

# INDIAN ENGLISH LITERATURE

## TEXTS AND CONTEXTS

**VISHWA BHARATI**  
LITERATURE SERIES



Editors Dr Satyawan Mane & Dr S.S. Kanade

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**साहित्य आनंद**  
A GLOBAL LITERARY VOICE

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### Reflections of Motherland and Otherland in *The Namesake*

Dr Sachin D. Bhandare

Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* is her first novel published in 2003. She is a diasporic writer and largely writes about the human condition of Indian diaspora in the USA. Cultural and emotional nuances at the otherland faced by the people due to dispersion from motherland have been delineated through this chapter. The chapter also focuses on a specific cultural experience of double vision of 'yearning backward' to the motherland and 'looking forward' to the otherland by the immigrant people.

Nilanjana Sudeshana, popularly known as Jhumpa Lahiri, is a prominent contemporary Indian American authoress. *The Namesake* is her first novel. This novel describes the struggles and

hardships of a Bengali couple Ashoke and Ashima Ganguly who immigrate to the United States or 'otherland' to form a life outside of everything they are accustomed to in their motherland i.e. Calcutta now Kolkata. Lahiri largely writes about the human condition of Indian diaspora in the USA. Diaspora literally means 'the dispersion of any people from their original homeland' (Das 2008:15). It spreads and hybridizes people and cultures across continents. It focuses on the disturbed self-assurance of one's 'roots' with its journey along various 'routes'.

In *The Namesake*, Lahiri deals with the motherland Bengali culture, idealism and liberal attitude to otheland or foreign influence. She portrays the trauma of cultural dislocation, displacement, homelessness and immigracy both in the native and foreign land. The novel narrates the saga of Ganguli family in Calcutta and Boston. The Gangulis are educated, cultured and elite Calcuttans. They are the lovers of Russian and English literatures. They love to read Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, Dickens, Graham Greene and Somerset Maugham. Through their readings Gangulis "travel without moving an inch" (Lahiri 2004: 16). Ashoke Ganguly is a doctoral candidate in Electrical Engineering at MIT, USA where he is engaged in "earning a Ph.D. in Boston, researching in the field of Fibre Optics" (Ibid 9). The saga of Ganguly family began in the imperial times of pre-independence era. Ashoke's grandfather is a former professor of European literature at Calcutta University. He used to say, "Ganguli is a legacy of the British, an Anglicized way of pronouncing his real surname, Gangopadhyay" (Ibid 67). Ashoke's career in America made him a prospective groom

in Calcutta. The Bhaduri family gets attracted to this ambitious Ganguli.

An average Bengali girl of Calcutta of late 1960's, Ashima lands up in America after her marriage to Ashoke. She finds no space either in the marriage, or in the consequent displacement. As the novel starts, Ashima is seen to be highly uncomfortable with the otherland American environs. She is the most diasporic character – torn between histories, geographies and identities. The opening passage itself narrates Ashima's attempt at making "... a humble approximation of the snack sold for pennies on Calcutta sidewalks and on railway platforms throughout India" (Ibid 1). Ashima remembers her past with nostalgia. Her otheland experience in America has made her alienated. She is always nostalgic of her home and spends her leisure in reading Bengali poems, stories and articles.

In the first chapter, Ashima is seen awaiting her baby's birth. She thinks 'essentialistically' about the different ways in which babies are born in motherland and otherland. In America, it is the hospital, which is, according to her:

... a place most people enter either to suffer or to die ... In India, she thinks to herself, women go home to their parents to give birth; away from husbands and in-laws and household cares, retreating briefly to childhood when the baby arrives (Ibid 4).

It shows Ashima is deprived of the familial warmth. Ashima is taken to the hospital for child birth. It is an unfamiliar situation for her. It leads her to create a mental image of her parents' flat at Amherst street Calcutta. She also counts the Indian time. It becomes a repetitive pattern of her

behaviour. This description also narrates Ashima's pre-marital life. She remembers that her 'original' home is no longer available.

For the past eighteen months, ever since she's arrived in Cambridge, nothing has felt normal at all. It's not so much the pain, which she knows, somehow, she will survive. It's the consequence: motherhood in a foreignland... That it was happening so far from home, unmonitored and unobserved by those she loved, had made it miraculous still. But she is terrified to raise a child in a country where life seems so tentative and spare (Ibid 5-6).

Ashima feels upset and homesick. She feels spatially and emotionally dislocated from her ancestral home. Caught between India and America, Ashima becomes 'homeless'. She can be 'at home' nowhere. Home connotes care, love, security and a sense of belongingness. She attains home through her imagination in otherland.

Culture of naming a new born baby is a unique practice in every society. According to Indian customs parents feel privileged when a child is given a name by the grandparents or the elder members of the family. In American custom a name is chosen at baptism or after the name of the family predecessors. In any case, the culture of naming is important for parents. In Indian perception:

Good names tend to represent dignified and enlightened qualities... Pet names have no such aspirations. Pet names are never recorded officially, only uttered and remembered. Unlike good names, pet names are frequently meaningless, deliberately silly, ironic, even onomatopoeic (Ibid 26).

Parents become careful in search of a meaningful name for their children. It may become symbolic of their actions and achievements in future. In the novel, celebrating a name carries a deeper implications. The letter of goodwishes and proposal for an apt name for the baby from its grandmother doesn't arrive on time. "... the letter, forever hovering between India and America, containing the good name she'd chosen for Gogol" (Ibid 56). Ashoke and Ashima face the difficulty of getting the baby discharged from the hospital. In American context a new born must have a name before its discharge from the hospital. The American civil authority in the hospital doesn't not accept *daknam* or petname for the discharge, an official name is a must for discharge. Mr. Wilcox suggests to follow the European or American tradition to name the baby; "You can always name him after yourself, or one of your ancestors ... It's a fine tradition. The Kings of France and England did it" (Ibid 28). Ashoke appreciates the idea but doesn't like this tradition as it will look ridiculous in India. This incident compelled Ashoke to name his son Gogol-his favourite Russian author. The author in some ways had been instrumental in saving Ashoke's life from an accident.

After a six week trip to motherland due to tragic death of Ashima's father, the family returns to Boston. Ashoke gets a job as an assistant professor at the university. They migrate to a university town, a historic town, outside Boston. For Ashima this migration is drastic and distressing. She feels:

...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 the 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 (Ibid 49-0).

As Rohinton Mistry observes in his *The Tales from Ferozshah Baag* (1998) that all writers "look at the past, at lost moments, lost opportunities, lost loves" and rethink and reassess them. Lahiri writes about the uprootedness of Ashima from her homeland and her loneliness in an alien land and cultural milieu. She indicates that one's home is where one lives or has lived. Ashima in *The Namesake* longs for her family and community and the life in the city of Kolkata. As Shahnawaz Begum mentions "Ashima and Ashoke live in a memory of great extent although it is not that they cannot acculturate. They know the English language; they know the use of gadgets, they are confident and competent in their work places. But as the memory of the homeland they had left in the past haunts them constantly" (2008:106, 7).

The Bengalis are a marginal community in America. They enjoy their cultural activities with fervor. They are a scattered community. They are in different professions and enjoy life in America's materialist society in every possible way. They exude a cultural resilience and enjoy family get-togethers irrespective of their professional and economic status.

The families drop by one another's homes on Sunday afternoons. They drink tea with sugar and

evaporated milk and eat shrimp cutlets fried in saucepans. They sit in circles on the floor, singing songs by Nazrul and Tagore, passing a thick yellow clothbound book of lyrics among them ... They argue riotously over the films of Ritwik Ghatak versus those of Satyajit Ray. The CPIM versus the Congress party. North Calcutta versus South. For hours they argue about the politics of America, a country in which none of them is eligible to vote (Lahiri 2008: 38).

During Durga Pujo they become nostalgic for Calcutta and wish to Visit the city of joy. Their bicultural America-impressed consciousness doesn't undermine their love for Calcutta. In their occasional visits they enculturate Calcutta's *desi* culture. They visit Calcutta's planetarium, Zoo gardens, Victoria Memorial, Dum Dum airport, shopping centers at Chowringhee and Gariaghata which is often shot in Hindi movies. They board double decker buses for tour. They purchase Bata shoes, Citicurra powder, Margo soap for use. They eat pink tandoori, aloo gobi, syrupy mishit and Marie biscuit and Lipton tea. On pujo and marriage occasions women wear Banarasi sari, gold jewellery and men wear dhoti and topor. And both pose for countless photographs. In America, when Gangulis celebrate Gogol's *annaprasan* and miss their relatives in distant Calcutta. The Bengalis get closer. Some sari wearing Bengali women become Gogol's honorary aunts and dhoti clad Bengali men become his honorary uncles. Gogol is trained to call them 'Dada', 'Dadu', 'Mamu' and learns to recognize the photographs of his grandparents and uncles in India. They practice their motherland culture on birth and death days, marriages, *annaprasan* and pujos. The first

generation Bengali immigrants send their children to special Bengali classes to learn Bengali language, literature and history. They are taught about their family lineage, religious customs, rites, beliefs, food and manners. The first generation Bengalis feel proud when their children memorise Tagore's poems, names of Hindu deities like Saraswati, Kartik, Lakshmi and Ganesha and Durga during pujo. Thus, the immigrant Bengalis make their sentimental journey to their motherland through cultural practice. However, their Americanised children experience a psychic separation from it.

Lahiri's *The Namesake*, as Bhagabat Nayak mentions (2008:134), projects, "the first generation Indian immigrants are caught in a cultural limbo due to the contamination with multicultural beliefs an over-valorization of home culture". The migrant parents face a challenge inculcating ethos and cultural values of their motherland among their children. To draw attention to this challenge, Pratik Khatri has coined the term American Born Confused Desis (ABCDs) in his article "The ABCD Conundrum" published in *The Statesman* 8 April 2007. Gogol (Nikhil), Sonia, and Moushumi, the second generation characters in *The Namesake* are such American Born Confused Desis (ABCDs). They are emotionally dislocated from their mainstream culture. They have hyphenated existence between *desh*/motherland and *pardesh*/otherland.

Gogol's growing awareness of confused identity with his name create contradictory experiences for him. As an impact of otherland American culture, he has had affairs with American girls Ruth and Maxine. He finds that love began for his

parents with or after their wedding. After falling in love with Maxine, he desires to marry her. But he takes seriously the warning of his parents that marriage of Bengali boys and American girls end up in divorce. With the encouragement of her mother he marries Moushumi a girl of Bengali/motherland origin. But they get divorced as Moushumi continues her affairs and sexual escapades.

Displacement in Sonia's case has less sense of alienation and nostalgia. She adopts the bits and pieces of otherland culture and adapts herself to American common sense without much hitch. She lives on her own in San Francisco, works for an environmental agency and makes her studies of LSAT. But when she hears the news of her father's sad demise due to massive heart attack, she comes back from San Francisco to live with her mother. She works as a paralegal, hoping to apply to law schools nearby. It is Sonia who takes care of her widowed mother. Compared to Ruth, Maxine, Moushumi and Gogol, Sonia is of different cast. Like her own mother she has a sense of duty. Like a traditional Indian woman Sonia marries her boyfriend – a half Chinese boy, Ben and is happy in her married life.

Vennila Kain in her review of *The Namesake* observes, "Her (Lahiri's) India and Indians are clumsy, awkward, desperately out of place (even in their own country) as are Ashima and Ashoke Ganguly in *The Namesake*. These transplants never strike root in America". She feels that the novel may be entitled as 'The model minority's guide to social climbing' or 'The Model minority's attempt at sophistication and resulting angst'. She feels that Lahiri has a muddled sense of India and

indulges in the depiction of an 'exotic India'. She writes:

Part of what is extremely irksome about Ms. Lahiri is her complete lack of comprehension of most things Indian. Particularly the nuances that make us people. Her Rudyard Kiplingish characters are disempowered and out of date. More detrimentally she is providing as an Indian-American, a validation for all the circle-jerkers of Indophilia-the fictional exotic India of the *Kamasutra* and the Calcutta lepers, that is (www.tribes.org).

Kate Flaherty makes positive comments on *The Namesake*. She explicates how the novel has "a paradoxical capacity to voice the general experience of displacement". She also points out how the cultural remnants of motherland i.e. Bengal and Otherland that of Russia and America and the immediate sensuality lend force to the typically nebulous experience of heterogeneity.

After the shocking death of her husband Ashoke due to massive heart attack, Ashima decides to discontinue living permanently in USA. She experiences a deep sense of loss and deprivation:

For thirty-three years she missed her life in India. Now she will miss her job at the library, the women with whom she's worked. She will miss throwing parties ... She will miss the country in which she has 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 dwell in her mind (Lahiri 2004:279).

Her decision to divide her time equally in the US or otherland and in Kolkata i.e. motherland. "It is solitary, somewhat premature version of the future she and her husband had planned when he was alive" (Ibid 275). True to her name, Ashima will now be without borders, a resident of everywhere and nowhere.

As Bhagabat Nayak mentions (2008:145), his father's death and widowed mother's miserable condition make Gogol empathize with the penitential ceremonies of the Hindu cultures. With his mother's erasing of vermilion or *kumkum* from her forehead, discarding of bangles, eating mourner's diet, foregoing meat and fish for ten days, shaving off hair on the tenth day he is supports Indian rituals fully. He follows and performs Indian cultural practices in their new house on American soil. The priest's chanting of Sanskrit verses for the purification of Ashoke's soul reminds man's quest for salvation in this otherland. Gogol like second generation immigrants in America cannot get rid of his bonds with motherland culture. He observes his father's birth and death anniversaries. He, his mother and sister stand:

"infront of the photograph and drape a garland of rose petals around the frame and anoint his father's forehead with sandalwood paste through the glass. It is the photograph more than anything that draws Gogol back to the house again and again ... (Lahiri 2004:189)".

It provides him spiritual happiness and brings consolation.

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