



Culture Shock in Jhumpa Lahiri's "The Namesake"

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"The Greatest journeys are the ones that bring you home"
- Jhumpa Lahiri, *The Namesake*

The novel chosen for the study, *The Namesake*, reflects the dilemmas that Indians face when confronted with a foreign culture. In this light the novel addresses the issues of culture shock, displacement, rootlessness, sense of unsettling and inbetweenness, conflict in the notion of 'home', nostalgia and identity crisis of the immigrants. Jhumpa Lahiri highlights the experiences of Indian immigrants on a new, foreign land. The characters carry the sense of being marginalized, experiencing displacement and constantly searching for new identity. The novel mirrors the cross-cultural, transcultural experiences of the characters who have very strong Indian roots. And in order to escape such estrangement the characters try to resolve the conflict by undertaking journey, both physical and psychological to relate to their culture, refashion their identities and reconcile with their true self.

Jhumpa locates her characters in a settled country to reflect the changes they undergo, the cross cultural interactions, the discrimination they face, the difficulty in settling in the new land,

in this case America. The novel analyses the mindset of the first generation and second generation immigrants and the conflicts that arise out of these. While the themes of nostalgia, culture shock and unsettling are addressed through the characters Ashima and Ashoke, the themes of identity crisis and culture stereotyping are addressed through the experiences of Gogol and Moushumi.

Ashoke and Ashima are the first generation immigrants who undertake a long journey to America in search of opportunities and in the beginning they find it difficult to settle there. Where as their children, the second generation, accept the land in which they are born as their homeland. Though India is at the heart of the thoughts of the second generation, it is consciously pushed to the back of the mind by the second generation that identifies itself more with the Western community. This idea is highlighted in the novel - the naive belief in their American identity, which they accept in the beginning but gradually arrive at a juncture where they are forced to question such definite notions, rendering them as 'in-betweens'. They



are unhappy about the way their parents live. It leads to several misunderstandings between both generations. Gogol's life mirrors these paradoxes and renders him a 'hybrid', unlike his parents who have a clear sense of understanding of their relationship with their home and America. While the parents struggle to cope with the cultural clash, isolation and nostalgia, the children struggle with the question of identity. It is a question of allegiance that results in a conflicting life. The parents are suspicious of American culture and strive to maintain ties with India, and preserving Indian traditions in America means a lot to them as they will be and be treated as foreigners. On the other hand, the second generation is torn between wanting to please their parents, meet their expectations and also desiring to meet the expectations of their American peers, and fit into American society. It results in divided identity. This is quite dramatically portrayed through the characters Ashima – representing the first generation; Gogol – representing the second generation.

The story begins on a land foreign to the lady in question 'Ashima', who is expecting her first child. This colossal occasion of bringing a baby into the 'strange' world makes Ashima apprehensive and sad as she contemplates on her loneliness in America. As she is in the hospital, admitted for labour, she finds herself

placed amidst a group of women who are strangers to her, also in a sense that they are Americans. And here her first impression of the Americans is voiced: : *"...Americans, in spite of their public declarations of affection, in spite of their miniskirts and bikinis, in spite of their hand-holding on the street ... prefer their privacy."* (Lahiri 3) And she becomes 'Jell-O and ice cream lady' to the American nurses as she does not stick to the dietary regime of that place. She feels as a stranger among these women and is reminded by the baby in her womb that she is not alone in this regard. This statement seems quite fascinating as the baby grows up as an American, follows its culture, social system, and yet is forced to contemplate on his roots as an Indian. Little does Ashima expect her children to face such severe sense of unsettling in future as she lays in the hospital regretting the absence of her family on this special moment. It is the 'American seconds' that tick as she endures the labor pain, but she calculates the Indian time on her hands, visualizing her home in Calcutta and assuming the events that would be unfolding at that moment as she lays in a hospital, thousands of miles away from 'home'.

There is a deliberate, constant comparison of the India ways with that of the American. For instance, in the beginning of the novel, Ashima compares the atmosphere that would persist when a child is brought into this world.



Ashima's idea of the hospital is worded thus: " *It's strange that her child will be born in a place most people enter either to suffer or to die. There is nothing to comfort her in the off-white tiles of the floor, the off-white panels of the ceiling, the white sheets tucked tightly into the bed. In India, she thinks to herself, women go home to their parents to give birth, away from husbands, in laws and household cares retreating briefly to childhood when the baby arrives.*" (Lahiri 4) This sense of nostalgia stays with her throughout. This feeling is so deep that she retains the Indian magazine 'Desh' for a very long time and the letters printed in Bengali become her source of comfort. Her way of sustenance is by holding on to her roots. She insists on wearing the traditional outfit she is accustomed to, prepares Indian food, and attempts to raise her children with Indian beliefs and with a sense of community as, she comes to recognize other Bengalis who also are hungry for homeland.

In such a state of affairs Ashima's pregnancy makes it even worse as she dreads the "*consequence: motherhood in a foreign land*" (Lahiri 6) She cannot bring herself to think of raising her children far from 'home' and "*in a country where she is related to no one, where she knows so little, where life seems so tentative and spare.*" (Lahiri 6) With nothing to do but endure the pain of estrangement she welcomes the baby into the American

world. But Ashima begins to experience impatience and inability to continue with such a life with a new member in the family. She cannot pull herself to take care of her baby boy alone without assistance of any kind. Since she nurtures such a feeling she broaches the issue with Ashoke and when he is helpless in this issue she decides to raise her children in the Indian way, the least she could do to hold on to her roots.: "*Until now Ashima has accepted that there is no one to sweep the floor, or do the dishes, or wash clothes, or shop for groceries, or prepare a meal on the days she is tired or homesick or cross. She has accepted that the very lack of such amenities is the American way... don't want to raise Gogol alone in this country. It's not right. I want to go back.*" (Lahiri 32-33) This idea of 'going back' traces their life in America as they go back home often to visit their relatives in India. These journeys to India become a sort of ritual that are looked forward by parents and detested and dreaded by the children. These journeys are an effort to maintain their connections with their community and homeland.

The readers are given a glimpse into Ashima's life between her arrival to Cambridge and the hospital. She arrives at Cambridge as Ashoke Ganguli's wife and that marks the beginning of her sense of unsettling and discomfort as nothing seems normal to her anymore. Her life takes a sudden turn as she finds herself on a foreign land after so many



years of upbringing in India. And her grandmother, back home, did not doubt Ashima's loyalty to her culture and so when it is time for goodbyes this is her reaction: *"Unlike her parents, and her other relatives, her grandmother had not admonished Ashima not to eat beef or wear skirts or cut off her hair or forget her family the moment she landed in Boston. Her grandmother had not been fearful of such signs of betrayal; she was the only person to predict, rightly, that Ashima would never change."* (Lahiri 37) The narrator's use of the word 'betrayal' is an indication of the intense struggle and fear that accompanied the first generation immigrants and their families.

Ashima's conflict results from the fact that the two cultures – Indian and American- are so different and this subjects her to culture shock resulting in her resignation to keep her culture alive even in her children. To put Gogol to sleep, she sings him the Bengali songs her mother had sung to her. She constantly gives a detailed description of her baby's developments to her family in Calcutta: *"Ashima writes back with careful descriptions of her son, reporting the circumstances of his first smile, the day he first rolls over, his first squeal of delight."* (Lahiri 36) She strives hard to make sure that her children also follow the traditions and rituals that she had learnt in India. This seems ridiculous and absurd to her children but for her it is the only way to retain her identity as

Indian. This creates a rift between the two generations as this sort of obsession is not comprehended by the younger generation. The children are forced to live according to two contrasting cultural and social sets of traditions and expectations. It is this culture-clash that transforms into a serious confusion of cultural identity in Gogol. Defining himself becomes a crucial issue for Gogol where he finds himself feeling affinity to America but at the same time his upbringing, his parents' culture, traditions, are in complete contrast with the place. In such a contradictory scenario and unfavourable situation he feels the necessity to identify himself according to his ideals and beliefs – as an American. Later on though Ashima understands that her son is leading a very normal American life against her cultural ideals, she refuses to admit the same to her Bengali friends as it would only reflect her failed attempts at Indianising her children.

Another source of her discomfiture is Language as she is extremely conscious of her accent, as in the beginning she uses incorrect plural forms and feels embarrassed. This pain of embarrassment is so severe that she compares it to the pain of her last contraction during pregnancy labour. Language becomes her first means of hindrance as she finds it hard to communicate with the natives. She feels ashamed of herself and feels embarrassed



in many circumstances. This shame is shared by her children who feel ashamed of their parents' accent. Gogol is constantly aware of his parent's accent whenever they converse with the natives. On the first day of schooling when Gogol is asked his name, he doesn't respond and Ashoke is forced to explain that his son is perfectly bilingual. This idea of perfection is allusive to the parents but the children grow up to speak perfect English like Americans, which their Indian relatives find amusing.

The sense of community is very strong in a new land which is a sort of survival strategy devised by the desolated Indians in America, to feel belonged and to hold on to the roots. Ashima understands this need and till the very end of the novel she maintains community relations very well. As Gogol grows, their circle of acquaintances also grows. These are Bengalis who are from Calcutta and that alone brings them closer. The family celebrations are shared with their Bengali friends who gradually become relatives to each other. For instance, for Gogol the women and men are his honorary uncles and aunts - his 'meshos' and 'mashis'. It is these 'relatives' who lovingly participate in Gogol's 'Rice ceremony'. And during this traditional ceremony Ashima takes care of almost every detail of the ceremony carefully following the tradition. Apart from certain slight replacements like the melamine plate instead of silver or brass,

and a Bengali friend assuming the role of the maternal uncle, everything is according to the Indian tradition. However, Ashima cannot help thinking about the people missing at the ceremony: *"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."* (Lahiri 40) Gogol, on the other hand comes to detest these Community meets which do not impress him *"as their lives in New England swell with fellow Bengali friends, the members of that other, former life, those who know Ashima and Ashoke not by their good names but as monu and mithu, slowly dwindle."* (Lahiri 63) The same people would not have even bothered to look at each other in India, but here they stand out in the American society and as they feel strange and isolated. They stay together within short distance from each other and form a community to endure their days on a foreign land. And Ashima, unconsciously attains the role of a mentor for the newly arrived Bengalis.: *"They all come from Calcutta, and for this reason alone they are friends. Most of them live within walking distance of one another in Cambridge. The husbands are teachers, researchers, doctors, engineers. The wives, homesick and bewildered, turn to Ashima for recipes and advice, and she tells them about the carp that's sold in Chinatown, that it's possible to make halwa from Cream of Wheat."* (Lahiri 38) Till the end it never fails Ashima to feel



insecure about her Indian culture which she aggressively tries to preserve.

It is not just better life and security but also the immigrants are respected among their community members for 'achievement'. This idea is reflected when Ashoke discusses his son's academics: "Like the rest of the Bengali friends, his parents expect him to be, if not an engineer, then a doctor, a lawyer, an economist at the very least. These were the fields that brought them to America, his father repeatedly reminds him, the professions that have earned them security and respect." (Lahiri 105) But this is lost on Gogol, as a second generation American citizen he does not consider these typical courses that had fetched their parents and other Indians their job and respect on a foreign land. He does not feel the need to fulfill his community needs and expectations. As far as he is concerned he is an American. He is not a foreigner here and need not adhere to those clichéd concerns that his parents share. And when he officially declares himself 'Nikhil', he does not feel any obligation or responsibility towards his earlier life as he has reinvented himself. The change of name brings him sudden liberation from all sorts of responsibilities. As the name changes so does his personality. With the new identity acquired with such diligence he experiments with his life: "it is as Nikhil that first semester, that he grows a goatee, starts smoking Camel lights at parties ...

takes Metro North into Manhattan one weekend with Jonathan and gets himself a fake id that allows him to be served liquor in New Haven bars. It is as Nikhil that he loses his virginity at a party ... By the time he wakes up, hung over, at three in the morning, she has vanished from the room, and he is unable to recall her name." (Lahiri 105) He begins doing things that would be considered scandalous in Bengali communities and which he would not be able to have done as Gogol. All of this is a conscious negation of his past life, his upbringing, his parent's ideals and beliefs and his Indian culture.

The idea of "home' looms large on the minds of the characters. For Ashoke India becomes a place where he was born and also a place where he had nearly died. He feels he was born twice in India and once in America. This quiet thought, though stated in a matter-of-fact manner, reflects his perception of his American identity and slightly suggests his struggle and at the same time ease of assimilation into the new world. Yet there are various indications as reflected by Ashima, that though he accepts the foreign place as his own he never really cares to adopt its culture. Indian culture still holds good for him. Though Ashoke has had his education abroad (PhD in Boston) and is exposed to its system, he still obeys and follows the Indian system of arranged marriage. The same tradition seems out of place and embarrassing to Gogol as he



perceives it as something unnatural. At one instance, Gogol makes the mistake of referring to New Havens as 'home' and Ashima is outraged by this slip: "*Only three months, and listen to you,*" she says, *telling him that after twenty years in America, she still cannot bring herself to refer to Pemberton Road as home.*" (Lahiri 108) Gogol in a way cannot be blamed and Ashima cannot expect her children to feel the same affinity she feels towards India. The idea of "home" for each of them is completely different. India can never occupy the place of home for the children. While Ashoke accepts America as his new home for Ashima it becomes her second home. Throughout her life in America she sustains displacement by visiting her past and meticulously maintaining ties with her community members. She carefully titles the envelopes of greeting cards from the address book that has all the addresses of Bengalis residing in India and America. She prides herself quietly for all the Bengali addresses she has accumulated over the years and she feels fortunate to have shared rice with them on a foreign land. And she allots an entire day to reread the letters from her parents that had been sent decades ago. "*Once a year she dumps the letters onto her bed and goes through them, devoting an entire day to her parents' words, allowing herself a good cry. She revisits their affection and concern, conveyed weekly, faithfully, across continents-all the bits of news that had had nothing to do with her in*

Cambridge but which had sustained her in those days nevertheless." (Lahiri 160-161)

The Ganguli family also becomes the tool of introducing the issue the 'other'. The novel demonstrates how Gogol gets the taste of racial discrimination at a tender age. The day after Halloween Gogol observes the name on their mail box - "Ganguli" has been altered as "GANG GREEN" and his embarrassment, tinged with confusion as to why would his fellow countrymen would attempt to humiliate him affects him greatly. But Ashoke is unaffected by such things. The difference in perception is obvious as the first generation immigrants have clear distinction between their Indian and American identities. They understand and have come to terms with their place in the mainstream. But the children of these immigrants are born and brought up in America, they begin their live from scratch and their affinity to the place is stronger and they tend to accept it as something normal and natural. Hence any kind of difference or discrimination confuses them forcing them to reconsider their social identity.

Even with all these feelings of isolation and dislocation, the Gangulis seems perfectly normal from outside. They acquire things that are part of any American household after consulting their Bengali friends. For their children's sake they start celebrating Thanksgiving,



Christmas – festivities that their children look forward to far more than the Indian festivals of Durga and Saraswati. They grow up like any other American child against their parent's wishes. Even the food habits experience a lot of change as they allow their kids to fill the cart in the super market with items which they both do not consume. Whatever the circumstances and changes, the parents try to retain their culture by doing what they can like, making it a point to drive to Cambridge with their children when Apu Trilogy plays at the Orson Welles, or when there is a kathakali dance performance or a sitar recital at memorial Hall. When Gogol is in the third grade, they send him to Bengali language and culture lessons every other Saturday, *"For when Ashima and Ashoke close their eyes it never fails to unsettle them, that their children sound just like Americans, expertly conversing in language that still at times confounds them, in accents they are accustomed not to trust."* (Lahiri 65)

Though the novel deals with the issues of isolation and nostalgia, they take back seat when issues such as the problem of identity and cultural clash emerge prominently. Assimilation into a new culture is a serious issue for the first generation immigrants as they feel it as a question of loyalty to their homeland. So this assimilation is never complete and they live an in-between life, unable to break away from their roots and equally

unable to relate with the new culture. On the other hand the second generation feels none of the dilemmas and they are open to integrate into the new culture without any guilt or apprehension. Yet the narrator quite interestingly highlights the problem of complete assimilation by the second generation. Gogol's experiences represent the ambivalence and dilemma faced by the second generation immigrants as they are caught sadly in between the two cultures that are prominent in their lives either by chance or choice. Gogol always nurtures the conflict about his identity and when he grows up this rift within himself widens and he deliberately divulges from the Indian towards the Western culture, ridiculing the Indian culture. However, towards the end of the novel his change in perception is quite evident as he accepts his identity and comes to terms with his Indianness.

The family visits India often. These visits are looked forward by the parents while the children dread them: *"Gogol knows that eight months is no vacation. He dreads the thought of 8 months without a room of his own, without his records and his stereo, without friends"* (Lahiri 79) The sight of their suitcases, locked and labeled with the address of his father's house in Alipore always unsettles them: *"the sight of them making him feel that his family doesn't really live on Pemberton Road."* (Lahiri 80) And once on the plane, while the parents enjoy



their Hindu meals, Gogol savors each mouthful of the American food served with the knowledge that for the next 8 months nothing will taste quite the same. On the other hand, his parents' excitement is unquestionable as they look forward to meeting their relatives in India, the only extended family in the entire world. So when Gogol's counselor expresses his concern over Gogol missing his classes and suggests that he can be left with relatives in America for few more weeks Ashima's words sound like a person who is holding the last bit of a link that holds her to her real world. "We have no relatives in this country...That is why we are going to India in the first place." (Lahiri 79) The desperation is quite evident.

Once in India the children feel odd and strange as outsiders, unlike their parents who feel at home. Gogol looks on at the Indian setting with awe as he unconsciously compares it with that of the American: "Gogol is accustomed to the scenery, yet he still stares, at the short, dark men pulling rickshaws and the crumbling buildings side by side with fretwork balconies, hammers and sickles painted on their facades. He stares at the commuters who cling precariously to trams and buses, threatening at any moment to spill onto the street, and at the families who boil rice and shampoo their hair on the sidewalk. At his mother's flat on Amherst Street, where his uncle's family live now, neighbors look from their

windows and roofs as Gogol and his family emerge from the taxi. They stand out in their bright, expensive sneakers, American haircuts, backpacks slung over one shoulder." (Lahiri 82) The family's emotional encounter with their relatives miraculously transforms Ashima into 'monu' and Ashoke into 'mithu' - their true, old selves: "Ashima, now monu, weeps with relief, and Ashoke, now mithu, kisses his brothers on both cheeks, holds their heads in his hands. Gogol and Sonia know these people, but they do not feel close to them as their parents do. Within minutes, before their eyes Ashoke and Ashima slip into their bolder, less complicated versions of themselves, their voices louder, their smiles wider, revealing a confidence Gogol and Sonia never seen on Permberton Road..." (Lahiri 81-82) All this seems unreal and scary to Sonia who seeks refuge in Gogol, the only other being whom she can relate to in the strange place.

There are many such journeys in the course of the narration that the characters undertake, especially Gogol that account for his transformation for instance, his journey to the court to change his name from Gogol to Nikhil. At this juncture it is useful to study the relevance of the title of the novel 'The Namesake'. It is interesting to note that the writer herself was born "Nilanjana Sudeshna" but goes by her nickname (or in Bengali, her "Daak naam") Jhumpa Lahiri. In past the writer has shared her



personal experiences concerning her name that she in a way is like Gogol in that her pet name inadvertently became her good name. *"I have two other names on my passport and my birth certificate (my mother couldn't settle on just one). But when I was enrolled in school the teachers decided that Jhumpa was the easiest of my names to pronounce and that was that. To this day many of my relatives think that it's both odd and inappropriate that I'm known as Jhumpa in an official, public context."* (Book Browse) While the author does not seem to have any qualms of being known by her Namesake, her protagonist in the novel desperately attempts to shed his namesake Gogol. It is his journey from Gogol to Nikhil and then back to Gogol that represents all the themes related to culture issues. As a child he accepts his name and it becomes a natural identity for him as he answers to the sound of his name called by his family. But as the narrative progresses we find him as a timid teenager who hates having to wear a nametag on his sweater at Model United Nations Day at school, hates signing his name at the bottom of his drawings in arts class. He 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. He does not date anyone in high school, suffers quiet crushes, does not attend dances or parties like other American teenagers. While he suffers silently his parents do not find it strange

that their son doesn't date, does not rent a tuxedo for his junior prom, instead they urge him to join the math team and maintain his 'A' average. Assured by his grades and his apparent indifference to girls, his parents don't suspect Gogol of being, in his own fumbling way, an American teenager. They don't suspect him, for instance, of smoking pot, which he does from time to time when he and his friends get together to listen to records at one another's homes. They do not suspect him, when he goes to spend the night at a friend's house, of driving to a neighbouring town to see *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, or into Boston to see bands in Kenmore Square. They do not doubt his Indian roots that would never nudge him to go against his Indian culture and he too pretends to be what his parents expect of him. But privately he indulges in past time like a normal American teenager. While on one such secret trips with his friends, he understands his strangeness when he compares his appearance with that of the other young people in the party hallway who seem not to care or notice anything and Gogol feels *"too wholesome in this ripped jeans and T-shirt crowd, fears his hair was too recently washed and is too neatly combed. And yet it doesn't seem to matter, no one seems to care."* (Lahiri 94) It is in this crowd that his transition begins and he embarks on a journey that any average American would experience. And the first means of his change becomes a girl named Kim, who is the



first girl to whom Gogol introduces himself as Nikhil. This is the first trace of his need for an alternate identity. And Gogol's feelings are mixed: *"he says it tentatively, his voice sounding strained to his ears, the statement turning without his meaning it into a question. He looks at Kim, his eyebrows furrowed, prepare for her to challenge him, to correct him, to laugh in his face. He holds his breath. His face tingles, whether from triumph or terror he isn't sure."* (Lahiri 96) and when he shares his little secret with his friends that he had kissed a girl, he swells in pride and doesn't own the action as Gogol's but as Nikhil. This assumption of new identity is a way of creating a new self, reinventing and refashioning himself, his identity. And so when at one point in the story Ashoke recounts to his son the accident that has led to his name, he does not comprehend the gravity of the situation. He sure finds himself speechless but fails to gain a clear understanding: *"Gogol listens, stunned, his eyes fixed on his father's profile. Though there 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 fully know."* (Lahiri 123)

Even after trading his name 'Gogol' for 'Nikhil', his past visits him often, haunts him in private and the only problem now is that he himself does not feel like Nikhil. Even after such an effort on his part to refashion himself he does

not feel as Nikhil. Though his new driver's license says "Nikhil", *"even though he's sliced up the old one with his mother's sewing scissors, even though he's ripped out the pages in front of his favourite books...there's a snag: everyone he knows in the world still calls him Gogol. He is aware that his parents, and their friends...will never call him anything but Gogol...Gogol will revisit him on each of his birthdays."* (Lahiri 103) He cannot get rid of his name till the end and tries to run as far as possible away from the people who remind him of his past and his name. It is in New Haven that he starts a new life as Nikhil, where no one is aware of his past. He instructs his parents to refer to him as Nikhil when they call him at his room. When they do as instructed he feels terribly odd: *"the fact of it troubles him, making him feel in that instant that he is not related to them, not their child."* (Lahiri 106) Whenever he visits his parents on the way back home the old Gogol claims the new Nikhil. *"Part of the problem is that the people who know him as Nikhil have no idea that he used to be Gogol. They know him only in the present, not at all in the past. But after eighteen years of Gogol, two months of Nikhil feel scant, inconsequential. At times he feels as if he's cast himself in a play, acting the part of twins, indistinguishable to the naked eye yet fundamentally different.... He fears being discovered....Occasionally he has to hear Nikhil three times before he answers."* (Lahiri 105-106)



Once he is obliged to attend a panel discussion about Indian novels written in English, Gogol is bored to hear the word 'marginality' as referred by the panelists. This is because he does not understand or consider himself as marginal in the American society. In his view he is American and nothing else. And the discussion rises a point about belongingness " *Technologically speaking, ABCDs (American-born confused desi) are unable to answer the question 'Where are you from?'*" (Lahiri 118) But Gogol does not feel affinity to such confusion or 'conflict' as for him India is India like for Americans, and not a *desh* as it is to his parents. He cannot read or write Bengali, though speaks his mother tongue fluently; his American accent fascinates his relatives in India; lives with a pet name and a good name in a place where such distinctions are not made. He finds it odd to see so many ABCDs in that meeting whom he never noticed on campus and whom he consciously avoids as they remind him of his past. "*He has no ABCD friends at college. He avoids them, for they remind him too much of the way his parents choose to live, befriending people not so much because they like them, but because of a past they happen to share.*" (Lahiri 119) This may not appeal to Gogol as he has not felt the loss of past, what is dear to him, or what he holds in respect. It is this sense of loss that he comprehends only when he loses his father. On the other hand, his parents

understand what it is to lose something dear.

His discomfort grows when there is a prospect of spending Christmas with Ruth's parents. In spite of his wish to accept, he hesitates as that would mean that he is required to tell his parents about Ruth, which he has no intention of doing as, "*He has no patience for their surprise, their nervousness, their quiet disappointment, their questions about what Ruth's parents did and whether or not the relationship is serious. ... He cannot imagine being with her in the house where he is till Gogol.*" (Lahiri 115) The fact that he acts against his parents' idea of their culture is a display of rejection and also his inability to completely let go of his background. This dilemma is so strong that one cannot but pity him. His accomplishment as he understands is one step towards blending into the American system and for their parents it is the other way, one step away from Indian culture. As he considers the prospect of introducing Ruth to his family he hesitates and only wishes that his parents could accept her without much ado: "*They've even gone so far as to point out examples of Bengali men they know who've married Americans, marriages that have ended in divorce...He pities his parents when they speak to him this way, for having no experience of being young and in love.*" (Lahiri 116-117) The Indian system of arranged marriage is an incomprehensible idea in the Western



world. And the fact that his parents could make their relationship work in spite of not falling in love before marriage, and he, in spite of love and courtship that preceded his marriage with Moushumi fails to sustain any relationship, reflects his own broken identity and inability to fit into any culture completely.

Gogol's encounter with Maxine makes him realize his own limitations in his relationship with respect to his family. He quietly obeys Maxine, fascinated to be a part of her family's adventurous life, and disregards his mother's pleas to visit home for Christmas. After a few visits he falls in love with them and their style of living. He learns many things from and quickly assimilates into their system of living, their routine. If he could learn so many things in such a short period effortlessly, why couldn't he assimilate himself in to their parent's system and culture? The obvious answer is his conscious defiance of 'their' culture and not wanting to 'belong' to that. The readers can easily find the contrasting personalities of Gogol and Maxine and the proof is everywhere in the narration. Where he is constantly running away from his past, Maxine openly shares her past and accepts herself as it is. This fascinates Gogol as he is in conflict with himself: *"She has a gift of accepting her life; as he comes to know her, he realizes that she has never wished she were anyone other than herself, raised in any other place, in any other way. This, in his*

opinion, is the biggest difference between them, a thing far more foreign to him than the beautiful house she'd grown up in...In addition, he is continually amazed by how much Maxine emulates her parents, how much she respects their tastes and their ways...There is none of the exasperation he feels with his own parents. No sense of obligation. Unlike his parents, they pressure her to do nothing, and yet she lives faithfully, happily, at their side." (Lahiri 138) And Maxine is surprised to know certain aspects of his life when he tells her that all his parents' friends are Bengali, that theirs was an arranged marriage, and that his mother cooks Indian food everyday and she wears saris and a 'bindi'. When she responds that he had not imagined him in such an environment, he realizes that a line has been drawn between them – not just he and her, but between his family and the rest of the Americans, isolating, segregating, highlighting the 'difference'.

Given that he has never truly comprehended the terms of his parents' marriage, he begins to compare the relation that Maxine's parents share, with that of his own parents. He observes that Gerald presents expensive gifts to his wife Lydia, flowers brought home for no reason, they kiss openly and rest on each other's shoulders. This physical closeness, and open expression of love they share is in contrast to the love and regard Ashima and Ashoke share with each other. Their expressions of love are



subtle. They communicate a lot without many words. They understand each other and express love in their own accustomed way. Their parties are so different than that of his parents'. This seems odd to Gogol: *"He is always stuck by these dinners: only a dozen or so guests sitting around the candlelit table...How different they are from his own parent's parties, cheerful unruly evenings to which there were never fewer than thirty people invited, small children in two... Unlike Gerald and Lydia, who preside at the center of their dinners, his parents behaved more like caterers in their own home, solicitous and watchful, waiting until most of their guests' plates were stacked by the sink in order finally to help themselves."*(Lahiri 140-141) He enjoys and appreciates their family's dinners. However, there is a constant guilt nagging at the back of his conscience that his immersion in Maxine's family is a betrayal of his own.

There is an occasion in the novel where Gogol introduces Maxine to his parents at their home in Pemberton Road. It is a sort of confrontation of two cultures that do not share many similarities. After a long list of Do's and Don'ts Gogol takes Maxine home: *"The restrictions amuse her; she sees them as a single afternoon's challenge, an anomaly never to be repeated. She does not associate him with his parents' habits; she still cannot believe that she is to be the first girlfriend he's ever brought home."*

(Lahiri 146) On the other hand for Ashima it is a totally important occasion and she spends many hours preparing the lunch, and her effort embarrasses Gogol. Throughout the visit, Gogol is only half attentive to their conversations as he is preoccupied with his overt awareness of his family's habit of not used to passing things around the table, or not used to chewing food with their mouth fully closed. And when Maxine mentions that she lives with her parents, it's only natural for Ashima to exclaim *"Really? I thought no one did that in America."* (Lahiri 149) Towards the end of this great ordeal for Gogol, as they start on their journey to Maxine's lake house, the Gangulis reciprocate clumsily to Maxine's hugs and kisses. Sadly this is the last time he sees his father alive.

Things begin to change after Ashoke's sudden demise. The news arrives to Ashima while she is busy writing Christmas cards to her relatives in Calcutta. The news of her husband's death hits her hard as she loses her only link on the foreign land as he had been the medium of her arrival here and her motive to settle in this new place. Now, with this reason being gone forever, she finds herself in extreme isolation. Though she has children in this place, it has always been her and her husband who always shared that sense of displacement, shared a common past, and shared the feeling of unsettling, which she never shared with her children. The



excruciating pain of losing a family member in a foreign land is an incomprehensible loss and Ashima's experience is truly heart wrenching as we are reminded of her words when she is engaged to Ashoke – where she answers to the question whether she would be able to fly to a distant place and live in a foreign land away from her parents, she says he (Ashoke) will be there with her. Such a blind trust in a stranger and her acceptance of the reality that for the first time in her life she would be away from her parents, her homeland and flying off to a new place with a new person in her life. So when her husband's death news reaches her she *"begins to shiver violently, the house instantly feeling twenty degrees colder...She gets up and walks systematically through the rooms of the house, turning on all the light switches, turning on the lamppost on the lawn and the flood light over the garage, as if she and Ashoke are expecting company. She returns to the kitchen and stares at the pile of cards on the table, in the red envelopes it had pleased her so much to buy, most of them ready to be dropped in the mailbox."* (Lahiri 169) At the age of 48 she experiences solitude which *"her husband and daughter already know, and which they claim not to mind."* (Lahiri 161) She feels too old to learn the skill of leading a solitary life, which their children wave off simply saying that everyone needs to learn to live alone at some point or the other. With her husband and children living far

away from her she finds herself feeling lonely once again on a strange land, which she has occupied for so many years and yet cannot bring herself to call as home. It is in this period of isolation she finds a chance to make American friends at a library where she takes up a job. After all these years in America the people she befriends are the women who lead lonely lives.

Gogol's reaction to the news of his father's death is worth noting as he, for the first time in his life, draws a line between himself and the American society. His journey to where his father resided prior to his death is a life changing journey as Nikhil is not the same anymore. The claiming of his past begins then. When Maxine offers to go with him to visit his family he says no as, *"He doesn't want to be with someone who barely knew his father, who's met him only once."* (Lahiri 170) and the thought that he had been partying with Maxine's family while his was dying in a hospital brings back his guilt: *"...feasted on flowering chives and salted squid and the clams in black bean sauce that Maxine loved best. They were already drunk from the book party, lazily sipping their beers, their cold cups of jasmine tea. All that time, his father was in the hospital, already dead."* (Lahiri 171) The fact that he had felt embarrassed when Lydia had told him that his mother had called, all these make him feel guilty for his actions, which till now he doesn't feel in relation



to his family. This is the beginning of a gradual change in Gogol who comes to accept himself. He visits his father in the morgue in a dazed condition, mechanically, and informs the hospital that there is no need for any religious services. The situation would not have been this way if the death had taken place in India. But in America, Indian rituals would seem absurd. When he drives in his father's car to the place he had stayed all these months, it bothers him more than the sight of his father's dead face. Here he considers the life that his father had before leaving this world. *"The relentless uniformity of it upsets him profoundly, more so than even the hospital, and the sight of his father's face. Thinking of his father living here alone these past three months, he feels the first threat of tears, but he knows that his father did not mind, that he was not offended by such things."* (Lahiri 174) When Maxine asks him to spend the night in a hotel rather than in his father's apartment he feels defensive and protective of the empty place his father had had occupied. Usually, he is accustomed to obeying her and asking her advice. But now he does not feel the need to do that anymore and he decides to stay in his father's apartment not leaving it empty as long as he is there. Lying there in that unoccupied house, sleepless and watching the first lights touching the skies, he succumbs to the deepest sleep. This is the new dawn in his life - a new chapter begins when he wakes

up more as Gogol. Nikhil gradually disappears from Gogol's life.

He understands the essence of loss and is terrified to face his mother in the wake of his realization of the pain of losing a loved member of the family and the guilt that had been carried by his parents all these years for their inability to do anything at the loss of their parents: *"He knows now the guilt that his parents carried inside, at being able to do nothing when their parents had died in India, of arriving weeks, sometimes months later, when there was nothing left to do."* (Lahiri 179) Flying back to his mother from Cleveland he remembers the time when his father had shaved his head at his father's demise. The significance of that tradition is learnt by Gogol years later, how it is the duty of a Bengali son to shave his head in the wake of a parent's death. He ponders on his reaction to such deep grief that his father had experienced- *"He remembers when his paternal grandfather died...remembers his mother screaming when she walked in on his father, who was shaving off his hair with a disposable razor. In the process his scalp had bled in numerous places...But at the time Gogol was too young to understand; when the bathroom door opened he had laughed at the sight of his hairless, grief-stricken father...."*(Lahiri 179)

Their Bengali friends are stricken by the bad news and the question is quite straight and true: *"Who had forsaken*



everything to come to this country, to make a better life, only to die here?" (Lahiri 180) Gogol realizes the role of these friends whom his parents have collected for almost thirty years. He feels glad to have them home and it does not seem out of place to Gogol to have only Bengali friends. When Maxine visits the mourning family it is his turn to feel shocked to see her in his house among all the Bengalis. The transformation is vivid: *"This time he doesn't care how the house, how the pile of guests' shoes heaped by the doorway, might appear to her eyes...doesn't bother to translate what people are saying, to introduce her to everyone, to stay close by her side."* (Lahiri 182) When Maxine says that he cannot possibly stay with his mother forever and suggests him to get away from all this, for the first time he is confident of his own path and his coming to terms with his life is evident when he replies, *"I don't want to get away."* (Lahiri 182) He has no intention of escaping.

For Ashima it is different when her friends suggest her to visit Calcutta - she has no desire to 'escape' to Calcutta as she refuses to be so far from the place where her husband made his life, the country in which he died. Suddenly for Ashima this place (America) becomes a second home, a place where she started a family, raised her children, bought a house, his husband had breathed his last. This connects her to the place in a way

and for the first time she is reluctant to escape from the loss.

The inevitable happens as he estranges himself from Maxine, which seems like a willing choice of Gogol. This exclusion becomes permanent as he is not interested in including a foreigner in his family list. And on the anniversaries of his father's birth- which was never celebrated when he was alive- and death, Gogol is drawn to his home, to his family to drape a garland around the frame of his father's photograph. This pull also reflects his realization of his responsibility and sense of duty towards his family, whom he had ignored and avoided all these years. There are changes in his professional life too as he reduces his outings and partying with his American acquaintances and friends. It is a conscious effort on his part to isolate himself from the mainstream as he to terms with his identity. But his isolation worries Ashima and at one point she even suggests to patch up with Maxine. But Gogol finds no interest in such a prospect. And this leads to something which for Gogol would have been unthinkable.

His mother takes the initiative of introducing him to a Bengali girl Moushumi whom Gogol had known in his childhood and whom he does not remember as part of his conscious effort not to make any Indian acquaintances. Reluctantly he agrees to meet Moushumi who herself had had a recent tragedy in



her life where her fiancé, "an American, had backed out of the engagement, well after the hotel had been booked, the invitations sent, the gift registry selected." (Lahiri 192) This is the first reference to the girl who is introduced to the reader in the beginning of the novel. She is brought back to the reader's memory with a clue of her life – how she, like Gogol, is struggling with her identity. Though she openly attempts at fighting back at her parents' system of living, deep down her consideration for what is Indian comes out clearly in her failed relationship with Graham, her fiancé. The reason is narrated thus: Graham complains about his visit to India that "he found it taxing, found the culture repressed. All that he did was visit her relatives...the society, in his opinion, was somewhat provincial. People tend to stay at home most of the time. There was nothing to drink." She listens to him partly sympathetic but horrified at his comments on her cultural system for "it was one thing for her to reject her background, to be critical of her family's heritage, another to hear it from him." (Lahiri 217)

In the following pages that explain Gogol's relationship with Moushumi, a glimpse is provided into her past life. She is another character who struggles as a second generation immigrant. A glimpse into her double unsettling is given when Gogol celebrates his 14th birthday. Her family spends few years in England and then move to Massachusetts and she is

considered by the Bengali children with some delight as she is sort of an outsider to them. She herself does not attempt at mingling with other children as she carries with her, from England, the social beliefs and notions when she claims to 'detest American television' (Lahiri 73). This 'othering' within the community is hypocritical as they themselves are outsiders in America. This is also an occasion when the readers are intimated of Gogol's transgression into an American teenager. "Lately he's been lazy, addressing his parents in English though they continue to speak to him in Bengali. occasionally he wanders through the house with his running sneakers on. At dinner he sometimes uses a fork." (Lahiri 75) It is interesting to see how two individuals, second generation Bengalis, who assume themselves as Americans, are brought together to understand their own limitations and experiences in a world where they always unconsciously, unknowingly remain at the margins.

The first impression of Gogol on Moushumi is interesting as he remembers how he had not asked her on phone how she looked, assuming that he would identify her in the sea of whites as Indians tend to stand out. But when he feels that he may not have been really sure of identifying her in the crowd so easily, then we get the picture of Moushumi as an Indian girl who has assimilated into the American life just



like Gogol. It comes as a surprise to Gogol that he feels attracted to Moushumi, which he had not expected in the least bit as he understands that, "*Their contact until tonight has been artificial, imposed, something like his relationship to his cousins in India but lacking even the justification of blood ties. Until they'd met tonight, he had never seen her outside the context of her family, or his. He decides that it is her very familiarity that makes him curious about her....*" (Lahiri 199)

He observes that her British accent, which had been a delight to all Bengali children in the past, is gone and it is ironical that he is shocked to hear her American accent on phone - this is a sort of stereotyping on his part- which he never notices in his own life. The first conversation they begin is about his name and he realizes that she is the first girl he has gone out with who is acquainted with his past. As they figure out their memories of their childhood she gives her perception of Gogol, how he thoroughly ignored her, and how she resorted to her books. The indication here is clear - though Gogol had Bengali friends, he consciously distanced himself from them to be with his American friends, and Moushumi, on the other hand, is doubly displaced - an Indian in America and an England returned Bengali into the American Bengali community. She is an object of fascination to the Bengali children with whom she does not feel any connection and befriends books. It is her way of

copied with isolation as a child. But in America as a teenager, she does not find herself at peace with herself and moves to a place where she is a stranger -like Gogol, who ventures into the American life as Nikhil - and free to do things that would otherwise be impossible to do within her cultural setting. Just like Gogol she vents out her frustration, though in a different way. For her the place that draws nostalgia is England, which is 'home' for her. She speaks yearningly of the past years she had spent there. She confesses to Gogol that she had hated moving to America and that she had held on her British accent as long as she could so that she could reclaim her identity. And the fact that their parents were afraid of America than England, probably because of its lack of relation with India, makes her life in America more difficult to endure as she is expected to relieve her parents of the constant fear associated with the new and unknown place.

Moushumi's parents strive hard to get their daughter married to a Bengali; she dreads the discussions her relatives conduct about her wedding: "*She hated the way they would talk of the details of her wedding, the menu and the different colors of saris she would wear for the different ceremonies, as if it were a fixed certainty in her life.*" (Lahiri 213)

However, Moushumi's persistence in going against their wishes results in her being a stranger in Indian and American



which she had grown to know and love her husband. Though his ashes have been scattered into the Ganges, it is here, in this house and in this town, that he will continue to dwell in her mind ... And though she still does not feel fully at home within these walls of Pemberton Road she knows that this is home nevertheless-the world for which she is responsible, which he had created, which is everywhere around her...." (Lahiri 280) On the other hand Gogol reconciles with his past as he revisits the book presented by his father, which he had ignored till then. The transition is complete as he accepts himself as Gogol.

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