

Alienation, Loneliness and Nostalgia in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Namesake*

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Abstract

The theoretic basis of alienation, within the capitalist mode of production, is that the worker invariably loses the ability to determine life and destiny, when deprived of the right to think of themselves as the director of their own actions; to determine the character of said actions; to define relationships with other people; and to own those items of value from goods and services, produced by their own labour.

Nostalgia is sentimentality for the past, typically for a period or place with happy personal associations. The word *nostalgia* is learned formation of a Greek compound, consisting of νόστος (*nóstos*), meaning "homecoming", a Homeric word, and ἄλγος (*álgos*), meaning "pain" or "ache", and was coined by a 17th-century medical student to describe the anxieties displayed by Swiss mercenaries fighting away from home.

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Introduction

Lahiri depicts the loneliness and isolation in the lives of foreigners by depicting the critical situations. Even when one loses someone who is very close to him, one is unable to show one's sentiments to others in the closing years of his life. When Ashima's father passed away, she could leave for India six days later, with no hope of meeting him again. Lahiri feels that the world narrows down for the foreigners, as they are unable to think or do anything beyond it. It was not Ashima alone, who felt nostalgic about India, but so many other Indian women who forced their husbands to return to their own homeland:

For being a foreigner, Ashima is beginning to realize, 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 (*The Namesake*, 49-50).

Lahiri exhibits the parents' anxiety in retention of their own culture. Ashima and Ashoke loved watching their son eat with his fingers as per the Bengali culture. They even had the fear that after them, he may not do so. Gogol, while going to kindergarten became unhappy at the thought of being called 'Nikhil'--someone he does not know. That is the reason he remains Gogol at kindergarten as well. But he does not realize that it is the name 'Gogol', which he got as Namesake, will make him feel embarrassed throughout his life. Though he realizes quite late that it is not the name, but one's identity, by which one is known in life. Gogol and his sister who was five years older than him, considered themselves Americans as they were born in this land. They looked forward more to Christmas celebrations, than to the worship of Durga and Saraswati. But Ashima and Ashoke tried their best to make them acquainted with the Bengali culture. In third grade, they sent Gogol to Bengali language and culture lessons every other Saturday. On Gogol's fourteenth birthday, his father presented him the short stories of 'Nikolai Gogol', his favourite Russian author. But Gogol never became interested in reading a word of Gogol, being unaware of the accident that had nearly killed his father, and which gave him his name. That was the reason Gogol had developed hatred for his name:

For by now, he's come to hate questions pertaining to his name, hates having constantly to explain. He hates having to tell people that it does not mean anything 'in Indian'. He hates having to wear a nametag on his sweater at Model United Nations Day at school. He even hates signing his name at the bottom of his drawings in art class. He hates that his name is both absurd and obscure, that it has nothing to do with who he is, that is neither Indian nor American but of all things Russian. He hates having to live with it, with a pet name turned good name, day after day, second after second (*The Namesake*, 75-76).

The name 'Gogol' distressed him physically as well. He found his name shapeless and weightless, and he could not imagine girls calling him 'Gogol' under romantic circumstances. He suppressed his emotions, and here he made a mistake. If he would have insisted his father to know the real reason behind his name, he would have possibly got a convincing answer. But he kept silent, suffering alone, bringing disaster to prime years of his life. Gogol feels that he has no identity, as his name lacked dignity or gravity. His suffering intensifies when he thinks that:

Not only does Gogol Ganguli have a pet name turned good name, but a last name turned first name. Therefore, it occurs to him that no one he knows in the world, in Russia or India or America or anywhere, shares his name. Not even the source of his namesake (*The Namesake*, 78).

A visit to India for eight months by Gogol's family seems to Gogol as cumbersome, having no relevance to their lives. He was now American--loved American culture and American life. The name "Gogol" was torturing him like anything, and when he hears an account of Nikolai Gogol's biography, it worsens his condition. Mr. Lawson, Gogol's teacher, describes Nikolai Gogol-- the author, as an intelligent, queer, and sickly creature. He also reputed him to be a hypochondriac and a deeply paranoid, frustrated man, who never married, fathered no children. Each time Mr. Lawson uttered Nikolai Gogol's name, Gogol quietly winced and experienced the pain. Whenever he listened to his classmates complain, he felt as if his own work was being attacked. Gogol's dislike for his own name brought misery to his life. He did not date with anyone in high school; did not attend dances and did not listen to the records together. Gogol was unlike American teenagers, that is the reason, his parents were not anxious of his career. But the new name Nikhil brought him disaster:

It is as Nikhil, that first semester that he grows a goatee, starts smoking Camel Lights at parties and while writing papers and before exams, discovers Brian Eno and Elvis Costello and Charlie Parker. It is as Nikhil that he 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 at Ezra Stiles.... (*The Namesake*, 105).

Gogol had never seen his father expressing his thoughts, desires, and moods on any of the occasions. On one windy night, the revelation of the truth about his name comes as a shock to Gogol. He is stunned to know about his father's past that had survived a tragedy and had suffered in an inconceivable way: He imagines his father, in his twenties as Gogol is now, sitting on a train as Gogol had just been, reading a story, and then suddenly nearly killed. He struggles to picture the West Bengal countryside he has seen on only a few occasions, his father's mangled body, among hundreds of dead ones, being carried on a stretcher, past a twisted length of maroon compartments (*The Namesake*, 123).

Like Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli; Gogol and Sonia struggle to respect their culture, while adapting to American society. Gogol had changed with the new culture in New York, and isolation had come into his life. Though he got support of his parents, he had become detached from them. It seemed that now he had no sentiments for them:

...after four years in New Haven he didn't want to move back to Massachusetts, to the one city in America his parents know. He didn't want to attend his father's ammeter and live in an apartment in Central Square as his parents once had and revisit the streets about which his parents speak nostalgically. He didn't want to go home on the weekends, to go with them to pujos and Bengali parties, to remain unquestionably in their world (*The Namesake*, 126).

Gogol finds quite comfortable to get incorporated into the lives of Ratliff's family. He is enraptured by Maxine's pale green-gray eyes and finds interest in talking to her parents Gerald and

Lydia. He is too much influenced by their brand of hospitality, so much that he loses his own identity. He forgets his own country, his own culture, and his own parents:

Quickly, simultaneously, he falls in love with Maxine, the house, and Gerald and Lydia's manner of living, for to know her and love her is to know and love all of these things. He loves the mess that surrounds Maxine... He learns to love the food she and her parents eat... He learns that one does not grate Parmesan cheese over pasta dishes containing seafood. He learns not to put wooden spoons in the dishwasher... The nights he spends there, he learns to wake up earlier than he is used to... He learns to anticipate, every evening the sound of a cork emerging from a fresh bottle of wine (*The Namesake*, 137).

In contrast to Maxine, who shows all respect to her parents' tastes and ways of life, Gogol feels no exasperation for his own parents, no sense of obligation. He could imagine the differences in Maxine's parent's way of living, and his own. He could find only a dozen of guests invited to dinner at Maxine's house. Whereas at his parents' parties, he could see no fewer than thirty people invited, where his parents behaved more like caterers in their own home, watchful and waiting until most of the guests' plates were stacked by the sink. Though he knew that there was a wide difference in culture of his parents and Maxine's parents, he could not remain uninfluenced by the foreign culture:

He cannot imagine his parents sitting at Lydia and Gerald's table, enjoying Lydia's cooking, appreciating Gerald's selection of wine. He cannot imagine them contributing to one of their dinner party conversations. And yet here he is, night after night, a welcome addition to the Ratliff's universe, doing just that (*The Namesake*, 141).

Gogol becomes insensitive to his parents' desires. In spite of his mothers' request to visit Massachusetts to see off his father to the airport who was going for a research work to Ohio for nine months; Gogol prefers going to New Hampshire with Maxine for two weeks. Though Gogol takes Maxine to his parents' house, he is unable to appreciate their noble gestures. His mother had prepared meals, which had taken more than a day, yet he feels embarrassed by the effort she had put in for it. Gogol feels relieved in the world of Maxine, in contrast to the world of his parents, where he felt uneasy and uncomfortable:

He feels no nostalgia for the vacations he is spent with his family, and he realizes now that they were never true vacations at all. Instead, they were overwhelming, disorienting expeditions, either going to Calcutta, or sightseeing in places they did not belong to and intended never to see again (*The Namesake*, 155).

Another turning point comes in the life of Gogol, when his father expires. He feels the guilt and realizes the sentiments for him, looking at the left-out things in his flat at Cleveland. A

significant change comes in Gogol's life after the permanent absence of his father. He becomes indifferent to Maxine who leads to their breakup:

At first, she'd been patient with him, and for a while he'd allowed himself to fall back into her life, going home after work to her parents' house, to their world in which nothing had changed. Initially she'd tolerated his silences at the dinner table, his indifference in bed, his need to speak to his mother and Sonia every evening, and to visit them, on weekends, without her (*The Namesake*, 188).

After Maxine, it was Moushumi Mazoomdar, with whom Nikhil goes on a blind date, who was the daughter of friends of his parents. Then he comes to know about her life, about her prenuptial disaster. He gets attracted to her, in spite of knowing the fact that in the past she had allowed men to seduce her in café's, in parks, and many other places. Though Gogol knew that there were days she slept with one man after lunch, another after dinner, Gogol marries Moushumi within a year. After their first marriage anniversary, Moushumi happens to meet Dimitri Desjardins, whom she had met years ago, in her final months of high school. Moushumi still remembers how on their first date, he had treated her like a child. And how he used to send her postcards and books while she was at Brown. Moushumi develops infatuation, and starts meeting Dimitri every Monday and Wednesday, in spite of having the guilt that she had betrayed her husband.

Lahiri depicts the desolation in the lives of Indians who settle abroad. She has depicted the lives of those who dwell abroad, leaving their respective family behind, and remains in a perpetual state of expectation and longing. Gogol realizes how his parents had lived their lives in America, in spite of what was missing. And making few trips to Calcutta would not have been enough for them to stay out of those perpetual fears, same way, Gogol had spent years maintaining distances from his parents. Just like a bird who returns to one's nest, Lahiri feels that finally one returns to one's own country. Ashima, now a widow, wanted to go back to India for few months.

Gogol wanted to correct his name-the first thing given by his father name. But he could not correct his life, his life was a failure and his marriage was a misstep. The name had distressed him for years, which he could change, but he could not change the things which happened in his life, which prevailed, and which he endured till the end. And now when he realizes the significance of the name given by his father, and longs to be called 'Gogol', there is no one to call him by this name. His father is no more alive, and his mother-a widow who is shifting to India, would call him 'Gogol' only once a week. The name which Gogol always despised, the name which he always hated, now would vanish. Nikhil had won over Gogol, but it did not give happiness to him. He realizes quite late that more than a name, a man's identity is important:

Without people in the world to call him Gogol, no matter how long he himself lives, Gogol Ganguli will, once and for all, vanish from the lips of loved ones and so, cease to exist. Yet the thought of this eventual demise provides no sense of victory, no solace. It provides no solace at all (*The Namesake*, 289).

Lahiri is a second-generation immigrant whose parents continue to look back upon India as home. One would not expect her to suffer from the problems of unsuccessful assimilation having lived in an alien country all her life. Yet, she confesses frequently to a certain sense of being an outsider in the USA. Not all the stories in *Interpreter of Maladies* deal with the trauma of immigrant life though the underlying theme of at least four of her stories is about somewhat misplaced conceptions of idyllic America. She claims to have inherited her parents' preoccupations with the past. Thus India reigns supreme in all her stories. "In my dictionary, the biblical definition of *translate* is 'to convey to heaven without death.' I am struck by the extent to which this decidedly Western, non-secular definition sheds light on my own personal background of Eastern origin. For in my observation, translation is not only a finite linguistic act but an ongoing cultural one. It is the continuous struggle, on my parents' behalf, to preserve what it means to them to be first and forever Indian, to keep afloat certain familial and communal traditions in a foreign and at times indifferent world."

The question of identity has always been a difficult one, but it is more so for culturally displaced persons, people who transgress the boundaries of familiar surroundings in search of fresher pastures in a foreign land. In Bharati Mukherjee's words, they trade "top-dog status in the homeland for the loss-of-face meltdown of immigration." This statement rings hollow when we read Feroza Jussawalla's opinion of Bharati Mukherjee which says: "Bharati Mukherjee definitely seems to have found her 'haven' in the United States, but with this comes obsequiousness, a pleading to be mainstreamed." Bharati Mukherjee has advocated for total assimilation of an individual to the American culture and society to bring about cohesive existence. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, another first-generation writer admits to have felt exhilarated at everything American when she first arrived in America and felt a relief at having found mind-blowing liberalism as compared to the debilitating patriarchal society back home. Yet nostalgia exists, in spite of the denials, in the form of metaphors and symbols, which represent the world left behind. This nostalgia is particularly touching when Uma Parameswaran says,

And I shall bring Ganga
As Bhagirathi did of old
To our land
Our Assiniboine,
And the flute player
Dark as kaya blossom
Shall dance on the waters of La Salle

Conclusion

Thus, Lahiri explores the Alienation, Loneliness and Nostalgia in his *Namesake* through his characters and the events that take place. Lahiri depicts the loneliness and isolation in the lives of foreigners by depicting the critical situations. Even when one loses someone who is very close to

him, one is unable to show one's sentiments to others in the closing years of his life. This is the reality that slaps on every individual's face that is fictionalised.

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