

## The Depiction of the Cultural Negotiation between the First and The Second generations in *The Namesake* by Jhumpa Lahiri

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### ABSTRACT

*In the era of globalization, no culture has remained in the state of purity because of immigration movements across the borders of a nation. This paper addresses the cultural clash when East meets West and the conflict arises between immigrant's native culture and the dominating western culture. It also discusses how the clash between the two cultures of immigrants influences them and causes them the feeling of being torn between two worlds and then how they lead to cultural negotiation to cope with the cultural tensions and the dual loss. With this cultural blending, they begin to feel alienation, loneliness, homelessness, identity crisis and pains of exile. They face the cultural clash and identity dilemma that causes them psychological oppression. On the one hand, they gusto to stick to their own cultural heritage and values while on the other hand, they gradually imbibe the cultural ways of the host country, too. The present paper is an effort to understand the conflicts between the first and the second generations of Indian immigrants as narrated in *The Namesake* by Jhumpa Lahiri. She traces the conflict between the two generations that leads to the clash between the Eastern culture at home and the Western culture outside home.*

### INTRODUCTION

In the age of globalization and modern multicultural societies, the immigration movements have increased especially in the twenty first century. The world has become a small global village. The term Migration refers to a process of social change whereby an individual leaves the country of birth and moves to another country for permanent settlement (Ostby, 2013). People from

Eastern countries have left their homelands for the Western countries in search of betterment and other various reasons such as political, social and educational ones. Migration is a complex psychological process that influences on individual's identity and causes them various crises and dilemmas.

Immigrants can be either the first generation, as the representative of the

Eastern culture, who emigrate from different countries with different cultural backgrounds and arrive in the foreign countries to begin a long journey of suffering, challenges of adjustments and acculturation in the alien land. In the novel, they are presented by (Ashoke and Ashima), while the second generation, as representative of the Western culture, refers to their children (Gogol, Sonia and Moushumi) who are born, raised and educated in the new surrounding environment in the host country, suffering the feeling of neither/nor.

This paper focuses on the process of negotiation that immigrants produce to cope with the differences and contradictory aspects of life in the new land. The word “Negotiation” has originated from the Roman word “Negotiatori”, which means to carry business. “Negotiation is the method by which people settle differences. It is a process by which a compromise or agreement is reached while avoiding argument and dispute” (Hamza, 11). In this sense, Negotiation is a psychological dialogue in the mind of the immigrant to arrive at a compromise with the contradictory aspects and cultural differences through interact, give and take between the two cultures.

Negotiation of immigrants is based mainly on the differences of cultures. The idea of “Cultural Negotiation” used in the studies of

the psychology of migration describes the “give and take” of old and new ideas and practices using a “dual frame of reference” (Suarez-Orozco, 1997). This paper uses the anthropological concept of cultural negotiation to analyze the conflict between the parents’ culture and their children’s mainstream culture. It describes how their children negotiate cultural tension as the outcome of the differences between the heritage inside and outside home. They try to negotiate the contradictory aspects of original and host cultures (Simich et al, 11).

Jhumpa Lahiri is an American –Indian novelist. She is born on July 11, 1967 in London. She immigrates to the United States at the age of two. Lahiri is the daughter of a Bengali immigrant family; she suffers from cross-cultural dilemma and reflects this suffering through her fiction. She occupies a crucial position as a hyphenated author and experiences this kind of being in-between two worlds. As she explains in an interview that she oscillates between the desires of her parents and her need to adjust herself into the American society.

I wanted to please my parents and meet their Expectations, I also wanted to meet the expectations I placed on myself to fit into American society. It is a classic case of divided identity, but depending on the degree to which the immigrants in question are willing to assimilate, the conflict is more or less

pronounced. As a young child, I felt that the Indian part of me was unacknowledged and therefore somehow negated, by my American environment and vice-versa –I felt that I led two separate lives”.(Agarwal M, 40).

*The Namesake*(2003) is the story of an Indian immigrant couple (Ashoke and Ashima) Ganguli who leave their country India and come to create a new home and life of opportunities in the United States. In 1968, Ashima gives birth to a baby in Cambridge. Ashoke names him after Nikolai Gogol, his favorite Russian author. When Gogol begins his school, his parents give him an official name Nikhil but Gogol insists on using his name Gogol only. This leads him to feel a sort of identity crisis. Gogol grows up suffering the strangeness of his name so he officially changes it to Nikhil before going to college. Gogol follows the American culture, which is far away from the culture of his parents. His life changes after the death of his father. He returns to live with his mother in Boston and follows her suggestion to marry a Bengali-American girl, Moushumi. The marriage does not remain so happy, so they get divorce. Sonia marries an American man named Ben and lives in Boston. At the end of the novel, Ashima decides to divide her time half in America with her children and half in India with her extended family.

Lahiri depicts the visible cultural gap between the two generations through many differences and conflicts. The main conflicting issue is that the first generations consider themselves as Indians, while the second generations consider themselves to be Americans and America as their true home. The cultural clash makes Ashoke and Ashima feel shocked and their children feel frustrated and caught between their parent's Indian culture and their own the surrounding American culture.

For the immigrant generation, the return is always to India: Gogol's parents go back to their home again and again for funerals, vacations, and other family functions. America, for them, is not entirely a new adopted home, and India is never completely forsaken. For the children (namely Gogol, his sister, and his wife), it is not India to which they turn for comfort or to reinforce any nascent nationalist impulse, [...]. These children do not see India as their country of origin or as a putative homeland, and they can only define home as the place where their two cultures-merge the literal and metaphysical location is in their parent's house. (Friedman,114,115)

The first generations attempt to preserve their Indian culture by keeping their Indian language, dress, food and religious rituals alive at their home. They consider that the

new culture will threaten their old culture and identity positively. They also try to plant a sign of respect in their children for their native culture and homeland. They want them to be abreast with their traditions and values. They intend to raise them according to Bengali culture. When Gogol is six months old, they invite all Bengali friends to a party called Gogol's 'annaprason' (rice ceremony). In Bengali culture, it is a ceremony of feeding solid food for an infant such as rice. They give their children two names according to their culture. They force them to attend Indian gatherings, sit in Pujas, and celebrate their traditional festivals and rituals. For example, when Gogol is in the third grade, "they send him to Bengali language and cultural lessons every other Saturday. In Bengali class, Gogol is taught to read and write his ancestral alphabet and together with other children, he reads handouts written in English about the Bengali Renaissance and the revolutionary exploits of Subhas Chandra Bose"(66). Unfortunately, neither Gogol nor the other children show any interest or enjoyment of these lessons. They teach them to eat their food with their fingers, to mix up the rice with curry, to suck the marrow from lamb and to extract the bones from fish(55), but their children follow American cultural practices such as seating with forks and addressing their parents in English(75). Their children struggle to escape from their parent's cultural practices and ignore their

heritage because they do not feel the same kind of link and connection with their ethnic roots. They have some kind of estrangement with their parents and they tend to recognize themselves as citizens of the Western world.

The second generations want to enjoy the American dream and American values of freedom, privacy and independence that conflicted with their old culture. As it is obvious in the novel, the major difference between the Indian and the American culture is with regard to family relations. India is a family-oriented country while America is an individual-oriented country. Indians concern on family values, and respect relations while Americans are committed to themselves only and each individual makes his own decisions. Therefore, when Gogol adapts to American culture, he leaves his family and feels concerned with himself only. He wants to live an independent life, full of freedom and far away from his family's authority and advice. Gogol grows up experiencing the cultural gap with his parents.

The Second generations try a negotiation with their problems of identity. Identity crisis is the main problem that arises when the two different cultures meet together. Gogol always seeks the answer of the question "Who I am? Am I an Indian or an American?". At home, his parents impose on him the Indian traditions and values and outside home, he experiences American culture. He suffers from non-belongingness.

He feels that he does not get acceptance as an Indian in India or as an American in America. Gogol was born in America, therefore he considers himself to be an American, however, he realizes that he is not accepted by American society; the White majority doesn't welcome him in its society because of his ethnic differences. An American woman tells him, "But you're Indian". Lahiri herself experiences this kind of identity crisis which she describes in an interview, "I never know how to answer the question "Where are you from" [...] it bothered me growing up, the feeling that there was no single place to which I fully belong" (HMC).

Gogol negotiates his origin and identity when he goes on the school trip to the cemetery. There he finds no grave of his ancestors and then he knows that his relatives were only burned and not buried, "he himself will be burned not buried, that his body will occupy no plot of earth, that no stone in his country will bear his name beyond life" (69). He feels belonging to nowhere. Ashima wonders how the burial grounds and cemeteries consider some kind of art and important place of culture in America, while in her country India, those places are forbidden places, "only in America are children taken to cemeteries in the name of art. What's next, she demands to know, a trip to the morgue? in Calcutta the burning ghats are the most forbidden of

places, she tells Gogol and though she tries her best not to, though she was here, not there, both times it happened, she sees her parents' bodies, swallowed by flames", and remarks that "Death is not a pastime" [---], "not a place to make paintings" (70).

Ashoke and Ashimasee their children to be more American, they are "expertly conversing in a language that still at times confounds them in accents they are accustomed not to trust" (65). When Gogol and Sonia gradually grow up, their Indian culture begins to fade away. They lose Indian values and embrace American values, instead. Gogol dates with American girls, while his parents disapprove his behavior. Gogol and his sister become so Americanized that they speak American English fluently, while they cannot read or write Bengali in modest proficiency.

The first generation knows that there is no way but to accept their children's assimilation so, they try to balance life and differences between them. They attempt to cope with their Americanization. The parents accept more and more American values and culture. It was not easy for them, but just for the sake of their children, they do so. They participate in American ceremonies and festivals "for the sake of Gogol and Sonia. They celebrate [---] the birth of Christ, an event the children look forward to far more than worship of Durga and Saraswati "(64). At Thanksgiving, "they

learn to roast Turkeys, albeit rubbed with garlic and cumin and cayenne” (64). In December, they “nail a wreath on their door—to wrap woolen scarves around snow men”. They also learn “to color boiled eggs violent and pink at Easter and hid them around the house” (64). For the sake of their children, they also allow them to buy American food and Hems that they only consume, not their parents such as “individually wrapped slices of cheese, mayonnaise, tuna, fish, hot dogs”(65).Although, they do not like this food and Ashima is a vegetarian but she makes sandwiches with bologna or roast beef for her children. She also makes for Gogol “An American dinner once a week as a treat, shaken Bake chicken or Hamburger Helper prepared with ground lamb” (65).In Gogol’s fourteenth birthday, his parents make two celebrations, one for Gogol and his American friends and classmates. This one is a typical American party “with pizzas that his father picked up on his way home from work, a basket ball game watched together on television, some ping –pong in the den” (72). The other one is a Bengali party. His mother cooks Bengali food as “lamb curry with lots of potatoes luchies, thick channa dal with swollen brown raisins pineapple chutney, sandeshes molded out of saffron tinted ricotta cheese”. (72)

The first generations are worried of their children’s American culturization who prefer

American food such as burger, tuna, pizza, sandwiches, and hotdogs, they prefer American festivals such as Thanks-giving, Easter and Christmas. They prefer American clothes than their parents’ traditional ones. “Gogol, whose life resembles that of other American children of a certain class-he eats hamburgers instead of traditional Indian foods, grows up to attend Yale, and acquires multiple girlfriends before marriage—spends most of his life traveling away from his Cambridge home,” (Friedman ,115). Gogol makes relationships with many American girls such as Ruth, Kim and Maxine. His mother does not confess of her son’s dating to her Bengali friends who gossip about it. Dating has no root in Indian culture and then for Ashoke and Ashima, dating has no meaning, they prefer to push him to study harder than experiencing any relations. Their parents fail to keep them attached to their tradition and culture because Gogol and Sonia become older and are more under the influence of their peers and colleagues in college and Americans society. Lahiri mentions this in one of her interviews that “things like dating, living on one’s own, having close friendships with Americans, listening to American music and eating American food—all of this was a mystery to them(her parents).(HMC)

The second generations have no memories, no nostalgia, no ties and no thrill of being in India. During their visit to India, they

negotiate the differences between the two-countries. They feel that they do not belong to Indian environment and are eager to come back to America. The children do not like the frequent visits to India because they feel uncomfortable there. They miss American school, friends and their comfort life; from their perspective, America is their country of origin. They travel to a country that they consider foreign and to relatives and extended family that they feel no connection to them at all. They do not have any taste for their food and long meals. Gogol and Sonia feel out of place and as outsiders in India. They could not appreciate the Indian climate. They are always to be “under a mosquito net, bathing by pouring tin cups of water over their heads” (82). They lose their privacy. The emotional affections of their relatives disrupt them. The children wonder how their parents are foreigners in non-Bengali regions of India during a visit to Agra in Delhi to see the TajMahal. Gogol and Sonia get terribly ill in India. According to Friedman “children of immigrants don’t always feel closely tied to their country of origin but rather, they feel American. They move fluidly between the private sphere of their Indian home life and the public sphere of their American experience. Their behavior is a kin to that of tourists in their home countries tourism”(115). Gogol feels exiled in India. On the contrary, Ashoke and Ashima get a temporary relief when they visit their homeland for eight months. They

smile all the time, feel confident with the people of their origin to such an extent that their children have never seen their parents “slip into bolder, less complicated versions of themselves, their voices louder, their smiles wider, revealing a confidence Gogol and Sonia never see on Pemberton Road” (81-82). After their visit to India, Ashoke and Ashima feel physical and emotional dislocation and exile again with much suffering of pain and loss, but their children feel pleased to return to their place of origin. In America, they feel at home again. This shows the huge basic difference of affiliation between the two generations. In her interview, Lahiri shows the difference of experience between the two as,

“I think that for immigrants, the challenges of exile, the loneliness, the constant sense of alienation, the knowledge of and longing for a lost world are more explicit and distressing than for their 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”. (HMC)

In America, when children become sixteen, the control of their parent ends and they enjoy their individual liberty, the parents never interfere in their children’s personal life. On the contrary, in India, the control of the parents over their children continues till

the end of their life and this is exemplified by Ashima who wants to control the life of her children. She wants Gogol and Sonia to marry Indians instead of Americans. Ashima disappointed when her children behave like Americans, she dissatisfied when Gogol involved in affairs with white women like Ruth and Maxine and when her teenage daughter wants an Americanized look by coloring her hair or getting additional ear piercings. Lahiri describes the quarrels between parents and their children as the generational clash. For example, it occurs when Ashima has problems with her daughter's American behavior and attitude. "Ashima lives in fear that Sonia will color a streak of it blond, as Sonia has threatened on more than one occasion to do, and that she will have additional holes pierced in her earlobes at the mall. They argue violently about such things, Ashima crying, Sonia slamming doors" (107) .

Gogol negotiates the differences between his parents' Indian culture and Maxine's American culture. In his attempt to distance himself physically and psychologically from his parents' culture and life, he lives in his American girlfriend's house. He easily adapts himself into Maxine's American world. He finds living with them so easy, comfortable and cozy "from the very beginning, he feels effortlessly incorporated into their lives" (136). He negotiates the different food style as Maxine's mother

serves so few dishes to a guest such as "a thin piece of steak,...the green beans boiled,...roasted red potatoes...and afterward a salad," unlike his mother whose table "would have been lined with a row of serving bowls" and she has kept her eyes trained on a guest, insisting he has second plate and then third, but Lydia pays no attention on his plate. They discuss their important talks at mealtimes that Gogol is not accustomed to. He participates in their dinner parties with New York editors and gallery owners. He drinks their wine and listens to their music. He gets astonished at the kind of relationship between Maxine and her parents as her friends, the feeling that is missing with his parents. Gogol admires and fascinates their American life. In living with American family, "he feels free of expectation, of responsibility, in willing exile from his own life" (142)

The author herself talked about the experience of generation gap and clashes between her and her parents at home and her American environment outside home,

I fell short at both ends, shuttling between two dimensions that had nothing to do with one another. At home, I followed the customs of my parents, speaking Bengali and eating rice and dal with my fingers. These ordinary facts seemed part of a secret, utterly alien way of life, and I took pains to hide them from my American friends. For my parents, home was not our house

in Rhode Island but Calcutta, where they were raised. I was aware that the things they lived for –the Nazrul songs they listened to on the reel-to-real, the family they missed ,the clothes my mother wore that were not available in any store in any mall...were at once as precious and as worthless as an outmoded currency. I also entered a world my parents had little knowledge or control of: school, books, music, television, things that seeped in and became fundamental aspect of who I am”. (My Two Lives, 2013)

For Gogol, the sudden death of his father makes him reconnect himself with his loss of origin and Bengali tradition. He returns to his parents’ house and to his Indian culture and he decides to accept his hyphenated identity and be proud of it. He insists to get together the two worlds. Gogol divides his time “between New York (his adopted home) and Cambridge, his parental home, (Friedman, 123) .

At the end of the novel, Lahiri makes her reconciliation to fill the gap between the two generations. “The first generations divide their time between the two countries as Ashima decides to return to India, living part of the year there and part of the year in America”(Friedman, 123)“both Indian and American cultures bleed into one another when they encounter each other on American soil and Indian Immigrants are

open to Americanization and cosmopolitanism” (Frediman,118).

### **Conclusion**

Jhumpa Lahiri portrays many differences and clashes between the Eastern and Western cultures in her novel, by depicting the conflicting relationship between the immigrant parents and their children in the host land. The first generations do not find interest in the new environment of America and therefore, they are not fascinated to know and follow its culture. They struggle to survive by maintaining their old traditions and values and attempting to impose them on their children who consider themselves completely American and prefer to adapt to American culture as their way of living. In so doing, they know that they betray their parents and their old culture. They realize that they are unable to accept either their parental identities or the host’s social identity. They suffer dual alienation, dual loss, the feeling of being in-between, the feeling of neither/ nor, cultural disorientation and identity crisis. They strive to distance themselves physically and psychologically from their parents to negotiate the differences between the two worlds and choose the best for themselves. Indeed, both of them are not able to integrate fully with the culture and values of the host country. Through her protagonist Gogol, Lahiri conveys her message that the acceptance of hybrid identity is the possible

reconciliation between the two generations and meshes the two Eastern and Western culture together.

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