
Transnational Empathy in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*

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Empathy is the capacity to recognize and identify what the other person think, feel and perceive. The origin of the word empathy can be traced back to the Greek word *empathia* meaning physical affection and passion. The first use of the equivalent word of empathy seems to be found in the usage of a German word by Hermann Lotze and Robert Vischer meaning 'feeling into'. The term was later translated in to English as 'Empathy' by Edward B. Titchener. Inter personal empathy is directly proportional to the similarities in the living condition, culture, education, family background etc. Naturally there exists a dynamic interpersonal relation when people are empathetic to each other. However the concept of empathy is crucial and complex when it comes in the arena of International relations and transnational Politics. Without empathy world will become chaotic and uncivilized. It allows us to make the bond of trust. Dr. Carolyn Pedwell has rightly pointed out that the empathy is differently felt, constructed and mobilized across range of key sites where issues of social justice and transnational politics are at stake.

The burgeoning presence of Indian Diaspora across the world has triggered a new consideration of the cultural theories of nation, identity and international affairs. In a preliminary definition, nationalism could be understood as "a devotion to one's nation or a

policy of national independence". In other words the concepts nationalism and nationality are preceded from the very existence of a nation and a sentiment or belief that produces devotion to and identification with the nation. It can also be said that nation is the gravity centre upon which a sort of national identity or nationality is founded. In a broader analysis, nationality can be seen as the distinct characteristic features of a group of people, closely associated with each other by common descent, language or history. However they are usually organized as a separate political state and occupying a definite territory. Benedict Anderson goes beyond this idea when he says a nation can be an "imagined political community" that is a subjective state of mind. In terms of psychology, as Walker Cannon put forward, the essence of the nation is a psychological bond that unites the people. However the nature or sources of such bond remain obscure emotional rather than rational. From a more anthropological perspective Max Weber speaks of ethnic group formed on the belief of common descent explains that a sense of affinity to a particular nation relies on the qualitative degree of the belief in common nationality.

Every nation socialises its subjects differently as they have different cultural backgrounds and value systems As a result of the large scale migration, there is a tendency

to emerge a globalised culture whose challenge is to combat with the heterogeneous societies who do not completely leave aside their cultural and the historical particulars. The need for a cultural identity which is more "transnational" in its essence has been recognised for many years. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the American intellectual Randolph Bourne wrote a piece entitled "Trans-National America". Charles Molesworth's introduction to Bourne's work in a recent anthology describes his writing as "extremely prescient", and suggests that "it is fair to say that even today the thinking on multiculturalism and its political and social forms has rarely gone beyond Bourne's formulations" (1731). To Bourne, "melting pot" metaphor is no longer useful and practical and he urges his readers to reject it, which he says will result in a culture that is "washed out into a tasteless, colorless fluid of uniformity" (1736): he dreams instead of a world in which a variety of cultures co-exist, "inextricably mingled, yet not homogeneous. They merge but they do not fuse" (1737). In the past, notions of the American "melting pot" have been set in opposition to those of the Canadian "mosaic"; however, the "mosaic" metaphor, too, is increasingly being replaced by ideas concerned with hybridity and multiculturalism. Depicting the process of negotiating the borders, both physical borders of states and countries and the metaphorical borders, between genders generations and cultures, Jhumapa Lahiri, an American writer of Indian origin, seeks for an alternative paradigm which seems to be less defective and more flexible to meet the need of the day without holding on to the hierarchical categorisation of nations.

Indian communities are found in all the major, countries of the world. The Indian diaspora may well be regarded as an international phenomenon. It has its presence in more than 100 countries globally. Being heterogeneous in terms of religion, education language and regional origins, the Indian diaspora has grown apace in the past three decades to comprise more than 20 million people spread over all countries. It has reached a critical mass in various host countries. It has developed institutions, orientations, and patterns of living specific to the institutional structures and socio political contexts of different host lands.

Indian diaspora is characterized by much diversity in its population in terms of culture, including languages, regions, religions and other forms of social stratification. In spite of their different backgrounds and their multiple spatial locations, diasporic Indians have some common features, such as sharply defined family roles and status based on patriarchy, gerontocracy and the subordinate of the individual to the interests of the family.

Diasporas are relatively exclusive minority communities all over the world whose identities are grounded in national or transnational networks and nostalgia for their imaginary homelands. Inhabiting the fictional world of large-scale transnational migrations, in which borders of cultures are frequently traversed and need to be constantly negotiated, Lahiri's characters are identified as cultural hybrids, whose hyphenated identities are troubled by tension and anxiety.

Jhumapa Lahiri's works have a universal appeal as it deals with migration,

politics of location, and the conflict arises from the constructed identity of the first, second and the third generations of Indian immigrant in the US. Jhumpa Lahiri was born in London in 1967. Her parents moved to the United States in 1970, and she became a U.S. citizen in 1987. Lahiri for her part was born to Bengali parents who migrated from Calcutta, and then moved to the United States. As a child she visited her ancestral home in Calcutta many times. She also had a very conventional Bengali wedding in Calcutta in 2001 Lahiri's rise to fame happened in the year 2000, when her collection of short stories, *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), won the Pulitzer Prize for the best American work of fiction. Lahiri's *Unaccustomed Earth*, a second collection of short stories having been published in 2008. Her novel, *The Namesake*, published in 2003, was made into a successful film adaptation by Indian filmmaker Mira Nair in 2007.

Jhumpa Lahiri largely writes about the human condition of Indian diaspora in the USA. Her focus is the 'mindscape of characters' and 'human predicament' in its wider perspective. Lahiri delves deep to explain the labyrinths of her characters, to explore, psychologically the intricacies and complexities of human relationships particularly of a class of characters who live in the west but with parents born and raised in India. What are they? - Indians or Americans. They had not changed their habits, and they are apparently a close knit ethnic group, still far from being assimilated into the general current of life around them. Yet they were as far from the Indian current. Like the mythological king Trishanku, they stood

suspended between two worlds, unable to enter either and making a haven of their own.

There has to be a source country and a target country, source culture and a target culture, a source language and a target language, a source religion, and a target religion, and so on. The crossing must be forced, not voluntary; otherwise the passage will only amount to an enactment of desire-fulfilment. Or, even if voluntary, the passage must involve some significant tension between the source and the target cultures. It is through this displacement and ambivalence that what is considered diasporic is engendered.

Gogol as the main character in *The Namesake* was a typical example of acculturation. Gogol was an America born, but an Indian by identity. He was raised in America thereby making him (Gogol) more acquainted with the American culture and life style. At the age four, Gogol have already been taught to eat on his own with his fingers, and not to let the food stain the skin of his palm. He fills the shopping cart with items that he and Sonia want to eat. In the grocery store, Gogol and Sonia picks up individually wrapped slices of cheese, mayonnaise, tuna fish, and hot dogs. For Gogol's lunches, Ashima and Ashoke make Gogol sandwiches with bologna or roast beef. As a treat from Ashima makes Gogol an American dinner once a week such as Shake n' Bake chicken or Hamburger Helper that she uses to prepare with ground lamb.

. To Ashoke, the name of Gogol signifies a beginning, a survival and everything that followed that terrible night of train crash in India. But it is difficult for Gogol to understand the emotional

significance of his name. He is afflicted from birth with a name that is neither Indian nor American nor even really a first name at all. Being away from home at college makes it easy for Gogol to live as Nikhil in an American culture. He does so happily for many years, detaching himself from his roots and his family as much as possible.

Gogol is schizophrenic as he is split between two nations, India/ America, between two names, Indian/Russian, between two value systems, traditions/conventions. Genetically he is tied up to his traditions and has unique self; racially he is alien, and a second class citizen in America. He feels that his wife has a better status. His complexes get reflected through Moushmi, who feels dissatisfied having married him.

As regards to the novel *The Namesake*, while Ashima was pregnant, Ashima states that she is very terrified in raising a child in a country where she is not related to no one, and where she knows little about. Ashima really did not like the America culture. Ashima always misses her country and her relatives that are in India. All the people she interacted with in America were all Indians. Even while Ashima and Ashoke were in America, Ashima dresses the Indian way. Ashima is reluctant to learn to drive, she insists on wearing Indian clothing and eating Indian food, and for many years she lives without American friends. Ashima's wish to raise both the children with Bengali culture and values often failed as the children grow up relating mostly to their peers.

For the second generation the question of identity is a complicated issue. At home Indian culture and value system are adhered to, while in public the American code of

conduct is followed. All first generation settlers want their children to do well and get good jobs. The American dream looms in their eyes and they want their children to exploit the situation and derive maximum benefit for themselves, but they must follow the Indian moral and cultural code at home. Ashima and Ashoke try hard to hold on to their Indianness, their culture despite surrounded by the American culture all around. They go at 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. But, Gogol, Sonia, and Moushumi want to chart their own lives. The second generation immigrants are not attached to their cultural past, in fact; they find it easier to accept America's hybrid culture. Both Gogol and Sonia grow in suburban New York and choose American over their Bengali culture, which is not liked by their parents.

Identities cannot be straightway preserved or lost in processes of acculturation, assimilation, pluralism and multiculturalism. Cultural identity of the recognizes all cultural relations as ambivalent, subversive, transgressive and hybrid. To Bhabha, hybrid is not a thing, but a process. In the same way identity of an individual in general and identity of diaspora in particular is not a stable static product instead it is a dynamic process. Cultural identity of the diaspora is not comprised of two cultural spaces from which the third emerges but points to an ambivalent third space of cultural production and reproduction.

When he leaves for college, Gogol rejects his identity completely and becomes

Nikhil (his long lost proper name that he rejected as a child). He dreads his visits home and his return to a life where he is known as Gogol. Gogol is not just a name to him; it signifies all his discomfort to fit into two different cultures as he grew up. His father, Ashoke Ganguly, named him Gogol due to the circumstances of his survival of a train wreck during which he was reading the work of the Russian writer Nikolai Gogol. The rescuers found him lying injured in the rubble of the wreck due to the piece of page from Nikolai Gogol's book he was still clutching in his hand.

Ashok Ganguli shows what is called transnational maturity which enables him to interact with the ways of the host country without losing his emotional attachment with his home land and the unique Bengali culture. He is an American Professor at the University but at home he seems to be a typical Bengali family man following the Bengali culture rituals and practises. He is mature enough to communicate with his children, and patiently understands what the second generation migrants feel and think. He perceives neither of the cultures as superior and never attempts to judge one using the episteme of the other. He is neither baffled at the more individualistic American culture nor alienated like his son Gogol when confronting with his native Indian culture. But he goes even beyond the binaries of host and native nationalities and seems to possess an identity which is more Transnational and global. His transnational empathy provides him with the capacity to acknowledge his roots and accept his roof.

Contrary to Ashoke, For Gogol, therefore, much of the rest of the novel is consumed by attempts to make peace with his past. He begins to open up about his heritage

in relationships, and he incorporates his family into his life. The years of resisting his past have made him uncomfortable in the present. However, Gogol slowly becomes a student of his past. And the lessons he learns, Lahiri seems to suggest, pave the way for him to discover a peaceful future. Gogol at the end realizes why his parents used to visit their homeland annually; he understands the value their native culture had for them. Gogol opens towards a new understanding of his own rich culture which till now he did not try to understand. The novel is a portrayal of the progression of Gogol's cultural education and the broadening of Gogol's cultural horizon which makes him see his past with love and respect. Towards the end he realizes the value of his Indian identity.

When the dynamics of his own family change after the death of a beloved family member, Gogol slowly begins to realize that he cannot simply walk away from who he is. Gogol's metamorphosis is triggered by the death of his father Ashoke. Earlier he was living an American life, now he thinks as an Indian and understands even the value of family and relationship. When Maxine asks him "to get away from all this (Gogol's family situation)", he replies "I don't want to get away" (182). For better or for worse he loves his family and their Indian custom. He even begins to realize that his passionate efforts to create an entirely new person are ultimately just reactions against his past. Gradually he reads his father's favourite Russian author after whom he was named. The novel ends in his journey to himself realizing the significance of knowing his own Indian roots as well as the possibilities of

An attempt is made in Lahiri's *The Namesake*, to map the journey of Indian Diaspora from the status of the immigrants to that of the transnational citizens of the world. The process of cultural identity construction in *The Namesake*, invariably reveals that the cultural identity of an immigrant is in flux and indeterminate. Like the post structural view of the play of signification, identity is also arbitrary in which different culture traces like dominant culture, native culture, shedding culture, emerging culture and residue culture offer a kind of culture play where each of these traces defer continuously. As a result a transnational maturity emerges and paves way to transnational empathy which takes the immigrant from his ethnic enclave and gives him a wider perspective of the world around. Thus transnational empathy emerges in *The Namesake* thus challenges the assumption that cultural encounters invariably establish hierarchical dominator / dominated relationship.

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