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**Interrogating the Generational Disparity in Diasporic Sensibility in  
Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake***

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**Abstract:**

Diasporic consciousness with all its social, political and cultural ramifications has remained an essential concern in the subject-matter of Indian fiction particularly in English since long. *The Namesake* by Nilanjana Sudeshna Lahiri popularly known as Jhumpa Lahiri aligned with this tradition reflects, crucially in a more subtle way, on the disparity in diasporic sensibility pertaining to two successive Bengali generations inhabiting U.S.A. Herself a representative of the second generation of Indian diaspora in America, Lahiri accentuates her personal observation which is worth quoting in this regard –

‘My parents’ generation made their presence known, but not quite in the same way. It’s my generation that really seeped into the culture and spread out and spread through it. People of Indian origin, like myself they’re still engineers and doctors and professors but they are also writers, cooks, dancers, rock musicians, actors. They are not here for the one purpose of having respectable job.’

According to Lahiri this is ‘a matter of generation coming-of-age’. In this paper attempts have been made to explore this evolution in diasporic sensibilities from the first to second generation of Indian diaspora in U.S.A along with every minutia of the proceeding of this ‘generation coming-of-age’.

**Key-words:** diasporic consciousness, tradition, generation, Indian diaspora, evolution

### **Introduction:**

Diaspora, a term generally applied for the de-territorialized or transnational population, invariably entails homelessness, alienation, rootlessness, a sense of loss in every possible way and the diasporic communities are attributed a perplexed locus of 'in-betweenness' or 'third-space' identified as the consequence of the constant psychic tug-of-war between the homeland and the host land. Vijay Mishra acknowledging this psychic dilemma opines 'All diasporas are unhappy but every diaspora is unhappy in its own way'. However, diasporic movements to new regions may be 'voluntary' or 'forcible' as propounded by Bill Ashcroft et al. Bharati Mukherjee leading one step further suggests that 'immigration' entails a kind of 'exuberance' as opposed to the 'expatriation' which is said to assume a 'static state'. 'Immigrant Indianness', according to her contention, is 'a set of fluid identities to be celebrated'. P. K Nayar pointing out this 'celebration' remarks that 'With much postcolonial theory (Bhaba in particular) and literature (Rushdie, Hanif Kureishi) such a condition of looking back and looking forward, of possessing multiple identities has been valorized as a valuable state to be in. Rushdie endorses the weightless, nomadic, placeless state of being embodied in the figure of the migrant. Bhaba believes that the in-between, hybrid nature of identity is preferable to that of fixed, stereotypical one.' In Lahiri's novel the first generation of Indian immigrants strives to 'master a new landscape, to map and read it as 'natives' do' while coming into terms with the ways of a foreign land but simultaneously suffers and rues the aloofness from '*desh*', the homeland. The second generation on the other hand actively and spontaneously participates in that foreign ways of life and feels less affiliated with the ancestral 'home'. What Batra argues in this perspective also demands mention. 'The first generation's story was about adaptation and learning acculturing and also discovering new things about themselves. The second generation finds itself presented with two conflicting realities and cultures and sets of expectations- one of the host countries through the socio-cultural surroundings and the other of the home-country through their parents.'

### **Mr. and Mrs Ganguly:**

The novel at the very outset introduces Ashima Ganguly (nee Bhaduri) a Bengali house-wife, pregnant relishing her spicy 'concoction' which, as the text suggests, is a 'humble approximation' perhaps of 'jhalhuri', supposedly the most popular snack of Bengal. This graphic picturisation of a Bengali household in a sticky August evening even now-a-days is not quite difficult for the readers (especially of Bengal) to conceive barring the one thing that Jhumpa Lahiri conjures up in this novel- the setting of Central Square Apartment,

Cambridge, U.S.A. Married in a perfectly arranged way to Ashoke Ganguly, a doctoral candidate in fibre optics at MIT Ashima Ganguly in spite of living in U.S.A is a prototypal 'Bangali bou' who never utters his husband's name because of 'propriety's sake' as 'it's not the type of thing Bengali wives do'. Ashima turns out to be a potential reflector of Bengali culture which, through contradictions, manifests abnormality in every nook and corner in the foreign land. The landlord Montgomerys residing just at the top floors of their rented house are their immediate 'other' whose apartment Ashima remembers with 'abiding horror'. Right from the awkward dressing sense of the Montgomerys to the haphazard and wild ways of their livelihood make Ashima feel so much awfully nauseating toward the entire 'unknown' culture that she impulsively decides to return to her homeland as she cannot even think of raising her neonate son in such an unnatural country. Ashoke truly a 'son of the soil' had the least intention ever to leave his family for abroad. He has to venture the foreign land only to ensure a career which has literally been at stake in Calcutta as he was bedridden for months with mortal injuries surviving a severe train accident. Ashoke who 'openly reveres Marx and quietly refuses religion' is an ideological misfit in U.S.A. He neither smokes nor drinks alcohol of any kind. He prefers tea to coffee and always 'likes to finish his dinner with a small final helping of rice and dal'. (P-10) He feels thrilled for having attained an opportunity to lecture before American pupils. Ashoke's premature death once again reunites the family by bringing Gogol and Sonia back to their mother. In fact it is after Ashoke's death that Ashima feels for the first time ever in her life any proximity with the country she hitherto has considered foreign. 'But for the first time in her life, Ashima has no desire to escape to Calcutta, not now. She refuses to be so far from the place where her husband made life, the country in which he died.' (P-183) Interestingly for Ashima Calcutta-America hierarchy gets somewhat subverted.

The Ganguly family's indulgence to the weekend 'addas' in Cambridge exclusively with their Bengali acquaintances proves their desperate attempt to cling to the Bengali culture and society as well. These informal get-togethers seem to have been like safety-valves for the psyche of the first generation Indian diaspora. The husbands are basically 'teachers, researchers, doctors, engineers'. The wives, 'homesick and bewildered' discuss among themselves about various Bengali recipes. 'They sit in circle on the floor, singing songs of Nazrul and Tagore...They argue riotously over the films of Ritwik Ghatak versus those of Satyajit Ray. The CPIM versus the Congress party. North Calcutta versus South.' (P-38) The 'annaprasan' ceremonies of both the children, Gogol and Sonali, are observed following the

Bengali culture as strictly as possible in abroad. With ‘payesh’, rice and dal the baby-boy Gogol, dressed as an infant Bengali groom, is introduced for the first time to the consumption of solid food. The mother pines for not having her Armherst street family by their side in this occasion- ‘Ashima’s eyes fill with tears as Gogol’s mouth eagerly invites the spoon. She can’t help wishing her own brother were here to feed him, her own parents to bless him with their hands on his head.’ (P-40) When the Ganguly family moves to a suburb for Ashoke getting appointed as an assistant professor of electrical engineering at university, Ashima feels even more marooned – ‘For Ashima migrating to the suburbs feels more drastic, more distressing than the move from Calcutta to Cambridge had been’. The claustrophobia she feels in the foreign land finds manifestation in a typical figurative language. ‘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.’ However towards the end of the novel Ashima gets transformed- ‘She is not the same Ashima who had once lived in Calcutta.’ (P-276) She decides to spend six months in Calcutta and six months in the States and it actualizes the literal sense of her name since ‘she will be without borders, without a home of her own, a resident everywhere and nowhere.’ (P-276)

**Gogol/Nikhil and Sonali/Sonia:**

Gogol as a newborn baby in the hospital is accidentally named after Nikolai Gogol, a Russian writer, whom his father Ashoke is obsessed with since his own boyhood. Gogol’s ‘good name’ Nikhil, too happens to bear a close resemblance to the same Russian litterateur. A Bengali boy living in America is named after a Russian. Understandably the boy does not find it easy to identify himself with either Gogol or Nikhil. ‘He hates that his name is both absurd and obscure, that it has nothing to do with who he is, that it is neither Indian nor American but of all things Russian.’ (P-76) Gogol’s younger sister is named Sonali, a purely Bengali name, which is later globalised and transmogrified into Sonia. Since his childhood Gogol is initiated with a family culture which is obviously quite different to the world outside and is rooted in a past he can hardly memorize. Gogol grows up a perfect bi-lingual though at times he seems to feel too lethargic to speak Bengali. ‘Lately he has been lazy, addressing his parents in English though they continue to speak to him in Bengali.’ (P-75) Gogol and Sonia feel far more enthusiastic to observe Christ’s birthday than the worship of Durga or Saraswati. That the ‘table-lamp’ like Christmas tree brought to the Ganguly household for the first time at Gogol’s insistence grows up to no less than a seven foot tree towards the end of the novel is indicative of the cultural adaptability of the second

generation. It is with the growing up of their children that the parents gradually start yielding to the process of assimilation of Americanism at least as far as their children's lives are concerned. Gogol turns out to be an ardent lover of the albums of John, Paul, George and Ringo. (P-74) He studies architecture and chooses it for his career. Sonia becomes an attorney. Unlike their parents both the children are uncannily reluctant to visit India where they feel themselves no better than the foreigners. Their relatives in Calcutta whom their parents miss so terribly in abroad appear to be well known strangers to them. 'Gogol and Sonia knew this people, but they do not feel close to them.' (P-81) Moreover Gogol is afraid of being alienated from his homely (if not home) cultural ambience because of his sojourn in Calcutta. 'He (Gogol) dreads the thought of eight months without a room of his own, without his records and his stereo, without friends.' (P-79) Food which has all through been exploited in the text to emphasize the cultural difference between the two countries is seen to have been approached divergently by the two generations of Indian diaspora. While the parents ardently long for and seek even slightest of excuses to celebrate Bengali food, the children are of diametrically opposite response to it. Before landing in Dumdum airport Gogol gobbles the meal served in the plane as he knows that 'for the next eight months nothing will taste quite the same.' In Calcutta eating is not a savouring but a 'dutiful' act to them. Gogol's love-affairs fail, even after the alteration of his name from Gogol to Nikhil, with not only two foreign girls, Ruth and Maxime but also with a Bengali girl of his mother's choice named Moushumi Mazoomdar. There is no such thing as 'perfect name' and despite having changed his name, he realises, 'it had not been possible to reinvent himself fully...' (P-287)

### **Moushumi:**

Moushumi Mazoomdar, representative of the second generation, feels nostalgic of the years her family spent in England and she hated, as her parents feared, to move to America. Her dislike for American television and her adherence to British accent as long as she could are forms of her resistance as a child to the foreign culture. Unlike Gogol who sought to reinvent himself through changing his name, Moushumi's rebellion, in her adulthood, has been an academic one. 'Immersing herself in a third language, a third culture, had been her refuge- she approached French, unlike things American or Indian, without guilt or misgiving, or expectation of any kind. It was easier to her back on the two countries that could claim her in favour of one that had no claim whatsoever.' (P-214) Moushumi's engagement with Graham an investment banker from New York living in Paris breaks off on the verge of their marriage owing to the cultural hiatus Graham fails to absorb between India and America- countries

which Moushumi does not ever feel rooted in. Later her marriage with Gogol, a choice of both the families, also succumbs to an unfortunate failure, apparently for her seeking 'refuge' in the arms of an aged professor, Dimitri Desjardins. However, Moushumi's final migration to Paris disstabilizes the notion of fixed 'home' and identity and associates the text with transnational floatation of 'home' and fluid nature of identity.

**Conclusion:**

The novel, following the same way as the Ganguly family in U.S.A, does not tie itself with any particular- either home or host- country or culture. Sonia gets married with Ben, an English-speaking half-Chinese, half-Jewish man but surprisingly not without her mother's consent. Moushumi having divorced Gogol ultimately seeks her refuge neither in America (or Graham) nor India (or Gogol) but in Paris. Ashima, out and out a rooted character, despite having decided to leave her residence in U.S.A permanently, seems to have undergone a transformation in her attitude to the 'foreign' country 'in which she had grown and love her husband'(P-279). And Gogol who 'never thinks of India as *desh*' but 'thinks of it as Americans do...' comes to terms agreeably with his name, family and Bengali culture at the end. Thus diasporic sensibility, as Jhumpa Lahiri seems to suggest, outstrips the mutual exclusivism of inter-national cultures and conduces to evolve, as Avtar Brah observes, 'the sites of hope and new beginning.'

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