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MARGINALIZED MASCULINITIES: A STUDY OF JHUMPA LAHIRI'S *THE NAMESAKE*

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ABSTRACT

In analylising diasporic fiction much research and writings have focussed on women's problems and search for identity in a "foreign" land. But the present article attempts to study Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* (2003) to explore the subtle semantic inflections and the politics of gender in the representation of men belonging to the Indian diaspora and configure masculinity from postcolonial perspective. It seeks to explain the diversity of experience of its male protagonists Mr Ashoke Ganguli, a first generation immigrant in U.S. and his son Gogol who is born and brought up in America. My argument is that while for the first generation cultural identity is a matter of negotiation of their 'being' with 'becoming', for the second generation it involves recognition of their 'being.' Drawing from the theories of Frantz Fanon, Homi Bhabha, Stuart Hall, and Sura P. Rath on diasporic identity and cultural hybridity, the article interrogates Lahiri's engagement with the marginalized masculinities.

Key Words: Diaspora, Jhumpa Lahiri, post-colonial masculinity, cultural identity

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The theme of dislocation, displacement, divided identity, problems of history, confrontation with racism, the problematic in-betweenness and sometimes "comforting" hybridity abound in diasporic fiction. The celebrated women novelists like Jhumpa Lahiri, Chitra Benerjee Divakaruni, Anita Rau Badami, Shauna Singh Baldwin and a host of others from the "third world" engage with these issues in their novels in an autobiographical vein where women occupy the forefront. Much research and writings in the area of post-colonial feminism have focussed on women's problems and search for identity in a "foreign" land. But then one needs to study these works to explore the subtle semantic inflections and the politics of gender in the representation of men belonging to the Indian diaspora and configure masculinity from postcolonial perspective.

In the context of post-colonial masculinity a few questions become very pertinent: How is man represented in various post-colonial contexts and how is it represented in a diasporic context in particular? What is the nature of the discourse of post-colonial hybrid masculinities created through the cultural fusions of global diaspora?

Does the essentializing and homogenizing of postcolonial masculinity serve to obscure the plurality of experience of different generations?

With an emphasis on alienation and assimilation as much as on the problematisation of name and identity, this article aims to explore the subtle and nuanced ways in which masculinities are configured and represented in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* (2013). It seeks to explain the diversity of experience of its male protagonists Mr Ashoke Ganguli, a first generation immigrant in U.S. and his son Gogol who is born and brought up in America.

The Namesake is the story of the Ganguli family ranging over a period from 1968 to 2000. It revolves around Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli's settlement in the US, their relationship with their US-born children, Gogol and Sonia, and their attempt "to lay claim upon a patch of foreign land without losing contact with their Indian heritage" (51). Their family can be best described with the following words from the novel, "Four in the family with two U.S. passports and two Indian ones" (80). The US passports of the children mark them different from the Indian identity of their parents.

Ashoke's move to the US was inspired by the words of a copassenger named Mr Ghosh during a train journey, who insinuated him thus: "Before it's too late . . . pack a pillow and a blanket and see as much of the world as you can. You will not regret it" (16). The fatal journey cost the person and others their lives in sleep, but Ashoke miraculously survived the accident because he was reading Gogol's "The Overcoat". When the rescuers arrived, Ashoke, although unable to speak, could attract their attention by waving a copy of the short story. Thus, he narrowly escaped death though he was confined to bed for a long time. He came to the US for his Ph D and never went back. "He was born twice in India, and then a third time in America. Three lives by thirty." (21) The memories of that fateful night influenced him to leave India and inspired him to choose an unusual name for his son. In naming his son Gogol, he paid the greatest homage to the Ukranian-Russian writer Nikolai Gogol. He felt a special kinship with Gogol, the writer not only because "he believed the book saved his life, but because he spent most of his adult life outside his homeland like him" (77). Thus, the existence and identity of the father and the son are importantly connected with the name Gogol.

It is worthwhile to dwell on the question: What might the study of Ashoke's position reveal about the complex structures of postcolonial relations? Have his cultural battles and negotiations produced cultural hybrids?

I believe, the employment of Hall's idea of 'being' and 'becoming' of cultural identity would elicit the best response to the above questions (Hall 70). Stuart Hall discusses two different ways of thinking about 'cultural identity' in the context of Caribbean or black diaspora:

> The first position defines 'cultural identity' in terms of one, shared culture, a sort of collective 'one true self', hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed 'selves', which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common. Within the terms of this definition, our cultural identities reflect the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes which provide us, as 'one people', with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning, beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of our actual history. . . .Such a conception of cultural identity played a critical role in all the post-colonial struggles which have so profoundly reshaped our world. (223)

In Lahiri's novel, the first-generation immigrants, both male and female, who share one history and culture, also share the similarity of experience in adjusting to life in a foreign land. They are aware of, what Hall calls, their 'being.' They allow the host culture only partially to intrude at home. The Gangulis maintained their ties with the Indian culture through the perpetuation of traditions and rituals along side gatherings with their Bengali friends and occasional visits to India. Food constitutes one of the many factors that help to establish the link between Ashoke, Ashima and their *desh*. Whenever Ashoke and Ashima have to make an important decision, they consult the members of their community: "each step, each acquisition, no matter how small, involves deliberation, consultation with Bengali friends" (64). In an attempt to preserve their identity, they hold on to their group and culture. Like all first generation settlers, they want their children to learn American English, get good education and pretty jobs; at the same time they insist them to practise the Indian moral and cultural code at home. They go to the Kathakali dance performance or a Sitar recital at

memorial hall. When Gogol is in third grade, they send him to Bengali language and culture lessons every other Saturday, held in the home of one of their friends.

It is apt and essential to mention here that Jhumpa Lahiri's engagement with the problem of cultural identity of the Indian diaspora springs from her own diasporic status. Born in London to Bengali parents who subsequently migrated to America, Lahiri was raised on Rhode Island. She belongs to the category of "ABCD" or American-Born Confused Desi (an acronym she uses in the novel to describe the difficulties experienced by US-born children of Indian parents). She won the Pulitzer Prize in 2000 with a collection of short stories, *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), and has since published *The Namesake* (2003), *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008), and *The Lowland* (2013). Lahiri sums up the predicament of living in a foreign land in *The Namesake* through Ashima's realization that, "being a foreigner... is a sort of lifelong pregnancy- a perpetual wait, a constant burden, a continuous feeling out of sorts. It is an ongoing responsibility, a parenthesis in what had once been ordinary life, only to discover that previous life has vanished, replaced by something more complicated and demanding. Like pregnancy, being a foreigner, Ashima believes, is something that elicits the same curiosity from strangers, the same combination of pity and respect." (49-50)

It is necessary then to accept and adapt to the change to cope with a more "complicated and demanding" life. Hall in the same essay goes on to add:

> There is, however, a second, related but different view of cultural identity. This second position recognises that, as well as the many points of similarity, there are also critical points of deep and significant *difference* which constitute 'what we really are'; or rather - since history has intervened - 'what we have become'. . . .Cultural identity, in this second sense, is a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being'. It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power. (225)

The novel privileges the character of Ashima and guards the readers through her development, and Ashoke is relegated to a marginalized position through his untimely death in the middle of the story. But it does not fail to escort us through the transformation his cultural identity undergoes. He is occupied with teaching and research seven days a week. But the Sunday afternoons are family reunion for the families from Calcutta. With other men Ashoke would argue about the politics of America, a country in which they have no right to vote (38). This exclusion from politics which is traditionally figured as the domain of the male reflects a subordinate masculinity. There is a defensive aspect to the construction of masculinity that permits the creation of safe space by assimilation with the host culture. After completing his Ph D at MIT, he is hired as an assistant professor of electrical engineering at the university. He finds it thrilling to lecture before a roomful of American students and is satisfied with a sense of accomplishment to see his name printed under "Faculty" in the university directory (49). Unlike Ashima who would prefer to go through a tattered copy of a Bengali magazine she brought from India even at the hospital (6), he reads international newspapers, a marker of his growing belief in multi-culturalism and transnationalism. In fact it had started taking shape within him from his adolescence in the form of love for Dickens, Graham Greene, Somerset Maugham and the Russians, the favourite authors of his boyhood. He is more adaptable to the American ways than Ashima. Though Ashima continues to wear sari and sandals from Bata, Ashoke switches from tailor-made pants and shirts to ready-made, or from fountain pens to ballpoints. Resigning the jackets and ties and the wristwatch he normally wears to the university, though seems to be insignificant change, it marks welcoming and adopting a new way of life. His cultural identity includes negotiating the pieces of his cultural inheritance with the American ways, his 'being' with 'becoming', to produce a hybrid identity.

Hybridity reflects in Ashoke's role as a father. A closer look at diasporic condition reveals that the status of patriarchs has changed since migration due to influence of the host culture. The hyper-masculine and aggressive practices are replaced by a new fatherhood with diminishing patriarchal privileges. They have less authority in the family decision-making process and less command over the children as the children take their own decisions. Adjusting to the new environment and accepting the change appear to be compensatory

practices for their experiences as marginalized masculinities. The first generation migrants try a negotiation with their cultural dilemmas and sense of displacement by a juxtaposition of received idea from their home culture and host culture and assume new "hybrid identities." In Lahiri's novel the idea of "hybridity" exhibits a belief in assimilation of cultural components without downplaying the diversity of culture.[1] Ashoke's total self is akin to Sura P. Rath's diasporic identity in a Third Space. Rath writes:

> I am constantly assured of who I am: a middle class, tax-paying, white-collar worker. Like the other roles I play in my private life as a husband, a father, a neighbor, a friend, a son and son-in-law, a brother and brother-in-law, etc., I take these public roles seriously, and obviously my total self emerges from a composite of all these over-lapping roles and images. (para 1)

For the second generation the question of identity is a conflicted one. At home Indian culture and value system are adhered to, while in public the American code of conduct is followed. It is through the eyes of the first generation and sometimes through the unwilling occasional visits to India with parents that the second generation learns about the homeland. They are not attached to their cultural past and find it easier to accept America's culture. The children's "Americanisation" is evident from Gogol and Sonia's preference for burgers, tuna sandwiches and Christmas over Indian food and festivals.

As Gogol grows older, his desire to escape his own past becomes more pronounced. When it comes time to apply for college, for instance, Gogol turns his back on his father's *alma mater* and accepts a position at Yale. Similarly, in college he refuses to study an "acceptable" immigrant subject like chemistry, engineering, or biology and prefers to pursue a course in architecture. Such actions not only neglect the wishes of his parents, but also imply that Gogol is uncomfortable with his 'being'.

The problematics of contested identity surfaces overtly in the novel when Gogol attends a panel discussion about Indian novels written in English. He is bored by the panelists who keep referring to something called "marginality". When the sociologist on the panel talks about ABCD, Gogol learns that it stands for "American-born confused deshi". He thinks the word "confused" could be replaced by "conflicted". He knows that *Deshi,* a generic word for "countryman", means "Indian". His parents refer to India as *desh*, but he never thinks of India as *desh.* He thinks of it as Americans do, as India (118). Gogol wants to be seen as American.

I want to interrogate here the question Frantz Fanon asks in *Black Skin/ White Masks* to analyze Gogol's position. Fanon alters Freud's question 'What does a woman want?' to 'what does a man want?' In the introduction to this epoch making work, he asks: "what does the black man want?" His answer is, "The black man wants to be white." Bhabha in *Location of Culture* elaborates on Fanon's image of Black Skin/ White Masks:

> 'You're a doctor, a writer, a student, you're different, you're one of us'. It is precisely in that ambivalent use of 'different'- to be different from those that are different makes you the same- that the Unconscious speaks of the form of Otherness, the tethered shadow of deferral and displacement. It is not the Colonialist Self or the Colonised Other, but the disturbing distance in between that constitutes the figure of colonial otherness- the White man's artifice inscribed on the Black man's body. It is in relation to this impossible object that emerges the liminal problem of colonial identity and its vicissitudes. (64)

Gogol, too, is accepted in the family of his American girl friend Maxine Ratliff because he is "so different". They are satisfied and intrigued by his background, by his years at Yale and Columbia, his career as an architect, his Mediterranean looks. "You could be Italian," Lydia (Maxine's mother) remarks (134). He does not conform to the colonist's image of a stereotypical Indian. Fanon explains the acceptance of the black person on the white men's part, from his own experience in France. He writes, ". . . the white man agrees to give his sister to the black- but on one condition: You have nothing in common with real Negroes. You are not black, you are 'extremely brown.' This procedure is quite familiar to coloured students in France. Society refuses to consider them genuine Negroes. The Negro is a savage, whereas the student is civilized." (50)

In spite of the acceptance, the "othering" is evident. Towards the second-half of *The Namesake* Gogol celebrates his twenty seventh birthday at the Lake house of his girlfriend Maxine's parents in New Hampshire without his parents. During the dinner they host to celebrate his birthday Gogol encounters Pamela, a middle aged white woman who insists on viewing him as Indian, though he declares that he is from Boston. She states that he must never get sick when he travels to India. Gogol denies it and replies that they get sick all the time. He tries to identify himself with America. But the woman persists, "but you're an Indian... I'd think the climate wouldn't affect you given your heritage" (157). Maxine's mother corrects Pamela, asserting that Gogol is American, but in the end even she hesitates, asking him if he actually was born in the United States (157). This tendency to categorize Gogol as an Indian stands testimony to the "othering" of "Indian" immigrants in the United States, where individuals are identified according to their roots and color of their skin, rather than their country of birth, residence or citizenship. The black/ brown skin supersedes the white mask.

Gogol's identity formation, then, demands awareness and recognition of his 'being.' His experiences with the Ratliffs and his father's sudden death, somehow widen the distance between the life he is yearning to live and the life he comes from and awakens him to the other part of his identity, his Indian background. He could feel his parents' guilt at being able to do nothing when their parents had died in India. For ten days following his father's death, he, with his mother and Sonia, eats a mourner's diet, forgoing meat and fish. The aversion to Bengali customs is replaced by a hearty acceptance and an acknowlegement of his Indian roots. The death of his father becomes a permanent presence in Gogol's life, "The train tilts to the left heading south to New York, to the right on the way to Boston. In that brief period of suggested peril, he thinks always, of that other train he has never seen, the one that had nearly killed his father" (185). Here Gogol connects his present to his father's past; the journey on the train reminds him of another journey in which his father narrowly escaped death because he was reading Gogol's "The Overcoat." He learnt the real story behind his naming which his father told him days before he suddenly dies of a heart attack and by which time Gogol is calling himself by the name of Nikhil. Thus the content of Gogol, the author's short story directs the threads of the narration. As does the ghost of Akaky in "The Overcoat," Ashoke returns to haunt Gogol, who can only then recuperate his past and establish a link between past and present. Finally, he is estranged from Maxine, meets a Bengali girl Moushumi according to his mother's wish and marries her subsequently though the marriage proves a disaster later as Moushumi decides to desert him for another man. But one cannot ignore the important part of his evolvement, that he has established a connection with his 'being.' The episode of Gogol-Moushumi points to another significant issue in the novel - though the scope of the article excludes a detail discussion - the issue of gender power reversals where women "become brokers of new domestic cultures and of new kinds of sexual politics" (Breckenridge and Appadurai, ii), and where the man comes to bear the burden of representing cultural tradition and family loyalty.

In Lahiri's novel, the position of men in the diaspora reveals that men are responding creatively to their marginalization by creating a hybrid identity mediated by the cultural effects of globalization. While Ashoke's awakening to cultural hybridity is a matter of 'becoming,' that in Gogol is an awareness of his 'being.' *The Namesake* celebrates the cultural hybridity resulting from transnational contacts and invites us to rethink conventional immigrant's experience. It makes us understand and appreciate the fact that in this globalised world characterized by hybridity, transculturalism and migration, identity is a matter of 'being' as well as 'becoming.'

NOTE:

1. Hybridity has been one of the most widely employed and most disputed terms in post colonial theory which commonly refers to the "creation of new transcultural forms within the contact zone produced by colonization". The term has been associated mainly with the work of Homi K. Bhabha, who theorized on the interdependence of colonizer/ colonized relations and the mutual construction of their subjectivities.

For a detailed and more illuminating treatment of the subject of hybridity see,

Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture,* (New York: Routledge, 1994); R.Radhakrishnan, "Adjudicating Hybridity, Co-ordinating Inbetweenness," *Jouvert: A Journal of Post-colonial Studies* 5.1 (2000); R. J. C. Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race*, (London: Routledge, 1995); S. Puri, *The Caribbean Postcolonial:*

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