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Jhumpa Lahiri's The Namesake in the light of Stuart Hall's essay on "Cultural Identity and Diaspora."

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Transnational migration, the movement of human populations between states, is growing and has been changing in nature since the Second World War (Soguk, 1999, p. 207; Doty, 2003, p. 3). Until the 1960s, 80 per cent of immigrants to the United States (US), Canada and Australia originated from other industrialised countries, but by the end of the 1980s, 82 per cent of migrants were from "developing" countries (Doty, 2003, p. 3). This shift is mirrored in the migration patterns to other areas of the global North, such as the European Union (EU) (Ibid, p. 3). With a significant number people of migrating from former colonies to former colonial metropoles, there is a sense of symmetry with previous movements of people in the opposite direction during the colonial period (Persaud, 2002, p. 56).

The Indian English fiction has not only opened and enriched the countries reservoir of knowledge and new ideas but also played an important role in its progress, prosperity and an intellectual mind set of the people.

Among these novelists Jhumpa Lahiri and Kiran Desai are the writers who have achieved fame and glory globally. Jhumpa Lahiri Pulitzer prize winner of 2000 is regarded as the original and innovative writer of the diasporic dilemma and dreams. Similarly, Kiran Desai a Booker prize winner of 2006 possesses a unique power of creativity, showing the tales and tragedies of individuals and families of different cultures and religions placed either in the backdrop of rural India or in the tempting and promising cities of America. The postmodern fragmentation is revealed through their protagonists wavering attitudes toward Englishness, and self imposed departures from their homeland and comparisons between mother country. Each of the Jhumpa Lahiri and Kiran Desai's works expand rather than limits the readers engagement with the text. In their works, both reader and character exit the world they know and move towards a mutual goal, the reader engaging with a narrative plot while the character crosses a geographical one. So it becomes crucial to analyse the representation of orient and occident in their works.

Therefore, with the increasing critical attention that post-colonial and peripheral writers demand globally, a study of these two South Asian women novelists becomes at once compelling as well as contemporaneous . Current theoretical focus remain on such issues as multiculturalism, alienation, hybridity, displacement, cross-culturalism, globalization, economic in equability, fundamentalism and terrorist violence and how a synthesis of immigrant woes and wedlock's, loss and longing, alienation and belonging, homelessness and motherland, real and imaginary, social and psychological, sense and sensibilities, local and global and utopian tenor of diaspora and new era and season of discovery of India and abroad is carried out through their non linear narration and hybrid language to give voice to the voiceless polygon of social and psychological forces rooting and de-rooting, assimilating and alienating the whole community of diasporas.

Lahiri was born in London in 1967 to Indian parents, and she migrated with them to the United States two years later. Her narratives are a mixture of fiction and autobiography filtered through a dual lens, even though she confessed that while growing up in Rhode Island in the 1970s, she felt neither Indian nor American: "Like many immigrant offspring I felt intense pressure to be two things, loyal to the old world and fluent in the new, approved of on either side of the hyphen. Looking back, I see that this was generally the case. But my perception as a young girl was that I fell short at both ends, shuttling between two dimensions that had nothing to do with one another" ("My Two Lives" 2006). The hyphen both separates and joins, and from the interstices thus created Lahiri is able to investigate both sides. She differs from writers such as Bharati Mukherjee or Chitra Davakaruni, with whom she is often paralleled, in that she is a second-generation non-resident Indian whose interest in her roots is "most likely that of an intelligent and sensitive tourist" (Sanjukta Dasgupta 84). While the former praise American freedom and demonize traditional Indian cultural norms, Lahiri is able to avoid both these pitfalls and to produce a balanced representation of the two cultures.

This paper is an attempt to read Jhumpa Lahiri's The Namesake in the light of Stuart Hall's essay on "Cultural Identity and Diaspora." Hall begins his essay saying that identity is not as transparent and unproblematic as we think it to be. Instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, we should think of it as a product, which is never complete, and is always in process, always constituted within, not outside, representation. Hall defines "cultural identity" to

be a matter of "becoming" as well as "being" (Hall, qtd in Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory, 1993: 394). Cultural identity belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something that already exists, transcending time, place, history, and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything that is historical, they undergo constant transformation (Hall, qtd in Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory, 1993: 394). The question of identity is always a difficult one, but especially so for those who are culturally displaced, as immigrants are, or those who grow up in two worlds simultaneously, as is the case for their children. Jhumpa Lahiri says, "for immigrants... the loneliness, the constant sense of alienation, the knowledge of and longing for a lost world, are more explicit and distressing than for the children. On the other hand, the problem for the children of immigrants — those with strong ties to their country of origin — is that they feel neither one thing nor the other" (Lahiri, qtd in "Jhumpa Lahiri on her debut novel. An interview with the author"). This paper aims to show how the discovery of one's identity is an intricate process, one that is always necessarily complex. When an individual straddles two cultures, as does Gogol Ganguli, the protagonist of The Namesake, the task becomes even more complex and problematic, being grounded in issues of memory, tradition, and family expectations.

The issues of names and identity are presented at the beginning of The Namesake. As Ashima's (Gogol's mother) water breaks, she calls out to Ashoke, her husband. However, she does not use his name because this would not be proper. According to Ashima, calling one's husband by his name is "not the type of thing Bengali wives do. a husband's name is something intimate and therefore unspoken, cleverly patched over" (Lahiri, 2). From this statement we are shown how important privacy is to Bengali families. Bengali children are given two names: one is "daknam", that is, pet name, used only by family and close friends, and the other is "bhalonam" that is used by the rest of the society. At birth, Gogol is given a pet name as his official name because his official name, sent in a letter from his great grandmother in India, gets lost in the mail. Upon entering kindergarten, Gogol is told by his family that he is to be called Nikhil, his "bhalonam", by teachers and the other children at school. Gogol rejects his proper name and wants to be called Gogol by society as well as his family. This decision made on the first day of kindergarten school causes him years of distress as it was also his first attempt to reject a dual identity.

The Namesake records the plight of Gogol's desperate attempt to change his identity by renaming himself from Gogol to Nikhil and thus helps us to understand Stuart Hall's definition of diaspora identities as "those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference" (Hall, qtd in Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory, 1993: 402). As Gogol grows older, his name becomes the troubled border between what he is and what he wants to be. Thus, before he leaves for Yale, Gogol rejects his identity and decides to reinvent himself by a legal deed as Nikhil, his parents' chosen "bhalonam" for him. Gogol's act of renaming himself from Gogol to Nikhil explains his urge to assume an American persona in order to blend into mainstream American society. It is as Nikhil that he embarks on his adult life, as Nikhil that he loses his virginity at a party and as Nikhil that he begins to have relationship with white American women, keeping his private life secret from his parents:

by the following year his parents know vaguely about Ruth. Though he has been to the farmhouse in Maxine twice, meeting her father and her stepmother, Sonia, who secretly has a boyfriend these days, is the only person in his family to have met Ruth.. .His parents have expressed no curiosity about his girlfriend. His relationship with her is one accomplishment in his life about which they are not in the least bit proud or pleased (Lahiri, 116).

Thus as Nikhil, he becomes a part of the mainstream, and not at all a hyphenated American. On the surface, he lives a life that is not that different from those of his fellow American students, yet the name Gogol still has a hold over him. He dreads his visit home and his return to a life where he is known as Gogol. Gogol is not just a name to him; it signifies all his discomfort to fit into two different cultures as he grew up. Being away from home at college makes it easy for Gogol to live as Nikhil in American society. He does so happily for many years, detaching himself from his roots and his family as much as possible.

Chanchala K. Naik quotes Kellner as saying that "one can choose and make, and then remake one's identity as fashion and life possibilities change and expand" (qtd. in Chanchala K. Naik, " The Identity and The Social Self"). But by choosing and remaking one's identity as Gogol did, one is always anxious about the recognition and validation of that identity by others. After remaking himself as Nikhil, Gogol relishes the moments when he encounters people who have

never known him as Gogol. The irony, of course, is that the reader, as well as the novelist herself, have invested too much in the significance of his name and can seldom think of him as anyone but Gogol. In other words, the readers as well as the novelist fail to recognize him as Nikhil. Moreover, he reasons that by

changing his name from Gogol to Nikhil, he can shed some cumbersome ties to the past. What Gogol does not realize is that his pet name, Gogol, is more than simply the product of his father's obsession with the Russian author Nikolai Gogol. He is named Gogol, rather, in memory of a train accident in which his father nearly lost his life. Throughout most of his childhood and early adult years Gogol experiences little intimacy with his father and his traditional ways, and perceives his father's name choice to be the greatest burden he must bear. When Gogol's father finally explains the significance of his name to Gogol, it becomes a way of bridging the gap between father and son, as well as his lack of identification with his Bengali heritage:

Gogol listens, stunned, his eyes fixed on his father's profile. Though there are only inches between them, for an instant his father is a stranger, a man who has kept a secret, has survived a tragedy, a man whose past he does not full know. A man who is vulnerable, who has suffered in an inconceivable way. He imagines his father, in his twenties as Gogol is now, sitting on a train.and then nearly killed. He struggles to picture the West Bengal countryside he has seen on only a few occasions, his father's mangled body, among hundreds of dead ones, being carried on a stretcher, past a twisted length of maroon compartments. Against instinct he tries to imagine life without his father, a world in which his father does not exist (Lahiri, 123).

Gogol knows nothing of his namesake except what he learns in high school: the Russian writer was a famously "'eccentric genius', who was reputed to be a hypochondriac and a deeply paranoid, frustrated man" (Lahiri, 91). It's hardly the image an adolescent boy would warm to. Gogol hates that "his name is both absurd and obscure, that it has nothing to do with who he is, that it is neither Indian nor American but of all things Russian" (Lahiri, 76). Learning about the train accident that set Ashoke on the road to America does not change Gogol's feelings about his name; instead, the name shoulders too much of the burden of the family hopes and wishes, and it adds to the exasperating process of assimilation.

Growing up as an outsider is difficult. And when your name is unlike everyone else's, it can be a greater burden. At fourteen, Gogol wants only to escape his name. "He's come to hate questions pertaining to his name, hates having constantly to explain. He hates having to wear a nametag on his sweater at Model United Nation Day at school. He even hates signing his name at the bottom of his drawings in art class" (Lahiri, 76). To him, the name is a burden, a disfigurement, an ugly reminder of the many differences between him and his peers. As he grows up, Gogol embarks on a bitter love-hate relationship with his name; he loathes it, denies it, and tries to escape it. It seems that an identity crisis is imminent as Gogol's name becomes the source of greater anxiety: "At times his name, an entity shapeless and weightless, managed nevertheless to distress him physically like the scratchy tag of a shirt he has been forced permanently to wear" (Lahiri, 76). Gogol, who "cannot imagine saying 'Hi, it's Gogol' under potentially romantic circumstances" (Lahiri, 76), experiences his first taste of liberation when he introduces himself to a college girl as Nikhil. Jhumpa Lahiri seems to understand the huge cost that abandoning one's ethnic identity carry for immigrants who desire nothing more than to blend in. Her Bengali protagonist, acutely aware of his difference but unable to resolve his dual identities, comes to symbolize the anguished decisions all young immigrants must make as they carve out their paths towards becoming American. Gogol Ganguli becomes the archetype for every immigrant who has wrestled with issues of conflicted identity, cultural confusion and humbling marginality. Gogol remains a captive of his conflicted identity — is he Indian or American? — although there is the merest hint at the novel's end that he may choose one identity over the other. His trajectory suggests that, for the second generation Indian- American at least, refusing to choose one identity over the other, which might mean complete renunciation of either Indian-ness or American-ness, troubles one's negotiation of identity. Whereas Gogol's mother, Ashima, as a first generation Indian-American, is able to negotiate a hyphenated subjectivity because she has an original identity as a starting point, Gogol is 'always-already' in crisis due to his birth on 'foreign' soil.

Lahiri uses Gogol's name to, literally and figuratively, represent the ways in which his cultural heritage severs him from the social sphere, forcing a gap between him and his American friends, and serving as a constant reminder of the depth of this disparity. He already knows that his Indian heritage sets him apart from his schoolmates, and that his inner turmoil is evident from a

young age. He tries desperately to distance himself from being Indian. He would rather not be forced to attend the weekly gatherings of Bengalis, and would rather not visit his relatives in India. He would rather attend art classes than Bengali lessons and he would rather listen to Beatles than his father's classical Indian music. Being the child of immigrants Gogol begins in a kind of nowhere place. He is firmly of America, but is not quite an American, in part because he is not recognized as such by others. For much of his life, Gogol has difficulty understanding where he is from or who he is. He is often unhappy because it is difficult for him to reconcile the different

cultures, countries, and people that define him. For Gogol, the universal difficulties of adolescence are compounded because he is the son of first generation immigrants. As he enters his teenage years, he begins to resent his Bengali heritage. He begins to address his parents in English, while they speak to him in Bengali. Gogol wants to adapt to American values and life concepts, which are firmly resisted at home. He cannot understand why his parents disapprove of his romantic relationships with American girls; he cannot understand why his parents do not accept his American girlfriends as their parents accept him; he dislikes his parents when he compares them with the parents of his American girlfriends. When Gogol is involved with Ruth, his parents refuse to give him money to fly to England where she has gone for a semester. Afterwards, when he gets involved with Maxine, he sees Maxine's parents, Gerald and Lydia, as stark contrast to his parents. Gogol distances himself from his parents and starts living in New York, away from his parents. He avoids going home on weekends, excusing himself on the false pretext of work and spends his time with Maxine and her parents with whom he feels "none of the exasperation he feels with his own parents. No sense of obligation" (Lahiri, 138). He thinks of the terms of his parents' arranged marriage as "something at once unthinkable and remarkable." When he goes on a vacation with Maxine and her parents "he feels no nostalgia for the vacation he's spent with his parents." Gogol's desire to spend more and more time with Maxine and her family shows his desperate attempt to mimic and assimilate:

He learns to love the food she and her parents eat, the polenta and risotto, the bouillabaisse and osso buco, the meat baked in parchment paper. He comes to expect the weight of their flatware in his hands, and to keep the cloth napkin, still partially folded, on his lap. He learns that one

does not grate Parmesan cheese over pasta dishes containing seafood. .He learns to anticipate, every evening, the sound of a cork emerging from a fresh bottle of wine (Lahiri, 137).

Gogol's act of appreciating and eating meals with the Maxine's family serve as an act of assimilation. When Gogol makes American culture a part of himself, for example, by making its cuisine his own, he can no longer identify himself as separate from it. As Gogol partakes of these high-class, expensive meals, they become part of him and he becomes part of them. He is both assimilating and assimilated. Through his mimicry1, the unfamiliar becomes familiar as he tries to adapt to their culinary tastes and practices as his own. His mimicry of these habits gains him a place in the privileged sphere. However, his assimilation is not a very comfortable act for Gogol. As Homi K. Bhabha has put it, mimicry "emerges as the representation of a difference that is itself a disavowal" (Bhabha, qtd. in The

Location of Culture, 1994: 86.). This disavowal via mimicry is illustrated when Lahiri writes that, "(Gogol) is conscious of the fact that his immersion in Maxine's family is a betrayal of his own" (Lahiri, 141). Gogol's moving away from his parents and seeking a life separate from theirs might be interpreted as an exercise in cultural displacement: he did not want to go home on weekends, or to go with them to pujos and Bengali parties, or to remain unquestionably in their world. Gogol struggles with the pain of being a second generation Indian American. He also has to cope with his unusual name and his parents' inability to break away from their origins. Like most Americans, he leaves home for university because he finds his parents and their life in Cambridge suffocating. He has affairs without their knowledge. He lives a life of isolation and alienation because he does not share his parent's past and their connections with India. Jhumpa Lahiri has thus brought out the sense of displacement, rootlessness, alienation and non-belonging that often besiege members of diasporic communities in her exploration of the relationships between non-resident Indian characters.

The Namesake illustrates what Stuart Hall meant by diaspora experience when he said "diaspora experience is defined by . the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity, by a conception of 'identity' which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by hybridity" (Hall, qtd in Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory, 1993: 394). In the course of the first quarter of the book, the Gangulis go through the many rituals of the immigrant experience, and

retrace the steps most Indian families take in the process of becoming American. Ashima and Ashoke, products of an arranged marriage, and acutely conscious of being different from the largely Ivy-League educated elite academics they live among, do not find it easy to shed their Indian identities in America. After the birth of their son, Ashima reflects that "being a foreigner ... is a sort of lifelong pregnancy, a constant burden, a continuous feeling out of sorts. It is an ongoing 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" (Lahiri, 49-50). Moving to a suburb with a decent school district, they graduate from the instamatic camera to a decent hi-tech one, to hosting yearly Christmas parties for their Indian friends. Transplanted from a land of centuries-old customs of kinship and pre-arranged marriages into a country of haphazard chance, reinvention, and opportunity, the Gangulis experience the freedom to reinvent themselves, and also the freedom to lose themselves in the process. Gogol's father sums up this dangerous freedom best when he gives Gogol permission to rename himself Nikhil: "In America anything is possible. Do as you wish" (Lahiri, 100).

Thus addressing the theme of immigration, collision of cultures, and the importance of names in The Namesake, Jhumpa Lahiri demonstrates how much of a struggle immigration can be. To pack your bags and head off to a foreign land seems unbearably difficult, even though we know immigrants have done it since time immemorial. The Namesake is a fictionalization of travails of people who leave their homeland and make their way to another country. The novel takes the readers deep into the Gangulis' immigrant experience: their puzzlement at and isolation from an alien culture, their loss of connection with families in India, where births and deaths occur apart from them; their seeking old ties in a circle of other Bengali immigrants, several of whom become substitute aunts and uncles to Gogol and his sister, Sonia. According to Dubey, "the immigrant experience is complicated as a sensitive immigrant finds himself or herself perpetually at a transit station fraught with memories of the original home which are struggling with the realities of the new world" (Dubey, qtd in "Jhumpa Lahiri. b.1967: Biography-Criticism"). This constant struggle is portrayed in The Namesake as first generation immigrants and their children struggle to find their places in society. As the Ganguli parents struggle to adapt to a culture different than the one they are used to, Gogol and Sonia, their children struggle,

trying simultaneously to respect their roots while adapting to American society. What these characters all go through in The Namesake is the difficulty of identifying with the new world, the old world, or both. First generation immigrants straddling two worlds, they strive to achieve a fine balance between the transplanted world of their parents and the native one that they seek to embrace as their own.

Jhumpa Lahiri, reflecting on her personal experiences and her keen observation of diasporic culture, brings legitimacy and poignance to the predicament of the Gangulis in this foreign land. This is indeed a work that is created by a woman who understands the complexities that arises from a cultural merger. Lahiri does an excellent job of juxtaposing the autonomous, assimilated American way of life in a manner that avoids suggesting the superiority of one over the other. The Namesake2 does not propose the importance of either fully embracing one's cultural heritage or completely assimilating into American culture; instead, it allows the reader to comprehend, if not completely, the full complexity of negotiating a life where one has a foot in American culture, and the other in the Bengali tradition.

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