

Searching for Roots in Two Cultures:

The Distress of Deracinated Indians in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake**

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Contemporary American writer Jhumpa Lahiri (1967-) is usually categorized as either an Indian-American writer or a South Asian American writer. Undoubtedly her works reflect her background as an Indian immigrant. She was born of Bengali parents in London, but when she was two years old, her family moved to Rhode Island. However, she is frustrated with the tendency to categorize the whole Indians as one group. She maintains that Indian immigrants are treated as “other” in the society by this categorization (“Migration, Assimilation, and Inebriation” n. pag.). By this experience of immigration, she is confronted with the distress of how she finds her own identity. Retracing her childhood, she writes that she could think herself neither an Indian nor American:

[W]ith the exception of my first two years in London, “Indian-American” has been a constant way to describe me. . . . When I was growing up in Rhode Island in the 1970’s I felt neither Indian nor American. Like many immigrant offspring I felt intense pressure to be two things, loyal to the old world and fluent in the new, approved of on either side of the hyphen. (“My Two Lives” n. pag.)

How to put down roots is one of the most important themes for Lahiri as a writer. Through her works, she has kept on writing about Indian immigrants who search for roots. About this theme, she admits: “I will continue to write about this world, because it inspires me to write, and there’s nothing more important than that” (Kachka n. pag.). Her strong conscious about roots is obvious in her latest work *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008). She begins her story of an immigrant family with an epigraph from Nathaniel Hawthorne’s “The Custom-House”: “My children have had other birthplaces, and, . . . shall strike their roots into unaccustomed earth” (n. pag.). In the interview about this work, she reveals her interest in the interchange between human and nature in 19th-century literature. Praising Thomas Hardy, Anton Chekhov, and Leo Tolstoy, she admires how these writers depict human’s “connection to the land and how rooted it is” (Interview with Isaac Chotiner n. pag.). Her interest in the physical interchange

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between human and nature nourishes and sustains her fictional themes of immigrants' putting down roots.

Among her works, her first novel *The Namesake* (2003) portrays the two generations of Indian immigrants. The male protagonist Gogol Ganguli is born of Bengali parents and grows up in the US. Through Gogol, Lahiri shows her inability to feel as if she belonged to either the US or India. The matter of generation is another theme of significance on which Lahiri focuses in her works. Since the 1970's, the Cuban sociologist Rubén Rumbaut has discussed about a "one-and-a-half generation." People of this generation are defined as persons born abroad who came to the United States as children (Portes 246). According to this definition, Gogol does not belong to the 1.5 generation because he is born in the US; still, he can be categorized in this generation because he is born of Bengali parents and raised in the US to face the distress about his roots. Thus, to categorize Gogol as the 1.5 generation is possible.

Gogol's deracinated state also derives from his family's social class. His parents came to the US for his father Ashoke's career opportunity at a university. Around 1900, Indian immigrants mainly came to the US for the constructions of railways, but within about ten years they became farmers. After the Immigrant Act of 1965, which removed the quota system, Indians started to migrate to the US as professionals. *The Namesake* reflects this social background. The Gangulis are well off because of Ashoke's position as a university professor, and their frequent visits to India keep Gogol suspended between the two cultures of the US and India, specifically Bengal. In other words, their social class is directly responsible for the "intense pressure to be two things." In this context, *The Namesake* presents the quandary of professional-class immigrants under bicultural and/or acculturational circumstances. They have freedom of movement beyond national borders combined with the feeling that they do not belong anywhere. By presenting the two generations of Indian immigrants, Lahiri shows how Indian immigrants of each generation find their identities. A comparison with other India-originated writers/critics reveals Lahiri's uniqueness as a writer.

The Namesake opens with a scene in which Ashima Ganguli goes into labor in her apartment in Cambridge, Massachusetts in 1967. She married Ashoke and came from Calcutta to the US because her husband was studying at MIT as a doctoral candidate. She gives birth to a son, and the young couple name him Gogol. When Gogol is 14, the Gangulis visit Calcutta to see their relatives. Around this time, Gogol starts to struggle with his sense of identity. To make matters worse, he dislikes his name; Gogol is his father's favorite Russian author. Before entering Yale University, Gogol changes his name to Nikhil and is

called “Nick” by his friends. He has several lovers and gradually becomes estranged from his family. In 2000, after Ashoke dies from a heart attack, Ashima, who lives alone in Massachusetts, holds a Christmas party with her family and her Bengali friends. She decides to spend six months of every year in the US and the rest in India. At the end of the novel, Gogol, who has divorced his wife, starts to read Nikolai Gogol’s “The Overcoat” which his father gave him for his 14th birthday.

The fact that Ashima gives birth to Gogol in the US suggests that the Gangulis have to live as rootless foreigners. Ashima is terrified to have a child in “a country where she is related to no one, where she knows little, where life seems so tentative and spare” (Lahiri, *The Namesake* 6). Ashima recognizes that she no longer belongs to her homeland, Calcutta, since she has to live as a mother and wife in the US. Her former life in Calcutta is lost for good and a new life for her begins in the foreign country. However, she does not start to live as an American either; in fact, she cannot identify herself either as an American or an Indian. And, her child will have to struggle between American and Bengali cultures. Nonetheless, the situation of the Gangulis is different from that of Indian immigrants before the Immigrant Act of 1965. Indians who migrated after 1965 were highly educated and trained. As Aijaz Ahmad points out, Indian immigrants were “petty-bourgeois” and “techno-managerial” (84). *The Namesake*, which begins in 1968, reflects this class shift of Indian immigrants.

Yet this freedom to cross national borders causes a problem; that is, they are lost about how to put down roots. Before the Immigration Act of 1965, they had to engage in low-wage jobs and were exploited so that they had neither money nor time to travel back to their native countries. Ahmad also argues that “the upper-class Indian who *chooses* to live in the metropolitan country is then called ‘the diasporic Indian’, and ‘exile’ itself becomes a condition of the soul, unrelated to facts of material life” (86; italics original). That the state of exile in metropolitan country becomes identity applies to Ashima, who moves from Calcutta to Cambridge, and later decides to spend a half of a year in Calcutta and another half year in Boston. This continuous move between the two countries causes the rootless state for her.

Crossing the borders of social classes by moving from England to the US, Lahiri represents the class shift of Indian immigrants and the distress about roots. About her childhood when her family moved from England to the US for her father’s job, she says that the US had a sense of acceptance (“Migration” n. pag.). Though these words seem to contradict her own statement that she could not feel either Indian or American, she means that immigrants can be free from the cohesion of social hierarchy and have more social opportunities in the US than in England. She admits that cohesion ends with the first

generation in the US while it remains even in the second generation in England (“Migration” n. pag.). Although her father was a librarian at the University of Rhode Island, Lahiri, achieving a Ph.D. from Boston University, crosses the borders of social classes. Her family also could have the mobility to cross the hierarchical borders by moving from India to England, and from England to the US.

The relation of the traditional hierarchy in India and England traces its history back to the British colonial era in India. In this era, Indian culture was mixed with British culture. Homi K. Bhabha asserts that the West started to create another history through the colonialism when Western modernity and Enlightenment began in the 18th and 19th centuries:

I [Bhabha] think we need to draw attention to the fact that the advent of Western modernity, located as it generally is in the 18th and 19th centuries, was the moment when certain master narratives of the state, the citizen, cultural value, art, science, the novel, when these major cultural discourses and identities came to define the “Enlightenment” of Western society and the critical rationality of Western personhood. The time at which these things were happening was the same time at which the West was producing another history of itself through its colonial possessions and relations. (“The Third Space” 218)

Under the pretext of enlightening Indians, England colonized India from 1757 to 1947 (this era is called the British Raj in India). Transplanting its Western modernity, England tried to create another history of itself in India. By the structure of caste, India remained to have a strict social hierarchy which England was losing. Therefore, as Gauri Viswanathan maintains in *Masks of Conquest*, England regarded India as a time capsule of its culture (116). As Stuart Hall points out, cultural identities are continuously transformed because of history and power (225). However, the transplantation of a culture to another is never easy. As Lahiri shows in *The Namesake*, Western culture does not simply dominate Eastern culture. Rather, a new area of hybrid culture emerges. Hence, the colonialism cannot produce another history or a time capsule of Western culture because how local people actually accept Western culture is always an extremely complicated business.

Viswanathan shows the history of English education in India and reveals its contradiction. According to her, Englishmen used the English text as the representation of their highest and most perfect state (20). Through English literature, Englishmen tried to make Indians believe that England was an ideal state. Although some English texts such as Shakespeare include pagan words like fortune, fate, and nature, English literary texts functioned usefully to

educate Indians and to make a linguistic stratification in India. To instruct Indians through literary texts referring to Christianity under the guise of liberalism was more effective than to use the Bible. As Viswanathan argues, although English missionaries taught literature “classically,” emphasizing on the history and structure of the language, Indian youth quickly accepted the knowledge of Christianity (85). In England, as the middle class rose to prominence, the literature was no longer only for elites. In this literary phenomenon, English language lost its politeness. To realize the traditional hierarchical society, Englishmen regarded India as the ideal place because India had linguistic stratification. The upper class of Hindus and Muslims learned the classical languages of Arabic, Sanskrit, and Persian, and the lower castes learned the vernacular languages. This linguistic stratification allowed English to remain as a language of a high culture (115-16).

The British government seemed to succeed in recreating their traditional society by encouraging the social and linguistic stratifications; however, these stratifications had a fatal contradiction. Indians, who learned English as the upper class, did not have opportunities to have higher jobs in British Indian government. Thus, as Viswanathan maintains, no matter how much English education they had, their chance to move upward in the colonial society and to be socially independent was strictly limited:

Educated Indians living under foreign rule were deprived of access to precisely this “honest honourable independence.” The tension between the upward mobility promised by modern studies and the limited opportunities open to the colonized for advancement exposed the fundamental paradox of British imperialism: economic exploitation required the sanction of higher motives, but once colonial intervention took on a moral justification – that is, the improvement of a benighted people – they pressure to sustain the expectations of the people by an equalization of educational opportunities created new internal stresses. (164)

The British government made Indian elites believe that English education would realize their true selves by liberating them from the oppression of Indian government (141). That is, Indians believed that they could have justice by British government and its English education. Nonetheless, after they learned English, they were confronted with the hypocrisy of the British government that they were treated unjustly in the colonialism. Their English education was not their passport for the future to go upward in the colonial hierarchy.

Amitav Ghosh reveals that this limitation of upward mobility in the British Raj still remains in India even after the independence in 1947. In his nonfiction book *Countdown*, he

writes about the nuclear experiment of the Indian government in 1998. The then Minister of Defence George Fernandes talks to him about why Indians do not stand up for their problems. According to Fernandes, this atmosphere derives from the colonial structure which the British government left behind. Even after the independence, the leaders refused to break the colonial mold (Ghosh 45). They give up the upward mobility in the society because they are too accustomed to staying in their given positions.

While Lahiri's movement from England to the US allowed her to be free from the cohesion of the traditional hierarchical society, it is also true that Lahiri could never write *The Namesake* without the influence of the British colonialism. The protagonist's is named after Ashoke's favourite Russian author Nikolai Gogol. Ashoke was recommended to read Gogol by his father when he was in Calcutta. It is possible that Gogol Ganguli's grandfather started to read Russian literature because European culture was imported by the British colonialism. Whereas causing the exploitation for Indians, the colonialism brought the intellectual legacy which Indian immigrants inherited. Lahiri's father, who was a librarian, might have read European literature in India, and influenced Lahiri's literary background that she likes 19th-century literature such as Hardy, Chekhov, and Tolstoy. While escaping from the traditional hierarchy, she owes her literary background to the legacy of the English education in the British Raj.

This self-contradiction makes her feel that she does not belong anywhere. Regarding this distress about roots of diasporic immigrants, Bhabha's argument is suggestive. He shows "in-between" spaces as another option of new identity for those who keep moving in two cultures:

These "in-between" spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself. (*The Location of Culture* 2)

The concept of "in-between" spaces thus defined is helpful to understand how immigrants negotiate to have new, hybrid identities. Bhabha's argument implies that roots do not necessarily have to be put down in one specific culture. Suggesting the hybridity of two cultures as "in-between" space or the "third space," he delineates the possibility of other positions about how immigrants search for roots ("The Third Space" 211). Bhabha's analysis also explicates the situation of the Gangulis. They feel anguished to know that they cannot find a land for their identity. The emergence of "in-between" spaces or the "third space"

would certainly provide them with a new option.

Bhabha treats identification as a process in which something new and innovative takes place out of “collaboration and contestation” of diverse elements. His main point is to present the process of cultural hybridity which shows “something different, something new and unrecognisable, a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation” (“The Third Space” 211). He stresses the position which is beyond binary oppositions or polarized concepts. This aspect is significant for Lahiri and *The Namesake* because she and her characters belong to neither Indian nor American culture. As Lahiri feels, the term Indian-Americans which is connected by a hyphen cannot be identity for Indian immigrants. However, Bhabha’s “third space” gives them the new area beyond this binary opposition.

Moreover, Bhabha’s “in-between” spaces and the “third space” can be linked with Paul Gilroy’s argument over the ways in which the black Atlantic politics presents the frame of identity. Using a pun of root and route, he traces how black culture has traditionally been interested in roots in modernity instead of routes of trans-Atlantic migration:

Marked by its European origins, modern black political culture has always been more interested in the relationship of identity to roots and rootedness than in seeing identity as a process of movement and mediation that is more appropriately approached via the homonym routes. (*The Black Atlantic* 19)

Though he mainly deals with black writers who went across national borders, his argument applies to immigrants who come to the US. As Bhabha does, Gilroy reveals the new possibility about identity of those who keep wandering across different cultures. Revealing that these people have tried to find a fixed soil for their roots, he demonstrates that a process of movement itself construct identity. In other words, not only root but also route can be one’s identity.

This argument about root/route concerns with the concept of home because putting down roots is linked with the matter of where people find their home. The concept of home is likely to be connected with the fixity of roots because home usually exists in a specific place. Thus, when immigrants find their identity not in roots but in routes, they lose their home. Yet Bhabha emphasizes the difference of the state of unhomed and homeless. According to him, unhomeliness is “the condition of extra-territorial and cross-cultural initiations” (*The Location of Culture* 13). This state has no border and distinction of public and private. Thus, the state of unhomed is different from the state of homeless. The condition of extra-territory means to go beyond the concept that home is fixed.

Gayatri Spivak also suggests that home is not a fixed place. Unlike Lahiri, Spivak maintains that the question of home or roots is not important for her. Asserting that she feels at home everywhere and does not feel at home anywhere, she explains, “I have roots in air” (Chakravorty 19). As Bhabha’s, Spivak’s attitude about home is beyond the concept of home. She also knows that unhomeliness can be roots. Having many “home bases” around the world (21), she regards her unhomed state as identity. In other words, her route going between home bases becomes her identity.

In *The Namesake*, Lahiri presents this unhomeliness through the Gangulis, especially Ashima. For her, the US is a foreign country. Also, India cannot be her home because she has children in the US. She thus accepts her rootlessness as their identity. According to Helena Grice: “[h]ome’ often carries a heavy ideological weight for the Asian American woman writer, who, in common with other ethnic or diasporic writers, may have undergone a separation from the ancestral homeland” (200). As Grice argues, Lahiri puts special emphasis on home. Still, home is beyond the distinction of territories for Lahiri. In *The Namesake*, Calcutta and Boston are home bases for Ashima. To keep on moving unhomely between these bases become her identity.

Unhomeliness is linked also with deterritorialized state of the globalized era. Paul Giles claims: “It is important to emphasize how the forces of deterritorialization have also operated . . . to disturb and dislocate the national identity of the United States itself” (14). As the exchanges between the US and other countries increase, national borders, which had formerly ensured the national identity of its citizens, come to lose their meaning. In other words, the blurring of borders leads to a blurring of the national identity. In *The Namesake*, Ashima represents deterritorialization. Lahiri explains the name of “Ashima means ‘she who is limitless, without borders’” (*The Namesake* 26). Her name thus suggests her personal life style in the vein of contemporary deterritorialization of the world.

Still, Lahiri does not describe Ashima as a model of whole Indian immigrants. The argument of Bhabha and Gilroy covers the first generation immigrants; however, Lahiri also reveals the distress of the 1.5 generation immigrant through Gogol. Reviewing her own childhood, she writes that her European American friends proudly talked about their origins:

These friends proudly called themselves Irish-American or Italian-American. But they were several generations removed from the frequently humiliating process of immigration, so that the ethnic roots they claimed had descended underground whereas mine were still tangled and green. (“My Two Lives” n. pag.)

Lahiri, having felt that she was not either an Indian or an American, is different from her Irish-American or Italian-American friends. Lahiri feels that her roots were not grown. Although Lahiri suggests: “[a]n anchor will drop, and a line of connection will be severed,” and implies that Indian immigrants will have firm roots in the US (“My Two Lives” n. pag.), she recognizes that Indian immigrants of the 1.5 generation are still confronted with the distress about their roots. As an immigrant of the 1.5 generation, she sees the difference between the first generation and the generation of her children (“Migration” n. pag.). For the first generation, the route between India and the US can become their identity. On the other hand, the generation of Lahiri’s children, namely the second generation, will find their roots in the US. Lahiri stands between these two generations. While Bhabha’s hybridity is about cultures, the 1.5 generation represents the generational hybridity which exists between the first and second generations.

Lahiri highlights these hybridities of cultures and generations in the scene that the Gangulis visit India. When Gogol visits India for the first time at the age of 14 in 1982, India was in the process of economic liberalization from foreign investment and multinationals (Grewal 82-83). In this cultural change, the Gangulis behave like foreign tourists in Agra by “staying at a hotel with a swimming pool, sipping bottled water, eating in restaurants with forks and spoons, paying by credit card (Lahiri, *The Namesake* 84). Agra in North India has a different culture from Calcutta; hence, the culture of Agra is foreign even for Ashoke and Ashima. As for languages, while people speak Bengali in Calcutta, people in Agra use Hindi. However, even though India has multicultural background in the country itself, the behaviour of the Gangulis shows that the domestic differences do not matter. Rather, their behaviour like foreign tourists endorse that India is not home for them. Local boys who sell postcards or marble trinkets to them near Taj Mahal suggest that they recognize the Gangulis as foreign tourists (84). Seeing India as not home even for his parents, Gogol feels Indian culture, which is mixed with European culture, as “something different, something new and unrecognisable.” He does not keep moving between home bases of India and the US as the immigrants of the first generation do. Also, he cannot put down roots in the US. The distress about his identity deepens after this visit. Dealing with the 1.5 generation as “something different, something new and unrecognisable,” Lahiri combines the cultural hybridity and generational hybridity.

Moreover, in *The Namesake*, the names of the protagonist represent the distress of his hybrid background. Around the time he visits India in 1982, Gogol starts to dislike his name because he has become conscious about his identity. He hates: “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” (76). Being neither Indian nor American, the Russian name Gogol suggests the “third space” for the protagonist’s identity. Also, the obscurity of his name shows the hybrid background that he does not belong to either culture. However, he cannot find his identity even in the “third space” as Ashima does. For Nikolai Gogol, after whom Gogol is named, “Gogol” is his last name. On the other hand, for Gogol Ganguli, the name is his first name. Anguished by his name, he feels that even Russians cannot share “the source of his namesake” (78). Thus, before entering Yale University, Gogol decides to change his name to Nikhil and feels New Haven as his home (102, 108).

However, even though he changes his name, he cannot escape from the distress about roots. When Gogol tells his family that he wants to change his name, his sister Sonia says to him: “You can’t do that. . . . Because you can’t. Because you’re Gogol” (221). Her words imply that Gogol has to face his identity as something unrecognizable. Having several American girlfriends, he breaks up with them. And though he marries Moushumi, who is from a Bengali family, he divorces her. Gogol cannot find his identity either in American or in Bengali culture. Lahiri does not show clear answer to Gogol’s distress. Instead, in the end of the story, she only describes that Gogol starts to read Nikolai Gogol’s “The Overcoat” (291). Gogol still does not find his home to put down roots. Yet he is no longer pessimistic about his name; rather, this scene represents Gogol’s decision to accept that his roots are not grown. Even if his roots are still green, he recognizes that he will put down roots in the US.

How to put down roots is one of the most significant themes for Lahiri. While she could be free from the traditional hierarchical society by moving to the US, she had to face the difficulty about her roots. In *The Namesake*, her ambiguous background is reflected in Gogol, who represents the 1.5 generation of Indian immigrants. Lahiri skilfully adopts the names of the characters like Ashima and Gogol. Their names suggest the distress of immigrants and how immigrants of each generation search for their identity. She crosses not only the borders of countries but also the borders of generations so that she makes the work multifaceted. Through the characters, she suggests the way Indian immigrants live. However, she does not depict a model which applies to all immigrants. The author herself has not found the answer yet. Through her works, she will keep on describing how she searches for her roots.

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