

Preserving Native Cultural Identity in a Multicultural Society: An Evaluation of Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*

Vineet Kumar
Upasana Singh

Abstract

In the journey from womb to tomb, every human individual passes through different stages and attains various identities during this journey e.g. national identity, religious identity, institutional identity, cultural identity and so on. Some of them are labelled from the birth of a child for example – religious identity, cultural identity and national identity and some are obtained through association with the institutions like – schools, colleges, work places etc. Cultural identity is one of the identities a person gain from his/her birth. Like his parents' genes, this identity is also attached with him/her. Cultural identity is the sum of his parents' religion, nationality, language and other factors that help in building cultural identity of a person. When people migrate from one cultural or geographical location to another these identities travel with them and make it difficult for them to negotiate with other cultures. Because, what one culture prohibits, other cultures encourage. The present epoch is the epoch of globalization and almost every country of the world has become a multicultural space especially during and after colonization. The United States of America is a multicultural country that witnesses immigrants across the globe in form of IT professionals, refugees, war victims, illegal immigrants etc. Jhumpa Lahiri (b. 1967) is an American novelist, short-story writer, and essayist. She writes about Indians residing in the USA. Her writings

deal with the traumatic experiences of immigrants and their struggles to establish themselves in the Multicultural land of America. The present research work will investigate Jhumpa Lahiri's magnum opus *The Namesake* (2003) where some characters easily adopt the culture of the land while others struggle a lot to preserve their cultural identity.

Keywords: Cultural Identity, National Space, Religion, Nationality.

In the journey from womb to tomb, every human individual passes through different stages and attains various identities during this journey. Some of them are labelled from the birth of a child for example – religious identity, cultural identity and national identity and some are obtained through association with the institutions like – schools, colleges, work-place etc. Cultural identity is one of the identities an individual gains from his/her birth. Like his parents' genes, this identity is also attached to him/her. Cultural identity is the sum of his/her parents' religion, nationality, language and other factors that help in building cultural identity of an individual.

A child's birthplace plays a vital role in the formation of his/her cultural identity because an environment affects childhood of a child in which s/he learns his/her parents' language, customs, rituals, and other cultural activities. These activities reside deep in human consciousness that when they migrate from one cultural or geographical location to another these identities travel with them and make it difficult for them to hybridize with other cultures. Because, what one culture prohibits, other cultures encourage. The present epoch is the epoch of globalization and almost every country of the world has become a multicultural space especially during and after colonization. The United States of America is a multicultural territory that witnesses immigrants across the globe in form of IT professionals, refugees, war victims, illegal immigrants etc. Sumitra Badrinathan and others conducted a survey entitled, "Social Realities of Indian Americans: Results From the 2020 Indian Americans Survey" which informs:

Indian Americans are the second-largest immigrant group in the United States. As the number of Indian-origin residents in the United States has swelled north of 4 million, the community's diversity too has grown.... While the majority are immigrants, rising

share is born and raised in the United States. Many Indian immigrants might have brought with them identities rooted in their ancestral homeland, while others have eschewed them in favor of a nonhyphenated “American” identity.

Numerous writers including Anita Desai (b.1937, her notable works include *In Custody*, *Clear Light of the Day*, *Fasting, Feasting*, *Baumgartner’s Bombay*, and others) Kiran Desai ((b.1971, 2006 Man Booker Prize winner for *The Inheritance of Loss*), Siddhartha Mukherjee (b.1970, known for his 2010 book, *The Emperor of All Maladies: A Biography of Cancer*, that won Pulitzer Prize for General Non-Fiction in 2011), Vikram Seth (b.1952, awardee of Padma Shri, Sahitya Academy Award whose famous works include – *A Suitable Boy* and *The Golden Gate*), Bharati Mukherjee (1940-2017, who portrays alienation, cultural changes, displacement, the nostalgia of immigrants in her works such as *Jasmine*, *Desirable Daughters* *Wife* and others), Amitav Ghosh (b.1956, best known for *The Shadow Lines*, *The Glass Palace*, *Sea of Poppies*, *River of Smoke* and *The Hungry Tide*) and Jhumpa Lahiri (b.1967) are among these 4 million immigrants, some migrated to the USA and others were born there.

Jhumpa Lahiri (b. 1967) is an American novelist, short-story writer, and essayist. She writes about Indians residing in the USA. Her writings deal with the traumatic experiences of immigrants and their struggles to establish themselves in the Multicultural land of America. Her famous works include – *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), *The Namesake* (2003, film in 2006), *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008), *The Lowland* (2013), and *In Other Words* (2015, in Italian as *In alter parole*) Lahiri’s magnum opus *The Namesake* is set in backdrops of American society where some characters easily adopt the culture of the land while others struggle a lot to preserve their cultural identity.

The novel depicts the life of a Bengali couple, Ashoke and Ashima, in America. Ashoke, a PhD scholar at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in electrical engineering and supporter of Marxism, decides to study in America on the advice of Ghosh whom he met during a train journey that ended with an accident and killed everyone except Ashoke. Ashoke is possessed by the

Russian writer, Nikolai Gogol (famous for his short story, “The Overcoat”) whose book caused his survival during the evacuation of passengers. Ashima, Ashoke’s wife, was born and raised in a traditional Bengali family. She likes singing and always wears traditional clothes which represent her love for traditional Bengali culture. After her marriage to Ashoke, Ashima moves to America where she finds herself an outsider in an alien land. She struggles hard to adjust to the environment of America but finds herself more attached to the memories of her homeland, India. Ashoke goes to the institution during the day time and Ashima feels lonely at home and does not make friends because of the hardship she faces with the English language. Ashima feels an unrealistic atmosphere in America because no family member is there with her on his child’s birth. She imagines the situation as:

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 strokes 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. (24-25)

When the hospital authority asks the couple to suggest “Good Name” of the child to get a certificate, both husband and wife find it helpless to suggest a name because according to their rituals a baby’s “good name” is chosen by elders in the family. After struggling with hospital administration over the baby’s name, Ashoke names the boy, ‘Gogol’, after his favourite Russian author. At home, Ashima plays with Gogol and when he attains the age of feeding, her eyes fill with tears because she misses the ceremony where a child’s name is proposed by elders and his/her future is predicted with a custom. She feels the gap of two lives, one she lived in India and the other she is living in America. Lahiri portrays the scene as:

Ashima eyes fill with tears as Gogol’s mouth eagerly invites the spoon. She can’t help wishing her own brother were here to feed him, her own parents to bless him with their hands on his head. And then the grand finale, the moment they have all been waiting

for. To predict his future path in life, Gogol is offered a plate holding a clump of cold Cambridge soil dug up from backyard, a ballpoint pen, and a dollar bill, to see if he will be a landowner, scholar, or businessman. (40)

Soon, the family begins to socialize with other Bengali families in the region. Gogol's *annaprasan*, a rice ceremony to celebrate a child's first taste of solid food, is performed by Dilip Nandi, Ashoke Ganguli's Cambridge friend, as an honorary uncle of Gogol. After completing his PhD, Ashoke gets a job as a professor and manages enough wealth to own a house at Pemberton Road. Ashima mesmerizes her life in India and often sends telegrams and photos of Gogol to her parents. At home, she starts feeling lonely again because she is not familiar with the neighbourhood and could not go to the market because it is far away from their new home. She bears a girl child who is named 'Sonali' but everyone calls her Sonia at home. Sonia learns the American lifestyle and hates the culture and rituals of her parents. Gogol suffers from an identity crisis because of his name which he did not like throughout his life until he finds his father's intention behind his name. Ashima lives a life with the traditional values she brought from India, she wears saris, she cooks and eats Indian foods, she celebrates festivals with Bengali families around her, and she also desires Bengali culture and language for her children. Ashoke is happy with both cultures; he does not bother himself much on cultural issues.

When the family visits India for eight months, Ashima feels very happy to see her relatives but her daughter does not accommodate Indian culture and environment because of her upbringing in American culture. Gogol and Sonia feel like strangers in India. They find that people live a very different life in India in comparison to America. Sonia does not like the Indian culture and habits of people. Sonia passes her time by listening to music and reading books because she does not find or feel herself to be attached to Indian culture. On the other hand, Ashima feels immense pleasure on her return to India. She enjoys every moment here and spends most of her time with her friends and relatives. Gogol is amused with Indian architecture which motivates him to go with

the subject for his higher education and to find a career in it. Finally, the Ganguli family returns to America where everyone except Ashima leaves memories of India behind and indulge in their daily task. Ashima again starts feeling lonely because her son has gone to New York where he works in an architectural firm and starts living with his girlfriend, Maxine Ratliff. Ashoke starts teaching temporarily at a university in Ohio. Sonia keeps herself busy with her books and Gogol spends his time with Maxine and seldom answers his mother's call. This creates a vacuum in Ashima and she gets a part-time job in a library where she blows her time with ladies of her age and with books.

Ashoke dies of a heart attack which reunites the family again and causes Gogol to understand his cultural identity which he has forgotten in the influence of Western culture. He regrets of not understanding his father's love for him. Fully aware of his duties, Gogol performs all the rituals of a son. He also cut his connection with Maxine when he understands that she would not fit in his life and culture. After some time of Ashoke's death, Ashima asks Gogol to look forward to his future and suggests seeing Moushumi Mazoomdar, a Bengali girl doing PhD in French literature, whom he has met when he was 14. Gogol and Moushumi go on a date and soon marry. Ashima decides to sell the Pemberton Road house and calls friends and relatives for a Christmas party. Gogol finds that Moushumi has an extramarital affair and comes alone to see his mother. Heartbroken, Gogol goes to his room and finds the book his father gave him on his birthday. The Book reads: "For Gogol Ganguli", it further describes:

it says on the front endpaper in his father's tranquil hand, in red ballpoint ink, the letters rising gradually, optimistically, on the diagonal toward the upper right-hand corner of the page. "The man who gave you his name, from the man who gave you your name" is written within quotation marks. Underneath the inscription, which he has never before seen, is his birthday, and the year, 1982. His father had stood in the doorway, just there, an arm's reach from where he sits now. He had left him to discover the inscription on his own, never again asking Gogol what he'd thought of the book, never mentioning the book at

all. (288-89)

Lahiri foregrounds the agony of migrants who leave their homeland in search of a better life in a stranger world. This search does not fulfil all the desires. They are not the only people who migrate; a complete culture also travels with them that is very different from the culture they land. The character of Ashima is portrayed as a typical Bengali woman who clings to her native culture throughout the novel and does not abandon it even after living for years in a country with different and opposite culture. Ashoke Ganguli represents a person who easily switches to both the cultures of America and India whenever requires. Characteristics of Gogol's character illustrate a child who does not like his name and his parents' culture but after his father's death devotes himself to his family and culture. Sonia hates Indian dresses, food, rituals and festivals but she takes care of her mother after her father's death. The present research examines the dilemma of characters between choices of cultures. Migrants, like Ashima, do not want to scrap their native culture and preserve it by all means. On the other hand, immigrants like Sonia and Moushumi do not want to preserve their cultural values.

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