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### Race or culture?

*The Namesake*, by Jhumpa Lahiri, details the life of an immigrant family in America. The book follows mainly through the life of Gogol Ganguli, born to Ashoke and Ashima in Cambridge after Ashoke and Ashima move to the US from India. Lahiri's book shows the kind of struggles that a first-generation immigrant family faces while building their lives in America, as well as the struggles that the second generation children face in attempts to stay connected to their roots while adapting to American life. Through the lives of Gogol, Ashima, and Moushumi, Lahiri creates a realistic portrayal of the different ways that immigrants handle conflicting cultures. While some believe that the book shows the characters' desire to fit into "white" America through materialistic views, others wonder whether the book shows an obvious lack of racial discrimination for the main characters. This lack of race-based struggles, however, allows Lahiri to paint a clear picture of the internal struggles of the immigrant families as they attempt to make sense of their conflicting cultures in every aspect of their lives. Through the different ways that Gogol, Ashima, and Moushumi come to terms with their cultural identity, Lahiri shows us that culture, not race, causes this conflict.

In her article, "Names and Nicknames", Mandira Sen states that "as educated immigrants within a university community, whose children are high achievers in a society that respects achievement, perhaps Lahiri's characters have been shielded from racial discrimination. But the lack of it in their lives is surprising" (9). Sen refers to the fact that most of Gogol's friends are

white Americans, and all of his girlfriends before his marriage are also white Americans. While *The Namesake* lacks a certain expected amount of racial discrimination for the timeline that it lies upon, had it included racial discrimination, that social message would have taken away from the entire story of the characters' internal struggles. Even when the Ratliffs' family friend, Pamela, asks "what age he moved to America from India" or says that he must "never get sick" because the "climate wouldn't affect you, given your heritage" (p. 157), one cannot categorize her behaviors as hateful. Pamela's comments and questions may offend some readers due to her lack of awareness; however, her speech proves the depth of her knowledge, not her emotional stance on Gogol or his culture. Simply put, she knows little about anything that does not pertain to her or her social circle. Gogol's race may have sparked the ignorant statements from Pamela, but these statements, said out of ignorance, only makes evident that Pamela had no chances to harbor any ill will or race-based hate, which racial discrimination truly comes from. The point that Lahiri wants to show remains that Gogol's divided cultural identity, not his race, plays a role in his isolation.

This cultural isolation is easily observed in Ashima as she experiences her first pregnancy. Her loneliness in the hospital, separated from all else in a sterile, unfriendly environment, amplifies the isolation she feels from her move to Cambridge from Calcutta. Ashima wishes to speak to other women that stay in the room, perhaps gain sympathy or share experiences, but curtained away from the other women in the room, Ashima compares the differences between her culture and American culture that she observed so far. She thinks about her family and India and all she knows as familiar, and feels "terrified to raise a child in a country where she is related to no one" (Lahiri, 6). Some say that the people, not the place,

matters more in terms of feeling comfort and belonging, and Ashima's experience in America proves that despite living in Cambridge, a city, does little to ease her discomfort in a foreign land. As a result, Ashima relies heavily on Ashoke, her only and strongest connection to her home in India as well as her only bridge to America, for culture-based guidance.

Ashoke, who provides for Ashima a connection to America and a refuge of Bengali life in a foreign country, bridges her culture to America, not her race. Similarly, Gogol feels a need to connect his life at home with the life in school. Unfortunately for him, his name, which stands out due to its anomalous nature of being a Russian last name on an Indian American boy, represents a break in the bridge that would have allowed him to blend in. In his book, Jeffrey Ana states that "Lahiri shows us in her novel that whiteness as a race and culture, as an ideological practice in modern America, is produced and maintained by an emotional life that is consistent with preserving capitalist material interests and social relations" (236). Ana, however, discusses little about the fact that Gogol changes his name from Gogol, a Russian or European-based name, to Nikhil, an inherently and blatantly Indian name. Had Gogol desired to become one with the "whiteness as a race and culture", Gogol had the option to choose from any other Americanized alternative of Nikhil, and yet he chose the name that his parents had originally decided for him as his *bhalonam*. This proves his desire to remain connected to his culture. Gogol's first actions after changing his name represents not his "capitalist material interests". He desires to be an autonomous person, separate from his parents and their culture without disconnecting altogether. In that moment, Gogol wants Newbury street, and eventually America, to acknowledge him as Nikhil, a typical Indian American that no longer stands out, giving him a chance to assimilate as part of the culture.

This assimilation that Gogol searches for proves a lot more difficult for Ashima. For all her life in the US, Ashima feels like a foreigner. Despite living in the US for longer than in India, she remains connected to her Bengali culture more. She exclusively befriends Bengali families until her husband has left the house to work in Cleveland, and only until she has been forced to live alone does she attempt a part-time job. There, she finally makes her first non-Bengali friends and, without her husband, begins to learn independence. Through this, she finds the autonomy that Gogol himself has so desperately sought throughout his life. As Gogol struggles with his divided cultural identity, Ashima struggles with her own. While her roots remain in Calcutta with the rest of her family, the fact that her roots have dug deep into America becomes evident as the story draws to an end. Her compromise of her Bengali identity and her American identity can be observed in her decision to “spend six months of her life in India, six months in the States” (Lahiri, 275). Ashima’s plans shows her acceptance and eventual allowance of the two cultures to coexist, side by side as separate entities that cohabit within her.

Moushumi, who also faces a divided identity like Gogol or Ashima, seeks comfort in neither American nor Bengali culture, and unlike Ashima whose cultures reside side by side, or Gogol whose culture intertwine, she desires only to escape. As a child, after moving from England to Massachusetts, she “[holds] on to her British accent for as long as she could” (Lahiri, 212) so that she could stay connected to England, because she identified with England first. After enough time passes, she begins to accept the American culture while vehemently rejecting the Bengali culture, but in contrast to Gogol or Ashima who found their peace with both identities that they live with, Moushumi seeks belonging in a new, third culture. For her, “it was easier to turn her back on the two countries that could claim her in favor of one that had no claim

whatsoever” (214). Because these cultures exist with her without choice; because her parents gave these cultures to her, and she did not have a choice in this matter, she picks an entirely new culture altogether. She accepts neither the American nor the Bengali, and finds her comfort in a country to which she owed nothing – neither her citizenship nor her cultural heritage. Only after she meets Graham does she return to America, but once Graham experiences what marriage to Moushumi’s culture really means, they separate. One may assume that Moushumi’s race was what caused the separation, but both her and Graham’s race remain irrelevant. His inability to accept her culture, and therefore her, causes the fight that leads to the separation. Moushumi does not struggle with her racial identity, but rather her cultural identity. Although she did not choose the Bengali identity, her parents and family identify with that culture and if she wishes to remain connected with her parents, she must admit to her Bengali self. For someone such as Graham to reject the Bengali culture meant to Moushumi that he was rejecting her.

In Gogol, Moushumi finds acceptance that she could not find in Graham. Gogol accepts Moushumi because he, too, has struggled with his divided identity and the fact that he belongs to more than one culture. He also remembers the way he tried to escape the Bengali part of him by immersing himself into the American life, and he understand Moushumi. In the same way, Moushumi understands Gogol’s desire to escape, and what made him return. Their lives, intertwined during childhood, continues to flourish in this shared culture. They need little explanation for things that their non-Bengali partners would not have understood, and they share a world in their Bengali language that others are exempt from (Lahiri, 211). Comforted by their shared culture and their parents’ acceptance of their relationship, Gogol and Moushumi quickly marry and begin building their lives together.

Despite this comfort, Moushumi, unable to let go of the freedom she felt in escaping her cultural identities, finds this escape once more in the arms of Dimitri. He embodies freedom of choice and the absence of pressure to make the expected choice, and in the same way French culture attracted her, Dimitri attracts her. This affair “reminds her of living in Paris—for a few hours at Dimitri’s she is inaccessible, anonymous” (p. 264). Because she marries Gogol under the pressure and expectations of her parents and because despite her initial attraction to him, Gogol now represents the reluctant acceptance of her Bengali and American self that she feels she had no choice but to become, spending time with Dimitri makes her feel “inaccessible”, in the same way she felt when she lived in France. As an “anonymous” person whose cultural identity remains vague, she builds a new identity that which she can control. Gogol, who has accepted that he belongs to both Bengali and American culture, does not provide for her the escape that she has spent her life seeking.

Like Moushumi, Gogol, and Ashima, all immigrants face struggles with their cultural identities. Each individual faces a different magnitude of this identity crisis, and their outcomes may contrast vastly. For Ashima, she spends her entire life holding onto only her Bengali culture without accepting American culture until she has lost her husband. Ashoke, who had completely accepted the two cultures of Bengali and American, had connected her to American culture but with that part of her life gone, she accepts American culture into her life. By living half of the year in Calcutta and the rest of the year in America, she allows her two cultures to coexist in her life, side by side. Similarly, Ashoke’s death shocks Gogol. From Maxine’s life and the fully American culture that he immersed himself in, Ashoke’s death brings Gogol back to Ashima’s life, and his old life, completely; and for a while, Gogol struggles to find a way for both of his

Bengali and American identities to exist together. Moushumi's struggle mirrors Gogol in the desire to escape at first, but contrasts his in her desire to escape only, turning her back on both Bengali and American cultures and chasing French culture – that which holds no claim over her.

While it may appear that all of these characters struggle with their race and the perception of their race, their struggle does not come from race or racial bias. The true struggle stems from the conflicting cultural identities that exist within them and the behaviors that show as a result. Some may state that Gogol's desire to escape Bengali culture coincides with his desire to join "white" America, being white solves none of the problems he faced. Having the same skin color and looks as his friends would not have taken away from the fact that his name was unusual for his culture. In fact, having the "whiteness" would only force Gogol to stand out more, looking out-of-place in his Bengali culture and tradition. If, hypothetically, Gogol, Ashima, and Moushumi originated from a European country as white people, they would still display a similar struggle to adjust. The culture matters more than the race. The race of a person often coincides with their culture, because culture originates from similar races; however, any person, regardless of their race, would feel this dissonance when living in a culture that contrasts the one they know.

References

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