

Paradoxes of Generational Breaks and Continuity in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*

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Abstract

Jhumpa Lahiri's novel *The Namesake* (2003) shifts its focal point from the first generation of immigrants to the second, in the process establishing interconnectedness of the two generations. While opportunity, movement, displacement and stabilisation form the sequence that defines the lives of the first generation immigrants, the lives of their children, the second generation, revolves around the issues of belonging – whether they belong to the country of their origin or to the country of their birth and whether to adhere to the culture and tradition of their parents or to subscribe to the standards of their immediate world outside home. The article analyses the movement of the two generations of Ganguli family in the United States and the various ways in which they are divided and united in the novel. The focus is on the aspects of cultural variance and assimilation between the two generations.

Abstract in Malay

Novel *The Namesake* (2003) karya Jhumpa Lahiri bertukar fokus dari penghijrah generasi pertama kepada penghijrah generasi kedua dan dalam proses itu membentuk hubungan antara dua generasi tersebut. Dikala peluang, pergerakan, pengenetepian dan penstabilan membentuk aturan hidup pendatang generasi pertama, kehidupan anak-anak mereka dari generasi kedua, berkisar pada isu hak kepunyaan – sama ada mereka dipunyai negara asal atau negara kelahiran mereka dan sama ada untuk mengikut tradisi dan kebudayaan ibu bapa mereka atau menurut cara terdekat iaitu dunia di luar rumah mereka. Artikel ini menganalisa pergerakan dua generasi keluarga Ganguli di Amerika Syarikat dan pelbagai cara mereka dipisahkan and dapat bersama di dalam novel tersebut. Fokusnya ialah pelbagai aspek kebudayaan dan penyatuan antara dua generasi.

Keywords

Absence, assimilation, culture, identity, immigrant, representation

Keywords in Malay

Ketidakhadiran, penyerapan, budaya, identiti, penghijrah, gambaran

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Lives of the Indian immigrants in the United States of America form the core of Jhumpa Lahiri's work. Her first collection of short stories, *The Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), focused mainly on first generation immigrants, whereas her second one, *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008), shifted the focus to the second and third generations. *The Namesake*, her debut novel, published in 2003, however, is a sustained exploration of Indian immigrants' transition from one generation to the next. Through this novel, Lahiri has shown the extent of time that is crucial in addressing such concerns as identity and culture are central to the novels of the writers of South Asian origins living in North America and Europe.

According to David Kipen, *The Namesake* is "a novel about an immigrant family's imperfect assimilation into America" (M1). But there is nothing we can call as perfect assimilation as there are great convolutions in the lives of immigrants, for they travel with their heritage into a new culture. Moreover, the dissimilar experiences and expectations of the immigrants and their children inevitably alienate them from one another. The family becomes the site of paradoxical happenings: it is no longer merely a source of strength but also an impediment to individual freedom. The strength of an immigrant family, therefore, can only be seen in the several crises it overcomes in its effort to assimilate into a new culture while it stays as a unit. As Lahiri observes, "There is an element of survival in an immigrant family's life, even if it's a middle-class academic immigrant family or an engineer's immigrant family" (Interview 78). In the novel, the Gangulis migrate voluntarily and their movement to a new land is necessitated by desire for bigger opportunities as opposed to distress, which is mostly the cause of forced migrations during wars or years of famine. The Gangulis' migration in the late 1960s was consistent with the spirit of the times; such voluntary migrations of course have even increased today as we witness a continuous flux in the movement of people globally, effecting worldwide relocations. In *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, Arjun Appadurai observes: "More people than ever before seem to imagine routinely the possibility that they or their children will live and work in places other than where they were born: this is the well-spring of the increased rates of migration at every level of social, national, and global life" (6). In spite of being part of the large global phenomenon of voluntary migration, no migrating people can escape the problems of exile, essentially cultural exile. The Ganguli family in *The Namesake* is placed in the maze of modern global living. Its success depends largely on its cultural adaptation. Cultural encounters may not be as life-threatening as economic upheavals, political disturbances or natural disasters but they can certainly be as life-changing. Lahiri tracks the cultural transformations in the novel tangentially through race and religion but predominantly through food and travel. In a way, food and travel become the novel's tenor and vehicle. Furthermore, everyday objects like books, hats and

wine bottles and routine events like birthdays, picnics and naming exercises supply the novel with its objective correlatives.

The two generations of the immigrant Indian family in America are represented in *The Namesake* by Ashima Ganguli, a young Bengali wife who accompanies her MIT student husband Ashoke Ganguli to America, and her son Gogol Ganguli who is born in the United States. As the Gangulis live through the later part of the twentieth century, their struggle becomes at once individual and social. *The Namesake* is characterised by the movement of its main characters. For the immigrants, the meaning of movement varies from the first generation to the second generation, the former being settlers in a country and the latter being born in that country. As the movements of the two generations are intertwined and as they belong to one family, their individual movement changes the state of affairs within the family. The concerns and aspirations of the two generations of immigrants may vary but their fates are knotted.

The vicissitudes of the family are formed on the inescapable past, the current environment and, of course, human actions. For a brief time in the novel the point of view shifts to Moushumi, whom Gogol marries. As Natalie Friedman points out, Moushumi "... offers yet another perspective on the ways in which the child in Lahiri's stories functions as a translator among cultures" (121). Unlike Ashoke and Ashima, Gogol and Moushumi hold markedly diverse world views, and by dividing the narration between the younger couple, Lahiri shows the multiplicity of situations in the lives of second generation immigrants. The two strands of the narrative, of the parents and of the children, "... form a continuum which contributes to the novel's capacity to encapsulate both the past and the present in order to assess critically the ongoing implications of a diasporic process of identity construction in the US" (Ridda 2). Again, the process of identity construction varies from generation to generation. The earlier generation tries to achieve a group identity by forming a community of fellow immigrants but the latter endeavours to obtain individual identity by following the laws of the land. These are not merely attempts at identity creation but essential strategies of survival, often formed sub-consciously.

For second generation immigrants, the notion of India is quite unlike that of their parents' generation. For instance, after a decade and a half in America the Ganguli couple, along with their two children, makes a longish trip of eight months to India. For the couple it is homecoming, but for their children, it is an ordeal. The parents tell the children to treat it "as a long vacation" (79), the children nonetheless are crestfallen. For Gogol, eight months in India without his own room and without his friends is unimaginable. Parents and children perceive the Mother Country differently owing to "changes in the global context and their repercussions in daily life" (Kral 65). Ashoke and Ashima,

who represent the many young people who went to the United States in the wake of the 1965 Immigration Act that encouraged immigration of the educated and the skilled, decades later, stand for the estimated 20 million Indian diaspora (Sen 73) that feels affiliated to both its country of origin and country of adoption. But for Gogol the idea of the “Mother Country” is almost a burden. From his position, the novel raises important questions: “The issue of culture – What constitutes it? Who is a part of which culture? Is Gogol Bengali, American or Bengali American? – permeates the novel” (Oates 178). On one occasion Gogol learns about the complexities involved in the lives of youngsters like him. A speaker at an academic event declares, “ABCDs are unable to answer the question ‘Where are you from?’” (118). He gathers that the term ABCD stands for American-born confused deshi. He thinks the letter C could also stand for conflicted. By providing this little detail, Lahiri hints at the complications involved – Gogol’s generation that looks confused to others actually feels a sense of conflict.

The novel begins a few moments before Gogol is born in the United States. In these few moments, through flashbacks the reader is taken to Calcutta. Ashima remembers the first time she left her homeland, and after several months in a new country, India and Calcutta continue to be fond and painful memories. In her thoughts, Calcutta remains home. She sees her arrival in America as departure from home. The impending birth of her child in an unfamiliar land “unmonitored and unobserved by those she loved”(6) appears like a miracle, “she is terrified to raise a child in a country where she is related to no one, where she knows so little, where life seems so tentative and spare” (6). In the waiting room of the hospital, Ashoke is haunted by images of the train accident he survived seven years ago. He thinks of his rescue as the first miracle of his life. And when he holds his newborn son in his arms, it is for him a second miracle. Here readers might be tempted to regard Ashima’s anxiety and fear as “feminine” and Ashoke’s survival and hope as “masculine.” But it is the author’s manner of manoeuvring to underscore Ashima’s rising up to the situation later, particularly after her husband’s death midway in the novel.

Ashoke and Ashima’s travails and triumphs in America stand for the pioneering struggle of the immigrants in that country. The fragments of their initial effort ceaselessly encompass their memory and consciousness. What the first generation immigrants missed when they arrived in a new country is seen through Ashima’s memories of her homeland. The absence of familiar faces and things makes every presence in the new country seem alien. As Ashima stays at home, the lack of company she feels is acute. She feels estranged and there appears no hope. She tells her husband after living for a couple of years in the new country, “... hurry up and finish your degree.... I don’t want to raise Gogol alone in this country. It’s not right. I want to go back” (33). As it turns out, she raises Gogol and her second child Sonia in America. In the quiet assurance of

her husband, she stops worrying about the uncertainties in a faraway country. The small Bengali family grows familiar to its surroundings on Pemberton Road. The family makes an effort to create a home away from home as its members speak Bengali at home and among fellow Bengalis; it also makes an attempt to absorb aspects of the prevalent culture as it learns to celebrate occasions like Christmas. The husband and the wife come to accept America as their country of adoption, a country where their children will live.

Ashima's actual arrival in America is signified in the novel when for the first time she ventures out of the house, desperate to get a bag of white long-grain rice, with the baby in the pram. That is the kind of rice familiar to her and she finds her way to get it. What is apparent here is that the anxiety of living in a foreign land is different for men and women. It is especially true for the first generation Indian immigrants, as the men invariably went to work and women stayed at home. The novelist makes us aware through Ashima that "... being a foreigner... is a sort of lifelong pregnancy – a perpetual wait, a constant burden, a continuous feeling out of sorts" (49). When Ashima continues to live in the country after her husband's death for her children's sake, it is another example of the resilience of the "new comers" to America.

Throughout the novel it is Ashima who is connected to her children. She is especially anxious for Gogol. Ashoke's unexpected death leaves her devastated and lonely, but she continues to be the binding factor in the family even as she works in a public library. She responds admirably to the changes in her children's lives. The breakdown of Gogol's marriage comes as a jolt. However, seeing her daughter Sonia and her boyfriend Ben happy together, she is full of hope for them. Although their relationship is not dealt with at any length in the novel to justify her hope, it can perhaps be regarded as a mother's instinct that her children can be happy. Significantly, Ben is of mixed ethnicity – half-Jewish and half-Chinese. By bringing him and Sonia together and making Ashima hopeful about their union, probably the novelist is hinting at the amalgamation of cultures, not uncommon today in developed nations, and the triumph of human will beyond ethnicity and nationality.

Towards the end, the arrangement that Ashima will divide her time between India and America is quite symbolic in the sense that she is connected to both the countries: India is where her roots exist and America is where her children live. In a larger perspective, a young woman who accompanied her husband to a big country without any specific plan for herself, is leaving after having lived a happy life with her husband and raising her two children in that country. She is going to leave now but only with a clear plan of returning.

Coming to the second generation, one notes that Gogol's movement away from home is gradual and voluntary. As he grows up, he comes to regard America not as the country of adoption but as his country. He learns to appreciate things such as individuality and freedom of choice that are ingrained

in American culture. As a child he had preferred popular foodstuff available aplenty in American supermarkets like mayonnaise, tuna fish and hot dogs (65) but as a young man he develops a taste for wine and champagne. He resents his parents' clinging to Indian values. The country of origin, from the standpoint of Gogol, is not a point of reference for anything. But his view of himself as an American is not accepted unchallenged, as evidenced in the casual racist comments of Pamela, one of the guests at a picnic in New Hampshire. Pamela asks Gogol "at what age he moved to America from India." He simply says, "I am from Boston." Refusing to give up, she remarks, "But you're Indian..." (157). It quietly adds a feeling of estrangement in him.

There are two very interesting views of Gogol offered by critics: Nathan Oates notes, "What Gogol wants is to be his own person, and the novel exposes the fallacy of the American myth of self-creation" (178); and Min Song suggests that the choices before Gogol, cultural unity and cultural pluralism, are both suffocating (347). The author of the novel, however, has a rather sympathetic view of an immigrant child; for as she informs us in her interview, "... it's not the luxury of money or a nice house, per se. It's more the luxury of completely possessing and belonging to the place where you live. That's the luxury that a child of immigrants will never feel" (78); she even conveys her admiration for her country by declaring that "The greatness of America is based on layers upon layers of foreign transplants, stepping away from the old world and being willing to set foot in" (80). Immigrant children like Gogol, in spite of their shortcomings, play a role in American culture as they seek their identity and find their expression. They add a valuable component to the national character.

Complexities about his identity appear in Gogol's consciousness early in adolescence. As Gogol finishes his school he feels miserable with two things: his name and home. Gogol's friendships are noticeably with people who are not of Indian origin. His Bengali contacts are limited to his parents' circle of friends, and they dwindle as he grows older. If his parents' instinct was to be part of their Indian, especially Bengali, cluster, Gogol's instinct contrarily is to begin friendships with those who do not remind him of home. It is a conscious effort on his part to detach himself from home. At eighteen, he chooses to study at Yale. It means to him an opportunity to stay away from home. At this point, he changes his name from Gogol to Nikhil.

Gogol's name has an interesting history. Ashima's grandmother's letter from India containing a name for the baby boy in America never reaches its destination. However, the hospital insists that the baby have a name without delay. Ashoke remembers how a book by the Russian author Gogol saved his life when the train he was travelling derailed killing many travellers. He thus gives the baby the name Gogol. The couple decides to name their son officially as Nikhil at his school. The baby, now used to the name Gogol, insists on being

called Gogol. But as he grows up, Gogol begins to detest his name. Whether as Gogol in the beginning or as Nikhil later, he “embodies the awkwardness of second-generation assimilation by the way his parents come to name him” (Peaco 581) and “The issue of naming, its arbitrariness and its fatedness, its significance and its quality as empty cipher runs through the novel” (Lynn 162). Ironically, Gogol clings to his name in the beginning and the name clings to him after that like the albatross to the ancient mariner – only, unlike Coleridge’s character, he has no tale to tell, at least not till the end when he is well on his way to accept his name.

Two incidents in Gogol’s boyhood make him reflect about the strangeness of his name. When he is in the sixth grade, he is taken on a school trip to a cemetery. While some of the boys identify names similar to theirs like Smith, Collins and Wood on the gravestones, Gogol experiences a sense of displacement and he reflects that when he dies, he will not be buried like in India but he will be burned and “his body will occupy no plot of earth, that no stone in this country will bear his name beyond life” (69) and “names die over time, that they perish just as people do” (70). This recognition of mortality is the beginning of Gogol’s education. It prepares him to deal with the loss of people close to him, for example his father’s death when it happens in the novel. Equally important is his awareness that he is in a country where he is a non-entity. He also “realizes that his personal name has no history, neither in his culture, his family nor anywhere else” (Heinze 194). The second incident happens in the classroom. In a short story class, when the teacher explains how Nikolai Gogol suffered and how bleak his last days were, Gogol finds it unbearable. Later at a court, citing his reasons for a change of name, he tells the judge, “I hate the name Gogol... I’ve always hated it” (102). Gogol attends this important event, “the legal rite of passage,” alone. He is euphoric as he emerges out of the court with the new name Nikhil.

The change of his name, however, does not mean a complete break with the old identity and total access to the new one. Yet, he makes every effort earnestly. At Yale few people know him as Gogol. He writes his name as Nikhil everywhere. He feels unshackled to be out of – metaphorically speaking – Gogol’s overcoat. The feeling is all but short-lived: “There is only one complication: he doesn’t feel like Nikhil. Not yet. Part of the problem is that the people who now 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” (105). The author, too, continues to call him Gogol even though he is officially Nikhil, perhaps because he is Gogol in his own consciousness and Gogol to everyone in the family. However, in her portrayal of Gogol, Lahiri steers clear of sentimentality: “the language of the narrator, written in the present tense and in the third person, lends an air of detachment and neutrality to the narrative, as if

Gogol is not experiencing his own life, but is watching himself travel through it" (Friedman 116). The language of narration is neutral but Gogol is made to occupy the seemingly unending in-between space – between Gogol and Nikhil, adolescence and responsibility, inheritance and opportunity.

Gogol learns the reason behind his strange name from his father. As Ashoke recounts his train journey of 1961, "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 fully know" (123). Gogol attempts to visualise the train accident his father survived. Nevertheless, he wonders about the way his name is associated with a catastrophe. He asks his father "Is that what you think of when you think of me? Do I remind you of that night?" To which his father replies, "Not at all.... You remind me of everything that followed" (124). This episode occurs sometime after Gogol has changed his name to Nikhil and has begun to feel he has acquired a new identity, and with it, a new status. He is made to see the shallowness of his attempt at name-changing in the backdrop of the circumstances in which he was named. The author sends him far in his venture of acquiring a new identity via a new name only to make him realise the superficiality of it. This last true exchange of words between father and son underlines for Gogol the importance of human relationships. Notably in the novel, the chain of relationships and the journeys of life are symbolised by the train. The several train journeys in the narrative are a metaphor for simultaneous movement of the individual and the masses – at another level the simultaneous movement of the immigrant as an individual and as a member of the immigrant community – and with its bogeys connected to one another, the train stands for life that is linked to other lives.

Gogol's growth as an individual can be traced through his three relationships. The interesting characteristic of these relationships is the way they are graded in the novel. In every case, the succeeding relationship is longer and more complex than the previous one, and hence the impact greater. In the first two relationships he tries to fill the lack he finds at home, especially with his parents, and in the third one he tries to identify himself, but every time in vain. What Gogol finds extraordinary about his first girlfriend Ruth is the hippy style of her upbringing. It is in stark contrast to his own upbringing which, he thinks, is bland. Another big difference is the way their families react to the relationship. While Ruth's family receives him at their farmhouse, Gogol's parents, when they learn about Ruth, are a bit uneasy, they even warn him about getting involved. Gogol finds it unreasonable, and he "pities his parents... for having no experience of being young and in love" (117). Gogol's happy time with Ruth in New Haven is interrupted when Ruth goes to Oxford for a semester. She returns only to tell him she wants to go back to England to

pursue her studies. Gogol's first serious association with a girl begins and ends while he is still a student.

Later, living in New York where he works with a design team allows Gogol to stay away from his parents even on weekends. He is happy to miss the Bengali atmosphere of home. He meets Maxine, a carefree girl who lives with her parents. Maxine's parents are very distinct from his parents. There is an astonishing camaraderie between the couple; they are rich, elitist and open with their daughter. They accept him into their household gladly. Gogol begins to feel bitter about the way his parents live. He thinks "the terms of his parents' marriage are at once unthinkable and unremarkable" (138). As he spends more time with Maxine and her parents and shares with them many light-hearted moments, he experiences a new sense of freedom, something he never experienced at home, "... yet for some reason it is dependence, not adulthood, he feels" (142). Maxine thinks of Gogol as different from his parents. She thinks of him as American. But such an attitude is tantamount to a refusal to acknowledge his background and accept him completely. Gogol sees this truth when he finds her insensitivity to his father's death. He breaks with Maxine and delves into soul searching. He recognises the frivolity of his actions in the light of his father's subdued nobility.

After a lonely year in New York, a dalliance with a married woman called Bridget leaves Gogol feeling guilty. It is a situation not rare in Lahiri and clearly echoes the short story "Sexy" from *The Interpreter of Maladies*. Shortly after the end of the affair with Bridget, Gogol meets Moushumi, an Indian girl whose parents are known to his family. They marry after getting to know each other. That their families play a role in bringing them together gives their marriage an ingredient common to arranged marriages popular in India. It is the way Gogol's parents got married, which, until now, was unconceivable for Gogol. At the initial stages of the marriage, the fact that Gogol and Moushumi share a common heritage seems to help. More importantly, Gogol and Moushumi are both cosmopolites. They are open to new cultural engagements. Their cultural choices and experiences are closer to Anthony Appiah's idea of cosmopolitanism where cultures mingle non-violently than to Homi Bhabha's idea of hybridisation which is an inevitable outcome of colonisation (Friedman 118). Gogol goes on and accepts Moushumi's fiercely independent nature and her bohemian circle of friends. But when he accompanies her to Paris, where she had lived before as a student and where she now seems detached from him, he vaguely feels her reluctance to be a part of his world. Moushumi resists conformation, "her immersion in other cultures, apart from American and Indian, enables her to escape her own pre-fixed cultural notions" (Schlote 403). Although she had sincerely started afresh with Gogol after a disastrous engagement to an American, it was perhaps inevitable for her to break free once again. Song explains the reason why her relationship with Gogol will not last:

“She wants a feeling of release from expectation, a kind of liberation that post war critical theorists have repeatedly found in the unravelling of the sign and in the embrace of a hard anti-identity position, a rebellion against meaning that sometimes seems the same as a rebellion against oppression” (360). After a couple of years with Gogol, she renews a sexual affair she previously had with a Russian and that puts an end to the marriage. Eventually Moushumi finds her sanctuary in her favourite city, Paris. The reasons for her actions are deeply rooted in her personality as “... she does not want to be tied to a context, determined by her origins, nor to adopt the identity of the Mother Country... finds a third place, an adopted country that has no claim over her” (Kral 70-71). Gogol’s own affair with a married woman just before meeting Moushumi is a kind of preparation for the readers to judge him and for the author to isolate him after the break up.

In the final pages of the novel, Gogol goes in search of something he has abandoned for eighteen years. It was a gift by his father on his fourteenth birthday, *The Short Stories of Nikolai Gogol*. His act of seeking what meant a lot to his father is his attempt to establish contact with the past. The impending departure of his mother makes Gogol hold on dearly to something that determined the trajectory of his parents’ lives. It is also his way of paying homage to the sacrifices of his parents, his way of relinquishing the pretensions that he had acquired and reclaiming his past so that he could go on living with a sense of history and purpose. Gogol holds the gift, the book, in his hands, opens it and starts reading. It is the moment Gogol realises the need for his parents to preserve their past. He now knows they did that mainly to extend their stay in a new country and he could see what it had taken them to replace the memories of their own past with the realities of their children’s present. Gogol’s realisation in the end is the moment where the gaps between arrival and departure, absence and presence, and displacement and replacement are erased. It is also the moment where the novelist shows how the lives of the first and second generation Indian immigrants in America are connected.

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