknam'(nickname) for home and a 'bhalonam' (true forename) for identification in the public sphere. These two names, one personal and the other, public, dramatize that entire socio-cultural dilemma which Gogol faces in the United States. He carries a name, 'Gogol' which does not mean anything in Indian languages. However, his identity crisis is the result of the 'daknam' which is a part of the Bengali custom. It forces a deeper awareness in Gogol that he is different even among a group of immigrants. Gogol's name is indicative of the loneliness and cultural isolation that Asian Americans experience in the host nation. By adding a strange name tag to her protagonist, Jhumpa Lahiri intensifies the socio-cultural isolation and the resultant identity crisis that such a subject has to negotiate in his existence in Diaspora.

The analysis of cultural hybridity in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* brings out her notions of socio-cultural units such as class, food, customs and religion. Jhumpa Lahiri tries to place her characters within the larger canvas of co-ethnicities and multiculturalism wherein the focal characters – both male and female – try to strike a balance between Indian ethnicity and the culture of the host nation. Lahiri, thus, examines cultural nuances of the international space in the mosaic of multiculturalism. In this way, her novel, *The Namesake* can be referred as document for migration studies, cultural variances and cultural studies.

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