

Original Research Article

Cultural Dilemmas Beyond Borders: Xenocentric and Ethnocentric Explorations in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*

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Abstract: This research paper endeavours to examine the manifestations of xenocentric and ethnocentric behaviours exhibited by the immigrant characters within Jhumpa Lahiri's diasporic narrative *The Namesake* (2003). It aims to meticulously scrutinize and analyse instances within the storyline where these characters demonstrate attitudes or actions that reflect either a preference for foreign culture (xenocentric behaviour) or a bias towards their own culture (ethnocentric behaviour) within the diasporic context. The paper seeks to delve deeper into these occurrences to understand their implications and significance in the characters' experiences and interactions within the diasporic setting portrayed in the novel. The novel brilliantly illustrates these contrasting attitudes within the diasporic context, portraying the tension between embracing a new culture and preserving one's heritage. The characters' interactions with each other and their surroundings depict the complexity of diasporic life, where clashes between differing cultural values often lead to moments of introspection and conflict. Lahiri intricately weaves these instances throughout the novel, showcasing how xenocentric and ethnocentric behaviours shape the characters' identity, choices, relationships, and sense of belonging in a foreign land.

Keywords: Xenocentrism, Ethnocentrism, Culture, Cultural Cringe, Immigration, Diaspora.

INTRODUCTION

Jhumpa Lahiri is an accomplished American writer of Indian heritage, renowned for her compelling exploration of the immigrant experience and the intricacies of identity. Lahiri is best known for her debut work, collection of short stories titled *Interpreter of Maladies*, published in 1999. The critical acclaim and success of *Interpreter of Maladies* culminated in Lahiri receiving the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 2000. Lahiri's contributions to diaspora literature lie in her ability to portray the emotional landscapes of characters negotiating the intersections of different cultures. Her work continues to be celebrated for its elegant prose, empathetic characterizations, and its exploration of the complexities of belonging, making Jhumpa Lahiri a significant voice in contemporary diaspora novels.

Lahiri's diaspora novel *The Namesake* (2003) further explores the immigrant experience. *The Namesake* by Jhumpa Lahiri explores the intricate themes of cultural identity, assimilation, and generational conflicts. At its core, the novel delves into Gogol Ganguli's life, as he struggles with his name and the complexities of straddling two distinct cultures. The narrative unfolds against the backdrop of the immigrant experience, depicting the tension between Gogol's desire for assimilation into American society and the cultural expectations imposed by his Bengali heritage. The novel also portrays the evolving dynamics within the Ganguli family, highlighting the generational gap and the nuances of familial relationships in the context of cultural adaptation. Lahiri masterfully weaves these themes together, creating a poignant narrative that resonates with readers, offering a profound exploration of belonging, alienation, and the universal journey to define one's identity in the ever-changing tapestry of life.

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In this present research paper, I have incorporated theories of ethnocentrism given by William Graham Sumner and Boris Bizumic and John Duckitt and theory of Xenocentrism by Donald P. Kent and Robert G. Burnight.

The narrative opens in Massachusetts, in the year 1968, where Mrs. Ganguli, pregnant with her first child, prepares a snack in her apartment shared with her husband, Ashoke Ganguli. Their arranged marriage brought them from Calcutta to the United States. Despite initial apprehension, Ashima fulfils familial expectations. She delivers a boy in a Cambridge hospital, and Ashoke, who survived a near-fatal train accident in India, suggests the nickname Gogol after the Russian writer Nikolai Gogol, whom Mr. Ganguly was reading when the accident took place. The ruffling of page from Gogol's book helped authorities identify Ashoke and save him. To honour this connection, Gogol becomes the boy's legal name.

The Ganguli family anticipates the arrival of a letter containing Gogol's "*bhalo naam*" from Calcutta. However, a stroke befalls Ashima's grandmother, the one tasked with naming him, and the letter containing Gogol's official name is lost. Settling into life in Cambridge, Ashima becomes accustomed to running errands with Gogol. Their plans for a trip to Calcutta are marred by tragic news — Ashima's father has passed away suddenly. The journey becomes a sombre affair, overshadowed by mourning.

The Ganguli family relocates to a Boston suburb, where Ashoke secures a teaching position in electrical engineering. Gogol starts school, and as he progresses through preschool and kindergarten, Ashima feels a longing for their previous neighbourhood walks. Despite his parents assigning him the official name Nikhil for school, Gogol insists on being called by his nickname. The family expands with the addition of a daughter named Sonia. Settling into life on Pemberton Road, Gogol develops a resentment towards his name, finding it oddly non-Indian. In high school, he learns about Nikolai Gogol's tumultuous life in literature class, leading to a sense of horror. On his fourteenth birthday, Ashoke gifts Gogol a collection of Gogol's stories, contemplating sharing the tale of his own railway accident but decides against it. Gogol stashes it away, eventually forgetting about it.

Before attending Yale, Gogol formally changes his name to Nikhil. While at Yale, he falls in love with Ruth, and they date for a short duration. During a holiday weekend, after anxiously awaiting Gogol's delayed train, Ashoke finally reveals the story of the train accident that nearly took his life and inspired Gogol's name. This revelation comes as news to Gogol. Graduating from Yale, Nikhil develops a passion for architecture and enrolls at a college in Columbia. Afterward, he lives uptown and works for a Manhattan firm. In New York, he meets Maxine, a cosmopolitan woman from downtown. Nikhil essentially moves in with Maxine, and they enter a serious relationship.

Ashoke accepts an offer visiting professorship and moves to another place. One night, Ashoke informs Ashima that he's been hospitalized for a stomach issue. When Ashima calls again, she finds that he has passed away. The family is devastated. Gogol clears his father's apartment. Following this mourning period, Maxine and Gogol end their relationship.

Gogol moves on with his life in New York. Ashima arranges a meeting with Moushumi. Initially hesitant about the blind date, Gogol and Moushumi discover a connection and mutual understanding and get married after about a year.

Over time, the two travel to Paris, where Moushumi presents a paper at a meeting. However, their marriage begins to strain. Moushumi enjoys the company of her artistic friends in Brooklyn, while Gogol finds them frustrating and self-centred. Gogol also harbours resentment towards Graham, Moushumi's banker ex-fiancé, who remains connected to her artistic circle. Feeling constrained in the marriage, Moushumi engages in an extramarital affair with an old friend, Dimitri Desjardins. She conceals the affair for a long time, but when caught in a lie, she confesses everything to Nikhil. As a result, they decide to part their ways forever.

Gogol returns back to Pemberton Road for a last Christmas celebration. His sister is getting married to Ben and will be staying in Boston. Ashima plans to split her time between America and India, being close to relatives. Gogol, an architect, will continue with his job in America. As he went inside his room, he discovers the book his father had given him. Gogol begins reading Nikolai Gogol's stories as the book concludes.

OBJECTIVE, METHODOLOGY, AND SCOPE

This research paper delves into the intricacies of xenocentrism and ethnocentrism, specifically within the context of *The Namesake*, a novel of Jhumpa Lahiri. Employing a behavioural analysis methodology, the research comprehensively examines the attitudes, beliefs, and motivations of individuals within a diasporic setting. The paper scrutinizes the manifestation of xenocentric and ethnocentric behaviour among the characters and elucidates its consequential effects on their lifestyles and interpersonal relationships. Previous research papers on *The Namesake* predominantly discussed the text by applying various theories of hybridity, assimilation, culture and acculturation. They have also approached the text through sociological and anthropological perspectives. But exploration of xenocentrism and ethnocentrism has been

overlooked in their analysis. In general, xenocentrism is a relatively understudied concept, leaving ample room for further research and exploration in order to deepen our understanding of its implications and manifestations in various contexts.

Exploring Ethnocentrism and Xenocentrism

The novel *The Namesake* is set in the post-1965 immigration of Indians to the United States. The enactment of the Immigration and Naturalization Act in 1965 created opportunities for increased immigration from Asian countries on a larger scale. The immigration of Indians from India to America after 1965 is categorized into three groups. The initial group, known as the Early Movers (spanning from the mid-1960s to the late 1970s), was characterized by a high level of education. More than 45% of this group held professional degrees in fields such as medicine, engineering, and computer science, which are now collectively referred to as STEM fields. (Williams 5)

Ashoke Ganguly was one such Early Mover and remained settled in America with his wife Ashima and their two children, Gogol and Sonia, till his last breath. Their settlement in America resulted in multiple diasporic experiences which shaped their behaviour. The primary focus of this research paper will be on the xenocentric and ethnocentric behaviours exhibited by the characters throughout the diasporic novel.

"The word "diaspora" is defined, at its simplest, as the dispersal of a people from its original homeland" (Butler 189)

The ethnocentric view, which favours one's own culture; the xenocentric view, which favours a culture that is not one's own and is the opposite of the first; and cultural relativism, which evaluates each culture according to its unique circumstances and values, are the three attitudes that can result from contact with more than one culture. (Kent and Burnight 256).

William Graham Sumner in his book, defined ethnocentrism as the term used to describe a perspective where one's own community is viewed as the centre of everything and all the other groups are compared and evaluated against it. (Sumner 13)

Paralleling Sumner's definition, according to Kent and Burnight, xenocentrism is a viewpoint in which a community other than one's own is the centre of everything and all others, including one's own, are rated and scaled in relation to it. (256)

In *The Namesake* novel, the characters exhibit the first two attitudes upon encountering another culture. Mr. and Mrs. Ganguly demonstrate an ethnocentric attitude. Unlike them, Gogol, Sonia, and Moushumi, display a xenocentric attitude. Ethnocentrism and xenocentrism are associated with the idea of in-group and out-group. An in-group represents a group an individual identifies with and considers a fundamental part of their identity, while an out-group is a group that an individual does not identify with or feel a sense of belonging.

Ethnocentrism in First-Generation Immigrants

Ethnocentrism encompasses six distinct aspects: preference, superiority, purity, and exploitativeness. The ethnocentric behaviour exhibited by Ashoke and Ashima specifically falls under the category of 'preference'. The tendency to like and favour one's own ethnic group over other groups and their members, as well as individual people within them, is termed as preference. Though it does not always imply supporting ethnic purity or viewing the ingroup as superior to outgroups, the term preference implies that people have a subjective like for and favour the ingroup over outgroups. (Bizumic and Duckitt 892)

At the beginning of the novel, we meet Mr. and Mrs. Nandi, a recently married pair, along with Dr. Gupta, who visit the newborn baby of Ashoke and Ashima at the hospital. All three individuals share a Bengali background same as Ashoke and Ashima. For Ashoke and Ashima their Bengali friends form the part of their in-group and the Americans form the part of their out-group.

"As the baby grows, so, too, does their circle of Bengali acquaintances. Through the Nandis, now expecting a child of their own, Ashoke and Ashima meet the Mitras, and through the Mitras, the Banerjees." (Lahiri 38)

Ashoke and Ashima had managed to connect to large number of Bengalis in America that finding a free Saturday was a rare occurrence for them. They said "in America, Bengali friends were the closest thing they had to family." (Lahiri 200) Their Bengali friends were always present during the major happenings of their life. From attending Gogol's birthday parties to attending Ashoke's funeral, their Bengali friends were always by their side. Being closely connected with their same ethnic group made it easier for Ashoke and Ashima to survive in a foreign land.

As per Brewer and Gaertner, preference involves positive emotions like trust and affinity directed towards individuals within one's own group, excluding those outside the group. People typically favour their in-group due to a

lower perceived risk in trusting them compared to trusting individuals in out-groups. Within in-groups, there is a sense of mutual trust and cooperation that does not extend to those in out-groups. (Bizumic and Duckitt 892)

Ashoke and Ashima are not boisterous in front of Americans as they normally are around their community of Bengali friends with whom they share the same ethnic group. They feel uneasy when their kids “sound just like Americans, expertly conversing in a language that still at times confounds them, in accents they are accustomed not to trust.” (Lahiri 65) They disapprove internally and show no curiosity both the times when their son Gogol courted American women, pointing out- “examples of Bengali men they know who’ve married Americans, marriages that have ended in divorce.” (Lahiri 117)

Ashima is bewildered when Maxine, Gogol’s second American girlfriend addresses Gogol’s parents by their first names. Ashima refuses to acknowledge that Gogol and Maxine spend their nights together. “Though she’d been polite enough the one time Gogol had brought Maxine to the house, Ashima doesn’t want her for a daughter-in-law.” (Lahiri 166) When Maxine breaks up with Gogol, Ashima is eager to set up Gogol with Moushumi, daughter of their Bengali friend.

It is not that Ashima and Ashoke never mixed with Americans. There are instances where they share friendly relations with their American neighbours and American colleagues at the library where Ashima worked. But, their social circle predominantly comprised of people from Bengali community.

Xenocentrism in Second-Generation Immigrants

In societies where people interact with diverse groups, certain individuals may develop attitudes that are completely different from ethnocentrism due to direct or indirect exposure to different cultures. It is relatively easy to find individuals in complex societies who prefer a society other than their own and who rate and scale everything in relation to it rather than their own. These people are xenocentric. They are centred in a foreign group and may even dislike their own kind. (Kent and Burnight 256)

Gogol, Sonia and Moushumi are second generation immigrants who have developed xenocentric behaviour. Xenocentrism involves a biased perspective or attitude. Usually, their preference leans toward American culture rather than their Bengali heritage. They sort of consider the Americans to be their in-group and they consider people of their Indian community as out-group. Xenocentric feelings are subjective in nature.

The economic, political, religious, and familial societal institutes, along with the corresponding moral and ethical norms, customs, and mores, are the most common sources of xenocentric sentiments. (Kent and Burnight 257)

This research paper will mainly focus on the xenocentric behaviour of Gogol Ganguly. Gogol’s parents have always tried to inculcate Bengali culture in Gogol since childhood. His mother made him- “memorize a four-lines children’s poem by Tagore, and name of the deities adorning the ten-handed goddess Durga during pujo: Saraswati with her swan and Kartik with his peacock to her left, Lakshmi with her owl and Ganesh with his mouse to her right.” (Lahiri 54)

His parents also take him to watch Apu Trilogy and Kathakali dance performance. They also enrol him in a Bengali language and culture class run by one of their friends. Despite his parent’s efforts Gogol fails to imbibe his Bengali culture. Instead, his parents had to give in to his xenocentric demands when-“For the sake of Gogol and Sonia they celebrate, with progressively increasing fanfare, the birth of Christ, an event the children look forward to far more than the worship of Durga and Saraswati.” (Lahiri 64)

Gogol feels the Bengali pujo rituals “can’t compare to Christmas.” (Lahiri 64) Gogol has also developed xenocentric behaviour in his food preferences. His mother prepares sandwiches with bologna or roast beef, Hamburger with ground lamb and serves him American dinner once a week. Despite attending Bengali culture classes Gogol still addresses- “his parents in English though they continue to speak to him in Bengali. Occasionally he wanders through the house with his running sneakers on. At dinner he sometimes uses a fork.” (Lahiri 75)

Even though Gogol comprehends his native language and speaks it fluently, he lacks even basic proficiency in reading or writing it.

Gogol is indifferent when it comes to dealing with his Indian community in America or in India. Gogol doesn’t express much sadness regarding the death of his grandparents or relatives in India. When Gogol and Sonia come to know that they would have to spend eight months in India, they are crestfallen. “But this time it frustrates him that it is to Calcutta that they always go... They have never been to Disneyland or the Grand Canyon.” (Lahiri 80)

Gogol and his sister don't feel connected to their relatives in India unlike their parents. "Gogol never thinks of India as desh. He thinks of it as Americans do, as India." (Lahiri 118) In America, when Gogol attends a conference, he comes to know about ABCD (American-born Confused Deshi) (Lahiri 118) and he comes to realise that there are a lot of ABCDs in his own college campus. He never bothered to interact with them and avoids them at all costs. Gogol isn't even the part of the Indian association in his college and when asked the reason as to why, Gogol lies that he lacks time, but in reality- "he can think of no greater hypocrisy than joining an organisation that willingly celebrates occasions his parents forced him, throughout his childhood and adolescence, to attend" (Lahiri 119)

This shows how much Gogol was unwilling to accept his Indian community as an in-group and had always considered them as out-group. When Gogol courted Ruth and Maxine, he constantly criticized and compared his parent's lifestyle with that of his girlfriend's parents. "He cannot imagine coming from such parents, such a background, and when he describes his own upbringing (to Ruth), it feels bland by comparison" (Lahiri 111)

Gogol gets greatly influenced by the lifestyle and behaviour of Maxine's parents, Gerald and Lydia, who are typical Americans. "Quickly, simultaneously, he falls in love with Maxine, and Gerald and Lydia's manner of living" (Lahiri 137)

"They would not want to go hiking, as he and Maxine and Gerald and Lydia do almost every day...They would not care to cook with the fresh basil that grows rampant in Gerald's garden...his mother will not put a bathing suit or swim. He feels no nostalgia for the vacations he's spent, and he realises now that they were never really true vacations at all. Instead they were overwhelming, disorienting expeditions, either going to Calcutta, or sightseeing in places that they did not belong to and intended never to see again." (Lahiri 155)

With the quote mentioned above, Gogol's xenocentric feelings are clearly visible. A xenocentric individual perceives flaws even in situations where there are none. (Kent and Burnight 257)

The reason behind Gogol developing such Xenocentric feelings and inclination towards the American culture could be due to his parents trying to forcefully impose Bengali culture on him which made him hate it even more. Gogol might also be experiencing cultural cringe. He found his parent's Indian lifestyle cringe inducing as compared to American lifestyle and chose not to adopt it. It takes years for Gogol to understand and appreciate his parent's mentality and lifestyle. By the end, Gogol realises the hardships faced by his parents as they lived away from their loved ones in India. Ashima plans to leave for Kolkata after Mr. Ganguli's death and will return to America every six months. This makes Gogol to promise "to keep in touch with them (their Bengali honorary aunts and uncles) now that his mother is leaving, not to forget them." (Lahiri 286)

CONCLUSION

This paper throws light on the ethnocentric and xenocentric behaviour shown by the Ganguly family in the narrative *The Namesake* penned by Jhumpa Lahiri. An individual cannot be purely ethnocentric or xenocentric that he fails entirely to see the favourable qualities of the other groups. Both the behaviours are very subjective and their proportion vary from person to person. We cannot say the immigrants of the first generation are purely ethnocentric and immigrants of the second generation are purely xenocentric. Both tendencies exist along a spectrum, shaped by personal experiences and interactions rather than being absolute traits. The characters in the novel grapple with a profound sense of confusion regarding their identity and actions within the diaspora. Their experiences, beliefs, and choices reflect a blend of ethnocentric and xenocentric inclinations, showcasing the complexity of cultural assimilation. This paper encapsulates the intricate behaviours and complexities of the Ganguly family within the spectrum of ethnocentrism and xenocentrism. It dissects the characters' motivations, conflicts, and adaptations, highlighting the fluidity and evolution of their cultural inclinations.

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