

# Contra Acculturation in Jhumpa Lahiri's The Namesake

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**Abstract:**-Nilanjana Sudeshna, who is well known as Jhumpa Lahiri, is one of the second generation immigrants in the USA and acknowledged as one of the women writers in Indian English literature for her Indian themes. She is a recent new wave literary artist and has won Pulitzer Prize for her short story collection *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999). She is a multicultural, diasporic, postcolonial, marginal South Asian Woman writer. This study concentrates on the cultural dilemmas of displacement, marginality, alienation and nostalgia faced by the Indian immigrants. It highlights Ashima's acute sense of loss, pain and nostalgia for the native land and heightens her feelings of alienation and at times of deep despair. She is a true representative of a trishanku existence. Gogol, the second generation expatriate, is schizophrenic as he is torn between two nations India and America; between two names Indian and Russian; between two value systems, traditions and conventions, openness and the let go attitude, between science and creativity. And in this sense Gogol somewhere becomes a biographical character where Lahiri tries to give a tongue to the feelings of immigrants in the character of Gogol and tries and unravel the enormously disturbing truths about them. He tries to assimilate the host culture but he fails to acculturize it completely. Ashima and Gogol demonstrate the lives of hybridity, inbetweeness and liminality. It is their contra-acculturation and rooting for India that allows them peace and consolation in moments of catharsis. Through an extensive study of Gogol's thought processes and decisions, actions and experiences, contra-acculturation is essentialised as 'spiritual odyssey' yielding him the much needed peace and solace.

**Keywords:**-Trishanku, Spiritual Odyssey, Contra Acculturation, Catharsis, Nostalgia, Expatriate.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The word 'diaspora' itself, coming, as it does, from Greek 'dia' ('through') and 'speirein' ('to scatter'), etymologically means 'dispersal', and involves, at least two countries, two cultures, which are embedded in the mind of the migrant, side-

by-side. Acculturation is the assimilation to a different culture while contra-acculturation reflects the opposite tendency. Contra acculturation is a postcolonial phenomenon in which there is a global amalgam of cultures and identities in varied proportions. The immigrants are neither capable to cast off their inherited cultural legacy nor are they able to encapsulate themselves in a socio-cultural environment while asserting their identities in alien lands. They, thus, experience a contra acculturation in their attempt to syncretise the two. One is reminded of these cultural presumptions and reservations of American Indians in *Crossing Cultural borders: New Voices in Indian America Literature* where Nila Das aptly remarks:

In Indian notion, culture has both individual and social connotations, especially when it propagates the terms *Kula* and *Shila*. *Kula* implicates biological and cultural heredity of both an individual and a group. It is a lifelong discipline and intimate conviction, a commitment to and a mutual relationship with one's resource tradition. *Shila* is the behaviour pattern that individuals and groups develop for themselves. Since *Kula* is the received one and *Shila* the changing one, the two concepts stand for tradition and respectively and make culture an ongoing process. (Das, 2002)

In the larger American cultural paradigm, Indian immigrants do not need merely a place for rehousing but they search for a position in an indeterminate hybridity to exercise their cultural authority of "essential" Indianness. In this context one is reminded of Homi Bhabha's postulation in *The Location of culture*:

Cultural difference must be understood as the free play of polarities and pluralities in the homogenous empty time of the national community....The analytic of cultural difference intervenes to transform the scenario of articulation ...The aim of cultural difference is to rearticulate the sum of knowledge from perspective of signifying position of the minority that resists totalisation ...producing other spaces of subaltern signification. (Bhabha, 1997)

While the first generation immigrants are caught in a cultural limbo due to the contamination with multicultural beliefs and over-valorization of home culture, the second generation as

American Born Confused Desis (ABCDs) is emotionally dislocated from their main stream culture.

## II. CONTRA ACCULTURATION IN THE NAMESAKE

Ashima is a first generation immigrant whose contra acculturation is revealed through the many ‘ethnic’ cultural practices, followed by her to distance herself from American mainstream culture. She wears silk sari, vermillion on her forehead, flower garland in her hair, wears sankhas and covers her hair with sari’s anchal in front of older Bengali acquaints in the US. She is dissatisfied when Gogol gets involved with two white women, Ruth and Maxine, and is upset when her teenage daughter Sonali wants an Americanized look by colouring her hair or additional ear piercings. Both her children prefer Christmas more to the Durga Puja. She disapproves of her children’s Americanized ways.

The first generation expatriates manifest their spirit of nationalism by practicing their own culture in foreign land. The Ganguli family and the other Bengali families living around Cambridge and Boston in the US, make a Bengali community. During Gogol’s and Sonali’s rice ceremony, the mourner’s ceremony of death of Ashoke and Gogol-Moushami’s wedding ceremony and in other social gatherings, there is revival of ancestral cultures, practices and beliefs. The study of the diaspora reveals that the elements of nostalgia and memory across time and space propel the expatriates to invent the image of the ‘homeland’, which is fragmentary, fissured and is irretrievably lost. Ashima reads the *Desh magazine* and other Bengali books and considers them as the only means to connect with her native land. Ashoke subscribes to newspapers like The Indian Abroad , The Sangbad Bichitra that the Bengali diaspora in the US read.

The use of ethnic cuisine comes as a mode of resistance to the mainstream foreign culture as the ethnic minority culture. In the opening scene, Ashima during her pregnancy craves for the rice krispies and planter’s peanuts and chopped red onion in a bowl. Food thus facilitates the movement between home and the world and the past and the present in the immigrated circumstances.

Ashima’s husband Ashoke chooses Gogol, the surname of Nikolai Vasilievich Gogol, the famous Russian short story writer, novelist and playwright, and his favourite author for his son. He preferred the author’s surname for his son’s name as a tribute to the writer. Gogol suffers under the burden of his father’s gratitude to the dead author. At some point, he is seen to be suffering under, to borrow from Harold Bloom, the “anxiety of influence” to differentiate himself from his “namesake”. In a strikingly similar way, Edward Said has spoken about his being caught between two names or

identities- names which in literal presence and cultural connotations are far removed from each other, “Thus it took me about fifty years to become accustomed to, or, more exactly, to feel less uncomfortable with “Edward”, a foolishly English name yoked forcibly to the unmistakably Arabic family name Said” (Said, 1999).

Finally, Gogol changes his name to Nikhil through a legal process and conveys it to all concerned. The change of his name seems to alter Gogol’s personality because after this his confidence grows and he seems to mingle with the land of his birth. He does not feel as an outsider. He loses his self-conscious attitude. Gogol makes many attempts at assimilating into American culture. At Yale, he goes to drink and loses his virginity. In this malady of naming, Lahiri projects the second generation Indians like Gogol who with their American accent behave like the mimics of Central Americans. “Gogol is constituted as an apt epitome of an American Indian hybrid who vacillates between his Indian identity and American nationality” (Chhabra, 2005). When he returns Boston, he discovers that “Nikhil evaporates and Gogol claims him again” (Lahiri, 2004). He understands his parents concern that no parents ever call their child by his Good name. Good name has no place within a family.

When Gogol attains his twentieth year, Ashoke lets out the secret to him. Ashoke’s emotional state is so touching that Gogol psychologically goes through that traumatic event and feels the pain of his father. This psychic experience of Gogol reveals to him a new significance of his pet name. It is bound up with a catastrophe his father has been haunted by for years.

The novel moves on from traces of contra- acculturation to a complete contra-acculturation through three major happenings in Gogol’s life. The first is the Maxine episode. Gogol hurts his parent’s sentiments when he indulges in lady- hunting especially Ruth and Maxine knowing little about marriage and love in American society. But his ‘uncelebrated’ and disillusioning love affair with Maxine, slowly but surely, draws him towards Indian ethos and values in marriage. When Gogol had brought Maxine to the house, Ashima had been startled that Maxine had addressed her as Ashima, and her husband as Ashoke. However, and not unexpectedly, Gogol’s affair with this Maxine ends abruptly when:

Maxine is open about her past, showing him photographs of her ex-boyfriends in the pages of a marble-papered album, speaking of those relationships without embarrassment or regret. She has the gift of accepting her life; as he comes to know her, he realizes that she never wished she were anyone other than herself, raised in any other place, in any other way. (Lahiri, 2004)

Gogol’s second confrontation with the hard truths of life comes after his father’s death at their Boston apartment. All through his life he was busy in a mind blogging business of

selecting an elegant name for his mental and emotional peace and tranquility, rejecting his parent's cultural austerities. But now he empathizes with the penitential ceremonies of the Hindu rituals. The priest's chanting of Sanskrit verses for the purification of Ashoke's soul reminds him of man's quest for salvation in this immigrant home:

On the anniversary of his father's death, and on his father's birthday, a day they never celebrated when his father was alive, they stand together in front of the photograph and drape a garland of rose petals around the frame and anoint his father's forehead with sandalwood paste through the glass. It is the photograph more than anything that draws Gogol back to the house again and again, and one day, stepping out of the bathroom on his way to bed and glancing at his father's smiling face, he realizes that this is the closest thing his father has to a grave. (Lahiri, 2004)

Gogol's metamorphosis is triggered by the death of Ashoke. Earlier he was living an American life; now he thinks as an Indian and understands the values of his family. When Maxine asks him "to get away from all this", he replies "I don't want to get away" (Lahiri, 2004). No doubt in taking such a step, Gogol experiences the pain of losing his love. The staggering experience of failure in relationships lights up the true significance of Dostoyevsky's statement on Gogol. "We all come out of Gogol's overcoat" (Lahiri, 2004). Life is decidedly undecided and rotates on the axis called suffering.

The third episode that transforms Gogol psychologically is the failure of his marriage with Moushumi. Her pre-and-post marital relationship with Dimitri Desjardins devastates their married life. He is strangely panicked when she confesses that she had harboured a lengthy infatuation for Dimitri during her journey by bus to Washington D.C.

The pull of contra- acculturation in Gogol becomes firm and steady; it brooks little hybridization and less assimilation. Despite the thirty years of living abroad the mother-son duo lose all fervor to live in America, mainly after Ashoke's death, Gogol's divorce and Sonia's marriage with Ben. Ashima plans to go back to Calcutta to live with her relatives. It is her way to optimize the emotional peace for the rest of her life and to find psychotherapeutic healing.

The novel begins with the departure of Ashima from Calcutta and ends with her anticipated arrival in Calcutta. In this sense, the novel seems to be an epic about the going away from home and also about 'homecoming'. At the centre of this departure and arrival is the life of Ashima divided between 'home' and 'away from home'. Ashima's trauma of living two lives of vastly different kinds, Indian and American, draws attention to the true meaning of her name, that is, borderlessness or homelessness despite having a home. Probably, a man's life can never be put within a border, but to

live a life it is imperative that one has a particular place to call it a home. It is this home which is central to the existence of Ashima. As long as she is at Pamberton Road, she considers Calcutta as her home, but when it is time to sell her house at Pamberton Road, she feels a mysterious pain within her and is hurt to think:

This will be the last party Ashima will host at Pamberton Road. The first since her husband's funeral. The house in which she has lived for the past twenty seven years, which she has occupied longer than any other in her life, has been recently sold... They will knock down the wall between the living and dining rooms, put an island in the kitchen, track lights overhead . . . listening to their plans, Ashima had felt a moments panic, a protective instinct, wanting to retract her offer, wanting the house to remain as it's always been, as her husband had last seen it. (Lahiri, 2004)

The house that she has decorated for such a long period will now change and its past will be lost forever. She missed her life in India for thirty three years and now she will miss the country in which she had loved her husband. She decides to move away desperately after the last celebration of Christmas together with her children.

The sense of this lost torments Ashima, and its memory always stays as a kind of trauma for her. It seems that Ashima is living a life of memory; the memory of Calcutta when she is in the States, and the memory of the States when she is in Calcutta. In this sense, she is a citizen of third space: a trishanku existence, neither of Calcutta nor of America. This trishanku existence is at the centre of diasporic trauma, and Ashima is a true representative of such an existence.

Gogol discovers that in his family – one is dead, another widow and himself a divorcee and his choice to lead his life in America, a false step which he had once much eulogized. He reimagines the locus of his Indian identity:

Gogol knows now that his parents had lived their lives in America in spite of what was missing, with a stamina he fears he does not possess himself. He had spent years maintaining distance from his origins; his parents, in bridging that distance as best as they could. And yet, for all his aloofness towards his family in the past, his years at college and then in New York, he has always hovered close to this quiet, ordinary town (Calcutta) that had remained, for his mother and father, stubbornly exotic. (Lahiri, 2004)

### III. CONCLUSION

Lahiri's *The Namesake* projects Ashima and Gogol as cultural survivors in America's multicultural milieu. They demonstrate the lives of hybridity, inbetweenness and liminality. It is difficult for them to maintain cultural insularity and like

millions of immigrant Indians; they essentialise their life in the available culture. But finally it is their contra-acculturation and rooting for India that allows them peace and consolation in moments of Catharsis. To the extent that contra acculturation has increasingly become a major trend of the postcolonial societies, Lahiri's Gogol is every Indian immigrant in America and Europe who suffers from alienation, impatience and isolation, and searches for a spiritual consolation in contra-acculturation. Amitav Kumar rightly observes, "The east-west divide is fundamental to Lahiri's characters but the truth is people everywhere today inhabit mixed orders of reality" (Kumar, 2003) in which no culture is sacrosanct and every culture exists with its survival strategies.

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