


Bengali Cultural Identity and ‘Multi-cultural America’ in Jhumpa Lahiri’s The Namesake (2003): A Cultural Anthropologist Approach			Literature
			Keywords: Lahiri; Bengali culture; habit/ costume; ritual/ ceremony; language; immigrant identity; multi-culturalism
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Abstract			
<p>Borrowing concepts from cultural anthropology, our paper argues the point that Jhumpa Lahiri affirms her Bengali cultural identity and substantiates it as a reality in multi-cultural America. In her novel <i>The Namesake</i> (2003), she deploys three items of the Bengali culture and imposes them on the American scene. She does so by drawing on Bengali habit/ costume, ritual/ ceremony and language to express her cultural identity. She depicts Bengali rituals and ceremonies related to birth, death and marriage to mark the Bengali bearing of her characters. She highlights Bengali food habits which are used as means of cultural gathering among members of the Bengali/ Indian diaspora of the United States and Indian costumes as the fabric that makes their cultural belonging. The third cultural component she refers to is Bengali language, which when used symbolizes cultural belonging. As the cultural product of a representative author of the Indian diaspora in the United States, Lahiri’s novel fits in Susan Koshy’s definition of the fiction of Asian-American literature and her concept of ‘space-claiming’ through ethnic or cultural identity.</p>			

1. Introduction

Culture and identity make up a central issue in post-colonial studies. The two components swerve together in what Marry Louise Pratt calls the “contact zone”, either in the colonial situation or the post-colonial condition of diaspora and emigration. The inevitable consequence of the latter condition is the cross-cultural encounter of the emigrant’s culture with that of the host country. In the “contact zone”, the emigrants experience identity issues. Sometimes, they witness their own cultural identity in friction with the identity of the host country, but they are forced to adjust their cultural practices to those of the latter. Consequently, their emigrant culture becomes hybrid in the sense that it merges with that of the host, which becomes part of them inevitably.

Our paper is directed to the identity issues related to the Indian diaspora in the United States of America, which hosts the second largest Indian community after Britain. Out of the community emerged several writers that were interested in identity issues related to the cross-cultural encounter. Jhumpa Lahiri is one such writer whose narratives deal with the encounter between the Bengali culture and the American one. In their recent studies of Lahiri’s *The Namesake* (2003), Heinze (2007) and Friedman (2010) study the novel either as a sample of diasporic literature for Heinze or as an immigrant narrative for Friedman. Taking the Gangulis as a sample immigrant family, the novel is interested in the identity issues such as the implications of immigrants’ names or their relations to other cultures. However, as Bengalis, the Gangulis’ concern with their own cultural identity imposes itself as a basic feature of their lives.

As a matter of fact, in our paper, we intend to study the three components of the Bengali culture that Lahiri appropriates to claim the Bengalis’ cultural space in multi-cultural America. In *The Namesake*, she draws on Bengali habit/ costume and ritual/ ceremony and language to express her cultural identity. She highlights food *habits* which are considered as means of cultural gathering among members of the Indian diaspora in the United States and Indian/ Bengali *costumes* as the fabric with which the immigrants’ identity and cultural belonging are woven. She puts emphasis on Bengali *rituals* and *ceremonies* related to birth, death and marriage and considers

them as the symbolic marks of the Bengali bearing of her characters. The third cultural component she refers to is Bengali language through which the Bengali culture is imposed as a cultural reality within multi-cultural America. In the “contact zone”, these cultural components are promoted by the members of the first generation Indians who play the role of cultural transmitters with their US-born children. This cultural transmission emerges as a pivotal concern in diaspora life, and Bengali parents in Lahiri’s novel make sure that they transmit it to their children in order to preserve their ethnic identity.

As a second generation Indo-American, Lahiri tells us about the manners the first generation immigrants like her own parents transmit the patterns of their culture to their US-born children. Thus, as a representative author of the Indian/ Bengali diaspora in the United States, she blends her cultural identity with the standard American culture to produce a hybrid text which also speaks a great deal about her hybrid identity as Indo-American (or Asian-American). The term Asian-American or Indo-American with a hyphen is used as one component of the American mosaic of cultures. This makes up a kind of “contact zone” with a variety of emigrant cultures and the standardized American culture to which they are bound to adjust. Each and every emigrant culture is called to adapt to the standardized culture, but cultural promotion is still involved mainly in the private sphere but sometimes in the public one.

The Namesake depicts the life experiences of a Bengali-American family as they grapple with the necessity of promoting their Bengali culture as well as adapting to the main American one. The Gangulis, parents and children, provide a sample family through which Lahiri explores these key issues. The novel covers more than twenty five years in their lives from the 1960s to the 1990s. Because the national culture in the United States after the dissolution of the idea of the melting pot involved a main culture and minority ones, there emerged a sort of cultural dichotomy between the private sphere and the public one. Some cultural patterns are reserved for the public sphere and each and every American, of foreign origins or not, needs to abide by it. In the novel, this is reflected in the naming process. Gogol is named Gogol and not as his parents wanted to do because they were asked to abide by the rules of the standard American culture. Indeed, if the authorities of the hospital did not urge the Gangulis to name their newborn baby right at his birth and allowed them follow their cultural practice of taking time for deciding upon two names, he would have been named differently and his life would have been different.

2. Results and Discussion

By establishing an important community in the United States, the Indians made a sort of cultural claim on the American space. “Space-claiming” according to Koshy (2012, p. 762) is the result of the “affirmation” of one’s ethnic or cultural identity in a multi-cultural setting. In *The Namesake*, the author makes this claim possible by emphasizing the cultural identity and practice of the Bengalis in “the contact zone” where “disparate cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of dominance and subordination like colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out across the globe” in the post-colonial era. (Pratt, 1992, p. 4) In the United States, diaspora life emerges as the “aftermath” to the colonial reality since former colonized people like the Indians migrated to the West after decolonization. By cultural identity and practice, we mean aspects of the Bengali culture which are promoted in the “contact zone” in order to make this cultural claim possible and negotiate their space among other diasporic cultures along with the standard American culture. Ascroft et. al. state that the “development of diasporic cultures necessarily questions **essentialist** models, interrogating the ideology of a unified, ‘natural’ cultural norm, one that underpins the **centre/margin** model of colonialist discourse.” (2007, p. 62) In multi-cultural America, there is a mainstream/ dominant culture that is white Anglo-Saxon Protestant and emigrant cultures that have to negotiate their proper places without transgressing the bounds of the standard one. In other words, each and every culture is called to negotiate its proper space without treading upon the main culture. Bengali culture is one such culture that Lahiri proclaims in her novel by focusing on three cultural components: *language, habit/ costume and ritual/ ceremony*.

2.1. Bengali Ritual/ Ceremony in the American Scene

To begin with ritual, the author articulates the rituals of initiation which introduce the newborn child to the culture of the mother land in the “contact zone”, marriage ceremonials that bind together the members of the same culture and ensure cultural continuity, and rituals of passage to the other world. Soon after the birth of a new baby in a Bengali family of the diaspora, the parents make sure that he or she is introduced to and accepted within their culture. This begins with the given name which has to undergo a kind of ceremony coined in cultural anthropology, “naming ceremony” (Prins et. al. 2010, p. 134). Like in India, the family always care after giving the baby two names. “In Bengali the word for pet name is *darnam*, meaning literally, the name by which one is called, by friends, family, and other intimates, at home and in other private unguarded moments. [...] Every pet name is paired with a good name, a *bhalonam*, for identification in the outside world” (25-26). In the novel, the Gangulis, husband and wife, have two such names for each. And when their first baby is born in the United States they have to face a bunch of difficulties for giving their baby the two names in their attempt to keep on their cultural identity. Prins et. al. state that

personal names are important devices for self-definition in all cultures. It is through naming that a social group acknowledges a child’s birthright and establishes its social identity. Among the many cultural rules that exist in each society those having to do with naming are unique because they individualize a person and at the same time identify one as a group member. (2010, p. 134)

It is a rule in the Bengali culture that names are given not by the parents but by the father’s grand-mother. However, the new born baby’s great grand-mother is in India, and the letter his parents were waiting from her with the two selected names never arrives. Within “Bengali families, individual names are sacred, inviolable” (28), so the baby is called *Gogol*, named after the Russian author Nikkolai Gogol which makes him a namesake. To the Bengalis, the first step in introducing the new born child into their culture is by giving her or him the two names. Gogol’s parents have received such names and are considered full members of the Bengali culture even if they live apart from their mother country. However, because he is a namesake, Gogol is forced to explain the nature of his name both in the American public sphere and the Bengali private spheres. This makes him a sort of ‘other’ both to his cultural identity and the American one.

After the naming ceremony, the family perform other rituals in order to initiate the new born child into the Bengali culture. When Gogol is six months old, they perform “annaprasam: his rice ceremony” (38). This replaces the Baptism ceremony in the Christian tradition. The Bengali babies receive the first “formal ceremony of their lives [...] around the consumption of solid food” (38). Even if the family are in the United States, they happen to gather enough people from their culture to take part in and bear testimony to this ceremonial. The practice involves the feeding of the child with rice, “the Bengali staff of life, for the very first time” (39). This kind of ceremonial has the purpose of **consolidating** Gogol’s Bengali bearing. It involves the first step to the socialization of the child into the food habits of the community.

In death, too, the Bengali migrants find ground for cultural expression following ceremonials that are practiced at home. At the death of Gogol’s father, the family perform the mourning ceremony in the Bengali way. They feed on “a mourner’s diet” which is basically vegetarian. They “eat only rice, dal and vegetables, plainly prepared” (180). During eleven days they had only to feed on this diet, and on the eleventh they rupture the period of mourning by a “religious ceremony” (181). This ceremony involves a gathering of the family and their friends around a framed picture of the dead with a priest “chant[ing] verses in Sanskrit” (Ibid.). This kind of ceremonial that follows the death of a Bengali is prevalent among the Bengalis in the United States so much so that the novel emphasizes the time when Gogol and his parents were mourning his grand-parents’ death following the same cultural manners. The implication is that he grew so close to his cultural identity from

childhood to adulthood despite being born and raised away from the mother land. His parents played the role of cultural mediators between the cultural patterns of the motherland and those he was to acquire from the American society through schooling and other extracurricular programs.

As an American-born Bengali child and despite his parents' efforts to fully *encultrate* him, Gogol is less concerned with the Bengali culture as his parents, but after his father's death, he experiences "a sudden need to reconnect with lost Bengali rituals; this desire to return culminates in marriage to an Indian American woman" (Friedman, 2008, p. 115). Indeed, Gogol posed as a cultural 'outcast' throughout his young years, but at his father's death and the ceremonials that followed, there awakened in him this need to reconnect ties with his culture. Immediately after the eleven days of mourning, Gogol decides to break up with his American girl friend to marry Mouchoumi, his Bengali chosen one. Their arranged marriage introduces us to another type of ceremonial endemic to the Bengali culture. The unsaid with the marriage ceremony is that it aims at binding Gogol and Mouchoumi together as a Bengali couple to ensure the promotion of their culture in the American space, something that would have been different if he married his Caucasian or white American girl friends. Even if their marriage is followed by divorce, it allows Gogol return "to the bosom of his ethnic community by marrying an Indian American woman in a traditional ceremony, returning again to his home and family after" the divorce (Friedman, 2008, p. 120).

2.2. Bengali Habits/ Costume in the American Scene

Bengali rituals and ceremonies are not the only cultural components through which the Bengalis express their cultural identity in the United States. Food habits and costume play an essential role. Despite their condition as migrants in the United States, the Bengalis always endeavor to create occasions to promote their cultural identity through, for instance, holding dinners and wedding/ birthday parties. Such occasions allow them, especially adults, to wear their Bengali costume. They also feed on Indian cuisine. Cultural anthropologists argue that food has symbolic functions. Kittler et. al. state that an "essential symbolic function of food is cultural identity" (2011, p. 4). What one eats determines who one is culturally. "Food habits are an integral part of cultural behaviour and are often closely identified with particular groups" (Fieldhouse, 1986, p. 41).

In *The Namesake*, the dinners and parties where Indian/ Bengali cuisine is served are occasions of communion among the members of the Bengali community. For instance, at Gogol's fourteenth birthday, the family throw a party to celebrate the occasion following the Bengali way. They invite their Bengali friends and make sure that the food served conforms to their cultural identity:

As usual his mother cooks for days beforehand, cramming the refrigerator with stacks of foil covered trays. [...] lamb curry with lots potatoes, *luchis*, thick *channa dal* with swollen brown raisins pineapple chutney, *sandeshes* molded out of saffron-tinted ricotta cheese. All this is less stressful than the task of feeding a handful of American children, half of whom always claim they are allergic to milk, all of whom refuse to eat the crusts of their bread. (72; emphasis added)

The words *luchis*, *channa dal* and *sandeshes* in this quote refer to three basic items of Bengali cuisine. This concern with the Bengali cuisine does not limit to the private sphere. Even at the public sphere they always endeavor to proclaim their Indian food habits. When the Gangulis depart for India for vacation, the parents make sure that they consume Indian food during the flight. At the airport, Gogol's father orders "[t]wo Hindu meals" (80). Even if the airport is cosmopolitan, it remains an American space where the Gangulis proclaim their Indian culture publically. The private and public concern with Bengali cuisine is related to the symbolic function of food; it allows one express his or her cultural identity in an adopted culture.

In terms of cultural practice and identity, food habits often go hand in hand with costume. In the novel, Bengali costume is hailed as the material mark of belonging to Bengali culture. At Gogol's birthday party, the Bengali guests, especially women, make sure that they wear their native dress. It is said that "Women are dressed in saris" (72). However, it is in the more formal marriage ceremony that native dress is given more prominence since every Bengali guest cares after dressing in the Bengali manner to the honor of the bride and the groom. This is the case with Gogol's and Mouchoumi's wedding. The groom wears a "Punjabi top", "dhoti" and a pair of "nagrai slippers" (220). His female relatives wear *saris*. We would argue that text and textile weave together in Lahiri's novel, and clothing for her plays the role of cultural incorporator binding together members of the same culture. The Bengali characters of the novel seize each and every opportunity to wear Bengali costume as the fabric through which they weave their cultural belonging.

2.3. Bengali Language as a Diasporic Cultural Reality

Despite the central role habit/ costume and ritual play in the enculturation process, the acquisition of language rests as the first step in the process. To learn the mother language allows for the acquisition of the cultural patterns of one's own community. It is therefore the first device through which "intergenerational cultural transmission" (Trommsdorf, 2009 p. 127) is achieved. Besides, according to the cultural anthropologist Claire Kramsch (1998, p. 3), "language symbolizes cultural reality". In a multi-linguistic and multi-cultural context, language stands for belonging to one specific culture among others. Within immigrant communities, the promotion of the mother language is primordial to the cultural promotion in the contact zone. The novel by Lahiri is written in English, but in her text she tells us that the Bengali migrants speak to each other in their language at home and sometimes outside in an attempt to preserve their cultural identity and establish it as a cultural reality in multi-cultural America. However, they also speak English language with their American interlocutors. Thus, they educate their children in such a way as to be bilinguals. This would allow them assume their double identities as Indo-Americans. They start by accustoming the child with the mother language followed by reinforcement through speaking to him or her in it as s/he grows up.

In the novel, Ashoke and Ashima persist in speaking to their son Gogol in "Bengali" even if "he's been lazy, addressing [them] in English" (75). They consider that their son will have time to learn the language of the host country when he confronts the outside world, but the only way to learn the mother language is to speak it at home or with other fellow Bengalis. When Gogol reaches the age of going to school, his father has had to convince the principal of the school that his son "is perfectly bilingual" (58). He, therefore, "does something he has never done before, and addresses his son in careful, accented English" telling him "Go on, Gogol [...] Tell Mrs. Lapidus how old you are?" (Ibid.) The implication is that the Bengalis persist in speaking to their children in the mother language, but when it is enquired by the dictates or needs of the public sphere like educational institutions to address them in English they abide by the rule.

The concern with the mother language does not stop at the level of day to day communication. There is a deliberate practice that consists of informal schooling which dispenses Bengali children the grammatical and phonological rules of their language and other patterns of their culture. Lahiri writes:

When Gogol is in the third grade, they send him to Bengali language and culture lessons every other Saturday, held in the home of one of their friends. For when Ashima and Ashoke close their eyes it never fails to unsettle them, that their children sound just like Americans, expertly conversing in a language that still at times confounds them, in accents they accustomed not to trust. In Bengali class, Gogol is taught to read and write his ancestral alphabet, which begins at the back of his throat with an unaspirated *K* and marches steadily across the roof of his mouth, ending with exclusive vowels that hover outside his lips. (65-66)

Apprehensive that formal schooling in American educational institutions will assimilate their children linguistically and culturally, Bengali parents like the Gangulis set up a parallel informal schooling where their linguistic and cultural heritage are promoted and transmitted to their posterity.

All in all, a linking thread that binds together the three Bengali cultural components involves the creation of social occasions where they are promoted. Some of these occasions are deliberate while others are occasional. First, marriage, birth and death ceremonies are occasional, but they tie together the members of the same culture and offer them opportunities of cultural promotion. In these specific occasions, the Bengalis establish opportunities of cultural practice and reinforcement. Second, holding dinners and throwing parties periodically are deliberately planned by them in order to keep up with their culture. The nucleus family in Lahiri's novel offers an example of all these elements. We learn from the births of Gogol and Sonia, Ashoke's death and Gogol's marriage that the Bengalis stick on their culture by conforming to each and every ritual involved in them. The Gangulis also create social occasions like dinner parties where other Bengali nucleus families are invited for cultural consolidation. This interest in the creation of social occasions for the sake of culture is central to Lahiri's other stories. The cash nexus of the short story "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine" (1999) is the deliberate holding of dinner parties among Bengalis for cultural practice and promotion. We learn from the story's narrator that Mr. Pirzada is always invited to "share our meals" (24).

3. Conclusion

As a conclusion, it is important to reiterate that consuming Bengali food, dressing in Bengali costume, performing Bengali ceremonies around birth, death and marriage and speaking in Bengali are the elements through which the Bengali/ Indian diaspora promote their cultural heritage and carve their cultural space inside multi-cultural America. However, there is a remarkable difference between first generation and second generation emigrants' attitudes towards their native culture. The members of the first generation make sure that their cultural heritage is preserved and endeavor to transmit it to their posterity. Despite the Bengali-oriented education they receive from their parents, the members of the second generation are integrated to the standard American culture by schooling and other extra-curricular activities like sports so fundamental to the American culture. Thus, they hover between their native culture and the culture of the host country, which results in their cultural hybridity.

Lahiri's novel is loaded with this interest in the hybrid condition of the second generation Indians. Gogol's attitude towards the culture of his parents and that of his American school mates and teachers shows that he is a kind of cultural hybrid Indo-American hovering between speaking Bengali at home and English at school, eating American food like hamburgers at school and Indian food at home. The result is that there is the need for cultural mediation or translation. The first and second generations play the role of cultural mediators or translators interchangeably between the adopted culture and the culture of the motherland. The first immigrants transmit the cultural patterns of their native countries to their US-born children. The latter translate the American cultural patterns to their parents.

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