

Restorative Nostalgia and Reconstruction of Imaginary Homeland in *The Namesake*

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Abstract

As a writer of Indian diaspora in America, Jhumpa Lahiri explores the themes like dislocation, displacement and identity. In *The Namesake*, she writes about the Indian American people's nostalgia for their home country. The couple Ashima and Ashoke reconstruct an imagined homeland through their interaction with Indian American community around them. The Indian American community helps preserve Indian cultural heritage through holiday celebrations and other parties in which the people in exile speak their own language and perform their cultural rituals. Striding Indian and American two cultures, the Indian American community also has a hybrid identity. This hybridity is a compromise people have to make in order to survive in a different culture but meanwhile it can also be a way to resist against the main stream ideology. In this way, people in the community transcend their former nostalgia and become more open, global nomads in the world.

Key words: Nostalgia; Imaginary homeland; Resistance

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INTRODUCTION

As a daughter of an Indian American family who came to America after 1965, Jhumpa Lahiri is always living in

the shadows of two cultures. Brought up in a traditional Indian American family, she shares her parents' sadness of loss and displacement in an exile life. Her wrings are always concerned about such issues like belonging, home and identity. She is already a famous Indian American author when she published her first novel *The Namesake*. Her first book *Interpreter of Maladies* made great success and won her Pulitzer Prize, Best American Short Stories and O. Henry Prize. The *New Yorker* names her one of the 20 most important young American writers of the new century. *The Namesake* was a *New York Times* bestseller and a *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize Finalist. Released in 2007, the book was adapted into a major film in the US, and achieved a commercial success.

Lahiri's diasporic background and her combination of ethnic and universal themes in her novels have instigated great interest among the literary critics. There is great controversy about how to label her and her works. In the introduction to *Naming Jhumpa Lahiri: Canons and Controversies*, Lavina Dhingra, the editor, mentioned her multiple categories as Asian American writer, ethnic writer, diasporic writer and American writer and also affirm her canonic position by comparing her with American literary masters like VS Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, Bharati Mukherjee and Maxine Hong Kingston. When commenting on *The Namesake*, Benjamin Austin notes elements that pale in comparison with those in her short stories but concludes that the author remains "one of today's most promising young talents" (Austin, 2003). From the post-colonial angle, Shao-ming Kung investigates the negotiation of hybrid cultural identities by South Asian immigrants and concludes that Lahiri is a "seasoned translator" between cultures. (Kung, 2009) Aparajita De focuses on the main character Gogol to explore the formation of transnational diasporic identity (De, 2010). Other papers also explore the themes like women's subjectivity, identity politics and the theme of death etc.

Despite the diversity of topics and concerns to *The Namesakes*, no attention is paid to approaching the book from the aspects of home, diaspora and nostalgia. Born to Bengali parents in London and raised in Rhode Island, Lahiri is British by birth, American by citizenship and Indian by origin, so she is a representative of Indian diaspora. She feels a strong sense of loss, displacement and homing desire. When she talked of India, she had a kind of intensive attachment for the country, "Calcutta nourished my mind, my eyes as a writer, and my interest in seeing things differently from different points of view." There's a legacy and tradition there that we just don't have here" (Das, 2008). She expressed this kind of nostalgia and longing for her hometown in her second book *The Namesake*.

Nostalgia as an expression of ethos, considered "twilight zone between history and memory" by Dennis Walder (2011), goes back a long way—at least to Homer's *Odyssey*. But the word is of recent origin, and was derived from a Greek neologism, combining *nostos* (home) and *algos* (pain or longing). The Swiss doctor, Johannes Hofer, in the 17th century first identified this symptom among displaced Swiss soldiers. The soldiers who missed their homes tended to lose their appetite, have a fever and feel depressed. In the old good days, nostalgia was a curable disease. A return to homeland was considered as a best remedy. However, for 19th century romanticists, nostalgia was no longer a physiological illness but a way to express dissatisfaction with reality by being sentimental and escaping to nature. The 20th century thinkers like Freud, treated nostalgia as a mental problem in the same way as melancholy and tried to solve the problem by resorting to psychotherapy.

The increased migration and diaspora in modern society made nostalgia develop from a personal malady to a social disease. In *The Future of Nostalgia*, Sevltana Boym points out its' contagion and spread in modern world. She comments that "The Twentieth century began with a futuristic utopia and ends with nostalgia" (2001). She expands the connotation of nostalgia by defining it as both a longing for lost places and time as well. In her book, she also makes two categories of nostalgias like restorative nostalgia and reflective nostalgia. For Boym, restorative nostalgia "stress *nostos* and attempts a trans-historical reconstruction of lost home...reflective nostalgia dwells on the ambivalences of human longing and belonging and does not shy away from the contradictions of modernity. Reflective nostalgia focuses on longing for home, so it contains suffering and pain, being sentimental, conservative and melancholy. It is what cultural critics like bell hooks rejected and called "a kind of useless act" (Hooks, 1990, p.147). But restorative nostalgia spurs the people in exile to imagine an ideal homeland in their homeland which is conducive to soothing their anxiety in assimilation and construction of a new identity. So this paper will focus on restorative nostalgia and explore its positive function through a close reading of *The*

Namesake. The paper argues that restorative nostalgia can keep the diaspora's own ethnic heritage and meanwhile facilitate the diaspora's assimilation into mainstream society by constructing an imaginary homeland to release the pressure of assimilation and sooth the pain of rootlessness. From this sense, nostalgia bears some positive qualities just as John Su in *Ethics and Nostalgia in The Contemporary Novel* mentions "it facilitates an exploration of ethical ideals in the face of disappointing circumstances" (Su, 2005, p.4). Nostalgia for the past is a hint that the present is not satisfactory, so it is a concern for the present by looking back at the past. Nostalgia is a bridge between past, present and future.

1. INDIAN COMMUNITY AS AN IMAGINARY HOMELAND

Salman Rushdie in *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism* 1981-1991 began with nostalgia for his homeland by recalling a picture of his old house in India. After absence for so many years, he revisited his homeland in India and found that everything had changed. Rushdie then concluded that the exile writers can only create his imaginary homeland in writing rather than depicts a genuine one because the homeland can't be retrieved. Even if the writer can come back to his old home, it is no longer the same as it was.

It may be that writers in my position, exiles or emigrants or expatriates, are hunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being muted into pillars of salt. But if we do look back, we must also do so in the knowledge—which gave rise to profound uncertainties—that our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of mind. (Rushdie, 1981, p.10)

According to Rushdie, The imaginary homeland is ideal because people can't retrieve it. That's how it keeps its charm and myth of return for people in exile. In *The Namesake*, Jhumpa Lahiri writes about Indian diaspora in the US. Diaspora originally referring to the Jewish dispersion from their original homeland, now indicates any kind of exile from the home country. It disrupts the fix nature of roots with journeys along various routes and reinvention of identities. *The Namesake* depicts an imaginary homeland created by Indian American couple Ashoke and Ashima after they moved to America from Calcutta following 1965 Immigration and Naturalization Act. This imaginary homeland is a dynamic community of Indian Americans who keeps an interactive relationship with each other. The members in this community are all Bengalis professionals who moved to America as intellectuals. As minorities in a white society, they feel a sense of dislocation and displacement. Being lonely, they often associate with each other by holding parties,

celebrating traditional holidays and traveling together. The community they form has a soothing effect for the diasporic people when they suffer deep alienation as a stranger in a strange land. Without the community's emotional bond and consistent help, Ashoke and Ashima can't achieve their middle class position so quickly. In the beginning of the book, when Ashima gave birth to their son, Gogol, the only people who came to visit her were a group of Bengali friends. "For as grateful as she (Ashima) feels for the company of the Nandis and Dr. Gupta, these acquaintances are only substitute for the people who really ought to be surrounding them". So here the Indian community serves as a substitute family to the couple and offer love and blessings to the newborn baby Gogol. The most traumatic thing for people in exile lies in the loss of their national culture. Frantz Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks*, mentions the example of a black man who wants to turn his face white. The black people have a kind of self-hate and want to destroy their blackness by wearing a white mask. Fanon holds that this inferiority complex derives from two factors: economic poverty and internalization of this inferiority. He calls on the black people to discover the meaning and beauty of their black identity. For Ashoke and Ashima, the Indian community plays a very important part in helping them discover the true meaning of their Indian identity and increase their confidence for being who they are. In the community parties, "they drink tea with sugar and evaporated milk... They sit in circles on the floor, singing songs by Nazrul and Tagore, passing a thick yellow clothbound book of lyrics among them". The songs in their own languages remind them of their happy childhood and parents. The famous poems by Tagore increase their sense of pride by comparing their old civilization with American history which only lasts for more than three hundred years. The traditional food they have at the party creates a home atmosphere. Their Indian Identity is also consolidated through the consumption of their home food. In this aspect, women hold a very important part in preserving the ethnic food culture. At their American home, Ashima always cooks Indian food to her kids and teach them how to eat with their hands like a true Indian. They observe Indian religious holidays with national food. Being exiles, they know the sadness of losing their native language. Ashima often sends Gogol to attend Bengali classes in order to learn their own language. In the community parties, they use the native language to speak and sing in order to keep and transmit their linguistic heritage to their future generation. Fanon says that to speak a language is to "assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization". So using one's own language in a foreign country demonstrates their patriotism and a sense of national pride. The India community also helps Indian Americans raise their political awareness and cultivate integrity to fight against racial prejudice. "For hours, they argue about the politics of America, a country in

which none of them is eligible to vote". Because of the racial prejudice, the Indian Americans are excluded from the Mainstream society for their political rights. So the discussion and disputes about politics in the community parties can help make up their loss by giving them a chance to speak. The Indian American community also shows concern for the continuation of the community and often gather together to celebrate the important moments of their future generation like the birthday and graduation parties. When Gogol is 6 month old, Ashima and Ashoke hold the rice ceremony party for him with many friends. "There is no baptism for Bengali babies, no ritualistic naming in the eyes of God. Instead the first formal ceremony of their lives centers around the consumption of solid food ...He Gogol is photographed by his father and his friends". When Ashoke and Ashima give name to their son Gogol, they also keep the Indian tradition by giving him a pet name and a good name. All these details show that the Indian people in *The Namesake* are very nostalgic about their past and tradition.

2. A HYBRID IDENTITY

Nostalgia in this novel has the double vision of yearning backward and looking forward. The characters feel homesick for their homeland with a purpose of seizing the present life and having a better future. Jhumpa Lahiri yearns for personal identity for herself as well as her imaginary characters in this novel. As Indian Americans, the liminal space the characters occupy between two cultures determines that their identity is not fixed and static but hybrid and mobile. Homi Bhabha in *The Location of Culture* points out that "The interstitial passage between fixed identifications opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains differences without an assumed or imposed hierarchy (Bhabha, 1994, p.4). In the beginning of the passage, because of lack of appropriate ingredients, the homesick Ashima is attempting to make a "humble approximation of the snack sold for pennies on Calcutta sidewalk and on railway platform through India" with a blend of both Indian and American ingredients. Anata mannur in her paper argues that "when it comes to thinking about south Asian diasporic bodies, food is never far...Discursively the term by which "Indianness" is imagined almost always mobilizes a culinary idiom; more often than not food is situated in narratives about racial and ethnic identity as a intractable measure of cultural authenticity (Mannur, 2010, p.3). The mixed food Ashima eats is the reflection of her hybrid identity. In the community parties, the Indian Americans often eat curry, pizza or Chinese food. Their hybrid identity is also reflected in the naming system. Both Ashoke and Ashima have two names, a pet name given by their Indian families and a good name used in America. Gogol takes his name from the Russian namesake Nikolai Gogol and he also has the English name

Nikhil. Gogol's hybrid identity is also shown in his several interracial affairs although they all end up with nothing. Both of his first two lovers are American girls. Although his wife Moushumi is not an American, but she is really a global citizen who learns a third language—French and chooses to stay in France. Ashoke, accustomed to wearing tailor-made pants and shirts all his life, also learns to buy ready-made. This exile situation is well reflected in Edward Said. As a Palestinian, educated and serving in the west, Said has been compelled to live more than one life simultaneously. All his works are being informed with this kind of condition of being exilic. He also expressed this kind of pain of living two lives in *Reflections on Exile*. "Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience. It is the unbearable rift between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home; its essential sadness can never be surmounted" (Said, 2000, 173). Yet this liminal position and hybrid identity give the characters pain and suffering, relish and joy as well. It is also an advantageous position in which the diasporic people can resist the mainstream culture. By assimilation into the white society, they acquire the cultural quality of mainstream society. According to Homi Bhabha, this kind of mimicry can also serve as a way of resistance because it deconstructs the binary oppositions of the self and other by creating a hyphenated identity and blurring area. All cultures and identities are based on othering exclusionist practices. One culture depends on rejection or forced ignorance of the other. All dominant culture establishes itself by subjugating the other culture like what the Germans do to the Jews. The hybrid identity creates a kind of grey area in which the self and other can't distinguish themselves, so it serves as a resistance to the dominant ideology. In this way, they can keep the national culture and meanwhile make the best of the main stream society. Ashima becomes more independent after many years of living in the US. After being a housewife for so many years, she decides to become a librarian in a public library. She also increases her own mobility by learning to drive. After her husband dies in the US, she is determined to divide her time between India and America, living a mobile and free life. Both Gogol and Sonia go to Ivy League universities and become middle class people in the US. After Gogol's marriage to Moushumi fails in the end, he returns to his parents' traditional Indian home and begins to read the book his father gave him as a present when he was young. This shows that he has experienced the transition from rebellion against his national culture to achieving a balance between the home and foreign

culture. He has experienced a negotiation of relationship with his parents. Therefore, all of the characters reap the most benefits in a strange land by construction of a hybrid identity.

Svetlana Boym in *The Future of Nostalgia* holds that nostalgia is a positive emotion because it is "not always about the past; it can be retrospective and prospective" (Boym, 2001). The purpose of homesickness is to create a better future by returning to the past. Salman Rushdie in *Imaginary Homelands* says migrants "straddle two cultures ...fall between two stools" (Rushdie, 1981. p. 15). Restorative nostalgia urges the characters in *The Namesake* to create an imagined homeland in which they practice their cultural ritual and reconstruct their national identity. Their hybridity is a compromise they have to make in order to survive in a different culture but meanwhile it can also be a way to resist against the main stream ideology. In this way, they transcend their former nostalgia and become a more open, global nomad in the world.

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