

Face to Face with a New Culture: Study of Lahiri's

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Abstract— Sometimes people who move to a new country tend to experience a sense of cultural discord, commonly referred to as culture shock. According to Kalervo Oberg, Canadian anthropologist, culture shock has three stages. In the first stage, people are attracted to the new culture. However, in the second stage, they will often become hostile and aggressive towards the host country; due to issues related to language, transportation and housing. Some people may remain stuck within this stage and never achieve the final stage of full cultural adjustment to the host country. Jhumpa Lahiri's *Namesake* portrays Ashoke and Ashima, a Bengali couple, who move from Calcutta, India to the United States and are caught between the two conflicting cultures. This paper will demonstrate how these family members experience culture shock and whether or not they succeed in overcoming the culture shock and adjusting to their new lives. Therefore, the paper will apply Oberg's concept of culture shock and its three stages within the context of Lahiri's *Namesake*.

Keywords— adjustment, Culture shock, *Namesake*, Oberg, three stages.

I. INTRODUCTION

Webster's New World Encyclopedia defines culture as "the way of life of a particular society or group of people , including patterns of thoughts, beliefs, behavior, customs, traditions, rituals, dress and language, as well as art, music and literature" (Sharma 111). Therefore we can discern that 'culture' is a learned behavior, which varies from and within different countries. People who move to another country can experience so called 'culture shock'. Culture shock is in some ways very similar to other mental/emotional diseases, thus demonstrating similar symptoms. Some people can get used to their new home, after a while; however, others may never recover from the 'shock' of their new situation. Culture shock happens because people undergo the anxiety of losing their family, their country, their culture, their language...

All their familiar conditions, which make up their own 'culture,' while learning how to function within their new lives can be very stressful, especially when the new culture is very different from their home country. For example, assimilation to a new country often incorporates not only learning a new language, but also understanding how the society functions, from basic habits, gestures and facial expressions of its citizens, all the way up to navigating its bureaucracies. The first reaction towards the frustration experienced by non-natives is the rejection of the new environment. Another reaction towards this frustration can be regression. They become nostalgic for their old lives (culture) and tend to only focus on its superiority, in relation to their new countries culture.

Culture shock tends to have its own symptoms, such as helplessness, dependence on residence of one's nationality, anger, frustration, fear of being robbed, cheated or injured, longing to be home again, and sometimes even dermatological issues (Oberg 142- 143). However, one can notice that culture shock and its effects can differ from person to person. Some people might not even be able to live in a foreign country. Some others might like the host country since everything is new and it fascinates them. According to Kalervo Oberg, this stage is called the 'honeymoon stage' and it can last for a few days, weeks or up to six months (143). The non-native will visit various places, enjoy his time and return back to his country. However, this would not be the case for those who will remain abroad, since they would need to cope with life in a foreign country. Here, the second stage begins. Hostility and anger toward the host country and its residents.

The visitor needs to know the language to go shopping, use public transport, etc. When the visitor cannot cope with his frustration at this point, he may become aggressive. As Oberg mentions, "this second stage of culture shock is in a sense a crisis in the disease. If you overcome it, you stay; if not, you leave before you reach the stage of nervous breakdown" (143).

As the visitor learns the language, he can get to know the culture easier. When he can joke about the difficulties he faces, he is on the way to recovery. When the visitor accepts the new country and its culture, he may begin to feel better in the new environment. He might feel strain at some points, but he will not be frustrated or anxious. As the complete adjustment happens, the visitor accepts habits, foods, customs and drinks and can enjoy them fully. "In short, the environment does not change. What has changed is your attitude towards it" (Oberg 144). This paper will apply Oberg's

concept of culture shock to Lahiri's *Namesake*. In one interview, Lahiri stated that "the question of identity is always a difficult one, but especially for those who are culturally displaced, as immigrants are [those] who grow up in two worlds simultaneously" (Nagaraju and Rajkumar 15).

II. ANALYSIS

The Namesake is Jhumpa Lahiri's first novel which was published in 2003. In this novel, the characters move from Calcutta, India to New York City. Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli met in Calcutta, where their marriage was arranged by their parents, and they moved to New York after their marriage. In United States, she gives birth to a boy in the hospital. They agree to name him Gogol, while waiting for Ashima's grandmother's letter to arrive with the name she has chosen for the son. But Ashima's grandmother suffers a stroke, and her letter with Gogol's official name never arrives. After a while, Ashima and Ashoke have another child, a girl named Sonia. Years pass and Gogol, dates American girls that his mother disapproves of. His serious relationship with Maxine did not end up in marriage and they got separated. After their separation, Gogol's mother asks him to meet the daughter of their family friend, Mushoumi. They meet and get along with each other and get married. However, their marriage did not last long since Mushoumi betrayed her husband. Later on, Ashoke dies of heart attack and Ashima decides to return to India since she has always considered India her true home. The novel is about the struggle the Bengali family undergo as a result of cultural difference. Attitudes, foods, gatherings and all that is related to the 'American lifestyle' is foreign to the protagonist couple Ashima and Ashoke. Even those who need to deal with this couple are sometimes frustrated because they do not know anything about Indian culture which makes the interactions difficult for them.

When Ashima goes into labor, she is admitted to a local hospital in NYC. When the nurse intends to help her to take off her clothes she is "exasperated by the six slippery yards, [and] ends up stuffing the material into Ashima's slate blue suitcase" (2). The nurse is surprised by Ashoke's dress and its length. She is not used to these kinds of dresses. In this sense, the cultural divide is felt by both Ashima and the nurse.

Ashoke shares a room with three other women at the hospital and once she hears a man's voice saying "I love you sweetheart" (2). As Indian men never express their love for their wives verbally, nor do they show it in their actions. American husbands, in general, are waiting for their wives' deliveries with "flowers, address books [and] bottles of champagne", but "it has never occurred to [Ashoke] to buy his wife flowers" (9). Americans express their affection for their wives, whereas, Indians in general, keep their affections to themselves. Once Ashima delivers the baby, she is depressed since she does not have her family by her side. She prefers to be home in India with her extended

family. Even though she is surrounded by her friends in America, she still feels the absence of her family. Kumar mentions that "Ashima feels very lonely in that hospital and remembers the Indian scene where at the time of delivery, women go to their parents' home to deliver the baby and many persons take care of them" (16). This is another example of how Ashima is struggling with the second stage of culture shock. She cherishes her memories of her home and rejects her current situation, because it is too alien for her to handle.

As grateful as she feels for the company of the Nandis and Dr. Gupta, these acquaintances are only substitutes for the people who really ought to be surrounding them. Without a single grandparent or parent or uncle or aunt at her side, the baby's birth, like most everything else in America, feels somehow haphazard, only half true. (20) She does not believe the reality of events happening in America since she does not trust the people in America. Everything seems unreal in her eyes.

Ashima was still not used to the American diet. " [she] would not have touched the chicken, even if permitted; Americans eat their chicken in its skin, though Ashima has recently found a kind butcher on Prospect Street willing to pull it off for her" (4). Although her and Ashoke live in New York City, where one can find any type of cuisine, they both still prefer their own cultural norms, which includes their Indian diets. As Oberg mentions those who undergo culture shocks long to be back home (143) and Ashima especially yearns for India. The situation gets even worse when she must face difficult language barriers.

Patty smiles, a little too widely, and suddenly Ashima realizes her error, knows she should have said "fingers" and "toes". This error pains her almost as much as her last contraction. English had been her subject. In Calcutta, before she was married, she was working toward a college degree. She used to tutor neighborhood schoolchildren in their homes, on their verandas and beds, helping them to memorize Tennyson and Wordsworth, to pronounce words like *I sign* and *cough*, to understand the difference between Aristotelian and Shakespearean tragedy. But in Bengali, a finger can also mean fingers, a toe, toes. (5)

Ashima cannot get used to the difference since she spoke English from her childhood and now making such silly mistakes are bothersome to her. With the loss of her language, her personality is lost since language and personality have a direct link with each other. As she feels she does not know the language of the host country very well, and people laugh at her mistakes, she does not have any confidence to express herself in words.

Weeks after the birth of their son, the child still has only a pet name, because in the Indian culture, all babies are given a pet name that might be used even in the future by family members and among friends. Later the Gangulis learn that in America "a baby cannot be released from the hospital without a birth certificate. And that a birth certificate needs a name" (22). In India, the baby can be released by their pet names, but it is not

appropriate in America. It is strange to the couple since the rules are very different in India. Moreover, in America, parents choose the baby's name but in India the grandparents choose the baby's name. Therefore, when they have not heard from their grandparents to pick a name for their son, Mr. Wilcox, a family friend, asks them "don't you have any backups" (22)? In the eyes of Ashima and Ashoke everything is just normal to Americans and they do not understand the frustration of the Indian family. As Heinze mentions "the entire novel hinges on a name: Gogol. Gogol is the protagonist and beyond addressing obvious questions of personal identity, telling his story through a focus on his name, reflects crucial issues of cultural identity, diaspora and multiculturalism" (193).

Since Americans choose the name of their children themselves, they do not understand the importance of naming by grandparents in Indian culture. "Ashima and Ashoke shake their heads. It has never occurred either of them to question Ashima's grandmother's selection, to disregard an elder's wishes in such a way" (23). In India, it is considered an insult, if the parents of new born baby disregard the grandparent's choice of the name. The suggestion of naming the child after his father, which is common in America, sounds silly and stupid to Ashima and Ashoke. As neither Americans nor Indians know each other's culture well, they do not understand the situations that either of them faces.

But this isn't possible, Ashima and Ashoke think to themselves. This tradition doesn't exist for Bengalis, naming a son after father or grandfather, a daughter after mother or grandmother. This sign of respect in in America and Europe, this symbol of heritage and lineage, would be ridiculed in India. (23)

The cultural difference manifests itself in different contexts and the Gangulis are sometimes surprised and sometimes shocked by the differences. They were forced to choose a name for their baby son since they wanted to leave the hospital, but they still need the name that the grandmother would choose for the baby. As Sharma points out "*The Namesake* is about this everlasting dilemma faced by immigrants as they struggle to maintain their identities while trying to shake them off at the same time. It is about the series of distressing choices they are forced to make every day as they try hard to avoid being misfits in a foreign land" (115-116). Ashima doesn't have any sense of belonging to America. Despite having different friends, she always feels lonely. She mentions that she doesn't "want to raise Gogol alone in this country. It's not right. I want to go back" (27). She always wants to go back. As she did not adopt herself to America, she just appreciates her own country and its traditions more and more each day.

Not only Ashima and Ashoke are confused and frustrated by cultural differences, but they make their own children frustrated by hanging on to their Indian culture while living in America. Gogol's parents "tell him that they each have two names, too, as do all their Bengali friends in America, and all their relatives in Calcutta. It's a part of growing up, they tell him, part of being a Bengali" (45). Gogol does not understand

what the point of having two names is since he has been raised in America and Americans do not practice this tradition. As the two cultures have differences, Gogol prefers to follow the traditions and the culture he lives in.

As the naming concerns, Indians have good names and pet names. The good name is chosen by grandparents and the pet name is used among friends and family members, but in America children just have one name. Therefore, the teacher at school is frustrated by the point of a good name. Since Gogol does not respond to the good name "Nikhil" that his parents prefer to call him, he is called "Gogol" but Ashoke and Ashima are surprised. "What about the parents' preference? Ashima and Ashoke wonder, shaking their heads. But since neither of them feels comfortable pressing the issue, they have no choice but to give in" (49). The child as a person has all the rights that adults have in America; whereas, this right is never respected in India. Therefore, Ashima and Ashoke are shocked that they do not have any say in their child's choice of name.

When Ashima's father passes away, they go to Calcutta for a while, but Sonia, Gogol's sister, gets sick, since she was not used to the weather and the food in India. The culture that they meet in India quickly makes them appreciate their home in America and they become eager to return to America. When they arrived home, everything turns back to their normal lifestyle. They again have freedom to do whatever they want to do without censoring themselves, or suppressing their emotions.

Since Gogol is raised in America, he behaves like any other American kid, but he has never dated any girls and this does not seem strange to his parents. "His parents do not find it strange that their son doesn't date, does not rent a tuxedo for his junior prom. They have never been on a date in their lives and therefore they see no reason to encourage Gogol, certainly not at his age. Instead they urge him to join the math team and maintain his A average" (74). Ashima and Ashoke were married in the traditionally Indian fashion of an arranged marriage. They met only once before they were married. Therefore, dating does not have any meaning for Gogol's parents. Furthermore, since the mother does not like her son to date American girls, she prefers to push him to study harder than experiencing any romance.

Ashoke and Ashima never appreciated America; therefore, they never intend to know American lifestyles and traditions. They raised their children based on Indian traditions, but their children choose to be Americans and follow American culture. Ashima even gets sad when her children want to adapt themselves to American lifestyle. "She is dissatisfied when Gogol gets involved in affairs with white women like Ruth and Maxine, and is upset when her teenaged daughter wants an Americanized look by coloring her hair or getting additional ear piercings" (Lahiri 131).

Gogol is well adjusted to his birth country, America. But Ashima still struggles with her appreciation of her home country. She tells him that after twenty years in America, she still cannot bring herself to refer to Pemberton Road as home. But now it is his room at Yale where Gogol feels most comfortable. He likes its oldness, its persistent grace. He likes

that so many students have occupied it before him. He likes the solidity of its plaster walls, its dark wooden floorboards, however battered and stained. (86)

While Gogol is well adapted to his place, his mother still yearns for India after all these years living in America. Gogol feels so at home in America that he does not care about India. "For instance, although he can understand Bengali, and speak it fluently, he cannot read or write it with even modest proficiency. On trips to India his American accented English is a source of endless amusement to his relatives, and when he and Sonia speak to each other, aunts and uncles and cousins always shake their heads in disbelief and say, "I didn't understand a word!"

As he lives in America, he prefers to live like an American, and not be frustrated and get anxious about clashes of cultures. At times however, Gogol surprises himself by making mistakes within American culture. Even though he is raised in America, he still cannot believe that American parents do not mind if their daughter's boyfriend visits them and stays with their daughter for the night. In one of his dating incident "he asks if her parents will mind hi[m] coming over, if perhaps they should meet at a restaurant instead. But she laughs at this suggestion in a way that makes him [feel] vaguely foolish. 'why on earth would they mind?'" (104). He is lost in between the two cultures. While girlfriend boyfriend relationships are forbidden among Indians, it is totally accepted among Americans and Gogol is torn between his Indian heritage and his American upbringing.

Because Gogol prefers the American style of living he finds in quite easy to live with Maxine, his American girlfriend, and her parents. "He learns that one does not grate Parmesan cheese over pasta dishes containing seafood. He learns not to put wooden spoons in the dishwasher, as he had mistakenly done one evening when he was helping to clean up. The nights he spends there, he learns to wake up earlier than he is used to, to the sound of Silas barking downstairs, wanting to be taken for his morning walk. He learns to anticipate, every evening, the sound of a cork merging from a fresh bottle of wine" (111). He gets used to the house where they live and he adjusted himself very well.

Gogol's father receives a grant from a university in another state and he decides to take the position. Gogol and Maxine decide to visit Gogol's parents and say goodbye to his father. As this is the first time the Gangulis will meet Maxine, on the way, Gogol tries his best to explain the cultural differences that Maxine might face:

"[They] will not be able to touch or kiss each other in front of his parents and there will be no wine with lunch. "There's plenty of wine in the trunk of the car,' Maxine points out. 'It does not matter,' he tells her. 'My parents don't own a corkscrew.' The restrictions amuse As Gogol's family did not adapt themselves to America lifestyle, their habits are totally different from Americans. In order to clarify the cultural differences he explains them to Maxine in details.

After a while, Gogol's relationship did not work with Maxine and they broke up. "The fact that he is single doesn't worry

him, and yet he is conscious of the degree to which it troubles his mother. She makes a point of mentioning the engagements and weddings of the Bengali children he's grown up with in Massachusetts, and his cousins in India. She mentions grandchildren being born" (155). His mother always disliked Maxine, as a white American girl, and she did not care when Gogol did not date any other girls. However, since she observes everything through the lens of Indian culture, she is worried that her son is still single. She expresses her concerns, only now she compares her son's single status with married Indian guys of the same age. She does not care what American guys do at Gogol's age, all she is concerned about is her own cultures tradition of marrying young and having a large family.

After Ashoke passed away as a result of heart attack, Gogol got married and then divorced, and Sonia is going to get married. At this point in the story, Ashima decides to return to India. She always longed for the day to return to her country and now that she is alone, and her children are adults, she decides to return to her homeland; she does not feel any sense of belonging in America. "For Gogol and Sonia, in spite of their many visits to Calcutta, they could never feel at home in India, unlike their parents, they were born and brought up in America which has taught them how to be Americans and this sense makes them feel their root[s are] in America and not in India" (Vijayakumer and Banu 1665). As Ashima always mourns for her homeland and is bonded mentally with India, she decides to finally return there and give up on her American life.

III. CONCLUSION

All in all, Ashima and Ashoke, as a Bengali couple, never adapted themselves to their host country. Ashima, always compared America with India and together they felt lost and frustrated at different incidents of culture shock, because they never fully integrated themselves with the culture and traditions of their host country. However, Gogol and Sonia, felt at home in America. They occasionally got anxious and frustrated, since their parents raised them within their own Indian culture, in America. However, they are happy with their lives in American and they stay there. On the other hand, Ashima who never felt at home in America, returned back to India the first moment she could and before being traumatized and losing control of her life.

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