Chapter -5:  

Jhumpa Lahiri’s The Namesake

After gaining a lot of success with her collection of short stories Interpreter of Maladies, Jhumpa Lahiri published her first novel The Namesake in the year 2003. The Namesake hits many familiar themes, the uneasy status of the immigrant, the tension between India and the United States and between family tradition and individual freedom. The Today Newspaper has given a comment on the book: “The Namesake is more than a book about a name; it is about finding an identity in a country that will treat you as an alien even if you were born there. But more than that, it is about rediscovering your roots, and the accidents of the universe that caused you to be and that is something all of us can identify with.”

On the website BookBrowse.com an interview of Jhumpa Lahiri was conducted after the publication of her novel The Namesake. It would be apt to present this interview here to understand the themes of the novel.

Interviewer: In your first book, Interpreter of Maladies, some of the stories are set in India, others in the United States. The Namesake is set predominantly in the United States. Can you talk a bit about the significance of setting in your work?

Jhumpa Lahiri: When I began writing fiction seriously, my first attempts were, for some reason, always set in Calcutta, which is a city I know
quite well as a result of repeated visits with my family, sometimes for several months at a time. These trips, to a vast, unruly, fascinating city so different from the small New England town where I was raised, shaped my perceptions of the world and of people from a very early age. I went to Calcutta neither as a tourist nor as a former resident -- a valuable position, I think, for a writer.

The reason my first stories were set in Calcutta is due partly to that perspective -- that necessary combination of distance and intimacy with a place. Eventually I started to set my stories in America, and as a result the majority of stories in Interpreter of Maladies have an American setting. Still, though I've never lived anywhere but America, India continues to form part of my fictional landscape. As most of my characters have an Indian background, India keeps cropping up as a setting, sometimes literally, sometimes more figuratively, in the memory of the characters.

The Namesake is, essentially, a story about life in the United States, so the American setting was always a given. The terrain is very much the terrain of my own life -- New England and New York, with Calcutta always hovering in the background. Now that the writing is done I've realized that America is a real presence in the book; the characters must struggle and come to terms with what it means to live here, to be brought up here, to belong and not belong here.

Interviewer: The Namesake deals with Indian immigrants in the United States as well as their children. What, in your opinion, distinguishes the experiences of the former from the latter?
Jhumpa Lahiri: In a sense, very little. The question of identity is always a difficult one, especially so for those who are culturally displaced, as immigrants are, or those who grow up in two worlds simultaneously, as is the case for their children. The older I get, the more I am aware that I have somehow inherited a sense of exile from my parents, even though in many ways I am so much more American than they are. In fact, it is still very hard to think of myself as an American. (This is of course complicated by the fact that I was born in London.) I think that for immigrants, the challenges of exile, the loneliness, the constant sense of alienation, the knowledge of and longing for a lost world, are more explicit and distressing than for their children.

On the other hand, the problem for the children of immigrants -- those with strong ties to their country of origin -- is that they feel neither one thing nor the other. This has been my experience, in any case. For example, I never know how to answer the question "Where are you from?" If I say I'm from Rhode Island, people are seldom satisfied. They want to know more, based on things such as my name, my appearance, etc. Alternatively, if I say I'm from India, a place where I was not born and have never lived, this is also inaccurate. It bothers me less now. But it bothered me growing up, the feeling that there was no single place to which I fully belonged.

Interviewer: Can you talk a little bit more specifically about the conflicts you felt growing up as the child of immigrants?

Jhumpa Lahiri: It was always a question of allegiance, of choice. I wanted to please my parents and meet their expectations. I also wanted to
meet the expectations of my American peers, and the expectations I put on myself to fit into American society. It's a classic case of divided identity, but depending on the degree to which the immigrants in question are willing to assimilate, the conflict is more or less pronounced.

My parents were fearful and suspicious of America and American culture when I was growing up. Maintaining ties to India, and preserving Indian traditions in America, meant a lot to them. They're more at home now, but it's always an issue, and they will always feel like, and be treated as, foreigners here.

Now that I'm an adult I understand and sympathize more with my parents' predicament. But when I was a child it was harder for me to understand their views. At times I felt that their expectations for me were in direct opposition to the world we lived in. Things like dating, living on one's own, having close friendships with Americans, listening to American music and eating American food -- all of it was a mystery to them.

On the other hand, when I was growing up, India was largely a mystery to Americans as well, not nearly as present in the fabric of American culture as it is today. It wasn't until I was in college that my American friends expressed curiosity about and interest in my Indian background. As a young child, I felt that the Indian part of me was unacknowledged, and therefore somehow negated, by my American environment, and vice versa. I felt that I led two very separate lives.

Interviewer: Did you feel as rebellious as your character Gogol does early in your novel?
Jhumpa Lahiri: Neither Gogol nor I were terribly rebellious, really. I suppose I, like Gogol, had my moments. But even ordinary things felt like a rebellion from my upbringing -- what I ate, what I listened to, whom I befriended, what I read. Things my American friends' parents wouldn't think to remark upon were always remarked upon by mine.

Interviewer: In *The Namesake*, characters have both good names, used in public, and pet names, used by families. Is this still a tradition in Bengali families? Do you have both a public and a family name?

Jhumpa Lahiri: I can't speak for all Bengalis. But all Bengalis I know personally, especially those living in India, have two names, one public, one private. It's always fascinated me. My parents are called by different names depending on what country they happen to be in; in India they're known by their pet names, but in America they're known by their good names. My sister, who was born and raised in America, has two names. I'm like Gogol in that my pet name inadvertently became my good name. I have two other names on my passport and my birth certificate (my mother couldn't settle on just one). But when I was enrolled in school the teachers decided that Jhumpa was the easiest of my names to pronounce and that was that. To this day many of my relatives think that it's both odd and inappropriate that I'm known as Jhumpa in an official, public context.

Interviewer: You write frequently from the male point of view. Why?

Jhumpa Lahiri: In the beginning I think it was mainly curiosity. I have no brothers, and growing up, men generally seemed like mysterious creatures to me. Except for an early story I wrote in college, the first thing I
wrote from the male point of view was the story "This Blessed House," in *Interpreter of Maladies*. It was an exhilarating and liberating thing to do, so much so that I wrote three stories in a row, all from the male perspective. It's a challenge, as well. I always knew that the protagonist of *The Namesake* would be a boy. The original spark of the book was the fact that a friend of my cousin in India had the pet name Gogol. I wanted to write about the pet name/good name distinction for a long time, and I knew I needed the space of a novel to explore the idea. It's almost too perfect a metaphor for the experience of growing up as the child of immigrants, having a divided identity, divided loyalties, etc.

Interviewer: Now that you've written both stories and a novel, which do you prefer? What was the transition like?

Jhumpa Lahiri: I feel attracted to both forms. Moving from the purity and intensity of the short story to the broader canvas of a novel felt liberating and, at times, overwhelming. Writing a novel is certainly more demanding than writing a story, and the stakes are higher. Every time I questioned something about the novel it potentially affected hundreds of pages of writing, not just ten or twenty. The revision process was far more rigorous and daunting. It was much more juggling much more than I ever have in a story, more characters, more points of view.

At the same time, there's something more forgiving about a novel. It's roomier, messier, and more tolerant than a short story. The action isn't under a microscope in quite the same way. Short stories, no matter how complex,
always have a ruthless, distilled quality. They require more control than novels. I hope I can continue to write both.

Interviewer: Have you re-evaluated any of your writing about men and/or marriage now that you are both a wife and mother?

Jhumpa Lahiri: Not really. The scenes about Ashima in labor and giving birth were written long before I became pregnant. I asked my friends and my mother and my mother's friends a lot of questions, and I based Ashima's experience on the answers I got. Being married doesn't make writing about men any easier, just as my being a woman doesn't make writing about women any easier. It's always a challenge. That said, the experience of marriage and motherhood have changed me profoundly, have grounded me in a way I've never been before. Motherhood in particular, makes me look at life in an entirely different way. There's nothing to prepare you for it, nothing to compare it to. And I imagine that my future work will reflect or otherwise be informed by that change.

Interviewer: You quote Dostoyevsky as saying, "We all came out of Gogol's overcoat." Has Nikolai Gogol had any influence on you as a writer?

Jhumpa Lahiri: I'm not sure influence is the right word. I don't turn to Gogol as consistently as I do to certain other writers when I'm struggling with character or language. His writing is more overtly comic, more antic and absurd than mine tends to be. But I admire his work enormously and reread a lot of it as I was working on the novel, in addition to reading biographical material. "The Overcoat" is such a superb story. It really does haunt me the way it haunts the character of Ashoke in the novel. I like to
think that every writer I admire influences me in some way, by teaching me something about writing. Of course, without the inspiration of Nikolai Gogol, without his name and without his writing, my novel would never have been conceived. In that respect, this book came out of Gogol's overcoat, quite literally.²

*The Namesake* is about Gogol, who later on calls himself Nikhil, and yet we can analyze it as Ashoke's story, Ashima's story and Gogol's story. Throughout the novel, there is no first-person description but the few chapters are clearly Ashoke's story, even though the novel begins with Ashima's labour pains and the birth of Gogol. It is Ashoke who dominates the scene: Ashoke as he sits in the waiting room of the hospital, waiting for news of the arrival of his first-born. Ashoke reminisces about his decision to come to the US and the reasons for that decision. With Ashoke, we move into the workings of his mind, feel his pangs. Ashoke's story takes us into his experiences at M.I.T., his work and life at home, the university town outside Boston, the Bengali community with whom they have social contacts and later his life at Cleveland, coping with the fact of being away from family and home. Ashoke lives a sparse life— he seems to merge with his surroundings and is a silent presence rather than an obtruding individual. Ashoke's story is obviously closely linked to that of his family—his wife Ashima's as well as those of his children—Gogol's and Sonia's. The novel moves ahead as we view events and people from the perspective of Ashoke. The need for bonding with his son that Ashoke feels is touchingly portrayed. On Gogol's 14th birthday, he buys him a special gift—special not for Gogol
but for his father. As the writer describes it, we can empathize with Ashoke's anguish as the son seems incapable of understanding and uninterested in his father's feelings. The writer Nikolai Gogol has a special place in Ashoke's heart but Gogol – the son – is lost in a world of his own where only one's own needs and interests are of relevance or importance. Hence it is with a pang of sorrow that Ashoke looks around Gogol's room. Ashoke's presence in his room seems like an intrusion to Gogol who is waiting for his father to leave so that he can get back to his music.

The opening of Jhumpa Lahiri's first novel finds Ashima Ganguli standing in her kitchen in the latter stages of her first pregnancy. Ashima tries to satisfy her cravings with concoctions that imitate the flavors of home. She mixes Rice Krispies with Planters peanuts, chopped red onion, salt, lemon juice and green chili peppers. It is an inadequate substitute for the Indian snack but a valiant attempt to stall the slippage of sensual familiarities that accompanies removal from Calcutta to Cambridge, Massachusetts.

*The Namesake* is really the story of Ashima's son, but it is fitting that the tale begins in the kitchen: the losses and shifts in Lahiri's novel are as the aromas and flavors of food. Food is one of the chief planes upon which the young Gogol and his sister Sonia work to define themselves against their Bengali heritage. They insist on pizza and Coke. Ultimately though, Gogol is drawn back by forces as bewitching as the emotional potency of aromas—his mother's cooking, his father's horrific trauma and, strangely enough, the Russain author from whom he inherits his name.
When Gogol is fourteen, his father Ashoke gives him a copy of The Short Stories of Nikolai Gogol. Ashoke imparts Dostoyevsky's adage that "we all came out of Gogol's overcoat," telling the indifferent adolescent that one day he will understand what this means. However, Nikolai Gogol's harrowing little fable "The Overcoat" is not given much play in Gogol's own imaginative development. For Gogol, who does not bother to read the stories of his namesake, the overcoat remains unworn; an odd-shaped ornament that he has inexplicably accrued along with his unusual name.

The narrative follows Gogol as he journeys through school, college and the early stages of his career in architecture. He makes and forsakes a series of relationship all of which shape or reflect upon his relationship with his past as encapsulated in his name. Gogol becomes Gogol at birth because the letter from his great-grandmother containing the name she has chosen for him, never arrives. Even this has a provocative metaphorical valence. Both he and his parents know that somewhere there is a letter with his real name inscribed upon it, the name that, had the proper naming practice been observed, should be his. But the letter goes astray and the real name hovers as a perpetual mystery on the edge of his consciousness.

The exigencies of American bureaucracy demand that the child be given name before he is released from hospital. And so, Ashoke pulls a name from the air: the name of the author who saved his life. In Lahiri's novel, names enfold stories and the narrative of Ashoke's rescue by the textual Gogol is a deeply embedded one. Traveling to Jamshedpur in his early twenties, Ashoke was involved in a horrific train crash. At the time of the
crash he was reading Gogol's "The Overcoat." Hours after the crash, lying blood-drenched in the twisted wreckage, Ashoke had raised his hand clutching a single crumpled page of "The Overcoat." This and the white pages of the book lying nearby arrested the attention of the rescue party.

Gogol is never meant to be Gogol's official or 'good' name. It is given as a temporary solution, intended to serve only as a nickname or pet name, until his real name arrives. But Gogol becomes complicit in the burden of this name. On his first day at school, despite his father's advice, that his 'good' or official name is now 'Nikhil,' he opts truculently for Gogol. He very shortly regrets this and throughout his school years conceives of his name as a kind of loathsome mantle: "At times his name, an entity shapeless and weightless, manages nevertheless to distress him physically, like the scratchy tag of a shirt he has been forced permanently to wear."

When Gogol leaves his family home to attend Yale, he tries to leave his name behind. Nikhil to his friends and Gogol to his family members, he lives out a new mode of dislocation over the span of his college years. He is disconcerted when his family complies, calling him Nikhil in front of his college friends. Much later, when he meets Moushumi who shared his childhood in the circle of their parents' Bengali friends, he is annoyed that she knows him as Gogol first and Nikhil second.

Despite his multiple long-term relationships with other women he eventually marries Moushumi. An air of narrative hesitancy attends this bringing of the plot full circle. In one sense it reads as an abortive attempt by
the author to force closure. In another sense it elucidates the vulnerability of all narrative constructions, including Gogol's own narrativising impulse.

Gogol's and Moushumi's wedding is not the type of wedding either of them really wants. Despite their usually defiant individuality they agree that it is better to submit to the overbearing wishes of their families, than to put up a fight. Unlike compromises made in previous relationships, the cost of conforming to these expectations is a known quantity. They pay a heavy price for beginning with resignation. Drawn together by their individual plights for self-determination, their aspirations dissolve into a comfortably predictable but secretly resented shape. Moushumi finds that the mantle of marriage does not fit. During and after the breakdown of their marriage the confident and often wry narration of the first part of the novel gives place to a detached and uncertain tone. The narrator becomes uncharacteristically equivocal about what Gogol has gained or lost in this relationship.

The anomaly of the concept of 'namesake' and, by extension, of the person to whom it is applied, is that it is always once removed; held in perpetual relation to an original. The Namesake is an elusive title because the term 'namesake' usually follows a possessive noun or pronoun; 'Gogol's namesake' or your namesake.' Lahiri's is a provocative ellipsis.

Without being anchored to the primary possessive noun, 'namesake' itself becomes the primary noun; at once the subject of the phrase but also, a vacancy. Gogol's plight, like that of many protagonists of the psychological realist novel, is to remedy an internal vacuum. What is unique about Lahiri's
formulation is the way a name becomes the site upon which contested aspects of his identity converge.

The novel's preoccupation with names and titles and the freight they carry, gives it a fable-like quality. It bears faint glimmers of the fantastical thought structures, the feverishly detailed obsessions that pervade Salman Rushdie's *Midnight’s Children* and, in less virtuosic fashion, Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*. Yet there is less magic and less subterranean complexity. India, in The Namesake, is once removed: the fragrance is diluted and the flavours are makeshift approximations.

This gives *The Namesake* a paradoxical capacity to voice the general experience of displacement. It’s rather eclectic blend of cultural remnants—Russian, Bengali, American—and its very immediate sensuality, lend palpable force to the typically nebulous experience of heterogeneity. *The Namesake* gives vivid particularity to the sense of being held in perpetual relation to distant original, of wearing a garment of unknown proportions, of having a name, the imaginative legacy of which one can never fully inhabit.

Born in London and living in the U.S. Jhumpa Lahiri is not an expatriate - Indian in the way in which Bharati Mukherjee is. She is separated from India by a generation and yet her first novel *The Namesake* is about Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli and their family. To take the title of Margaret Laurence’s well-known essay, one could say that these people hope to get “A place to stand on”. From the moment Ashoke decides to move away from India, Lahiri provides the reader with a picture of the life of the expatriate,
the diasporic writer writing about diasporic characters. Ashoke and then Ashima learn to live in the land they were not born in as it is Ashoke’s accident that makes him decide to walk away “as far as he could from the place in which he was born and in which he had nearly died” (p. 20). The first sight of this land, “Leafless trees with ice-covered branches. Dog urine and excrement embedded in the snow -banks. Not a soul on the street” (p.30) is hardly a flattering description of the land they now call their own. The novel portrays realistically the experiences of this family, which is sometimes afflicted with a feeling of cultural alienation: diaspora both literal and metaphorical referring both to physical displacement as well as the shaping of a different sensibility. The absence of the motherland (or being away from it) becomes a constant presence as it always seems to colour the perceptions of the expatriate. Expatriation is a post-colonial fact and whether it is an individual or a group moving to another country, the diaspora continues.

The term ‘diaspora’ has multiple layers of meaning in academic circles today. From the original meaning of large scale migration of people due to religious persecution, it has now come to refer to any movement of people from one land to another. In fact, often it is used as a synonym for migration or immigration and the diasporic is equated to an expatriate. The Indian diaspora can probably be traced to ancient times when Buddhist monks travelled to remote corners of Asia. However, today it is customary to refer to the 19th and 20th centuries as the period of Indian diaspora when Indians in large numbers went to other countries in search of job
opportunities either as skilled and unskilled labourers to West Asia or as professionals and semi-professionals to industrially advanced countries. That this migration is made by personal choice is a fact that has to be borne in mind when the term diaspora is used today.

The Indian living in a host country continues to live in a ‘sandwich world’. Refusing to give up his cultural roots, he still hopes for assimilation and acculturation in his new land. He does not sever relationships with his homeland. As Safran observes, “they continue to relate personally or vicariously to the homeland in one way or another, and their ethno-communal consciousness and solidarity are importantly defined by the existence of such a relationship.” Yet, most societies today are multicultural societies and the writer living and writing in such a society is affected at multiple levels by both the cultures. Such a writer is constantly in a state of flux. The question of identity and the dynamics of relationships affect the writer. The writer reflects, analyses, criticizes that particular environment and the world around him even when he does not become a part of it, belonging and not belonging. The expatriate writer lacks a shared memory which is often the basis of the writing in one country, one nation. Many writers often disclaim all attempts to be labeled a part of the diaspora – as they want to become an intrinsic part of the land of residence or adoption, probably because the image of a minority is often suspect. The writer may feel no crisis of identity or alienation or depression or frustration specially if one is a second generation expatriate. Often relations
between original inhabitants and the diasporic become complicated. As Tinker asks,

..... do the Asians (Indians) create their own difficulties by their own way of life and by remaining separate from the host society, or do their troubles arise from excess of chauvinism or racism in the country of their adoption? Do they offend because they are, visibly, both pariahs and exploiters in alien societies? Or are they scapegoats, singled out for victimization because their adopted country (or its government) needs an alibi for poor performance in the national sphere?

As a University Professor Ashoke is accepted into the academic community – but at home he continues to be the typical Indian male, fastidious about his clothing and his food:

He is fastidious about his clothing: their first argument had been over a sweater she’d shrunk in the washing machine. As soon as he comes home from the University the first thing he does is hang up his shirt and trousers, donning a pair of draw-string pajamas and pullover if it is cold. On Sundays he spends an hour occupied with his tins of shoe polish and his three pairs of shoes, two black and one brown. (p. 10)

The Indians live life constantly on two planes – as Indians and as one guest once remarked “as true Americans” (p. 63). As days and years pass by, gradually the realization dawns that “the people they have grown up with will never see this life, of this they are certain. They will never breathe the air of a damp New England morning, see smoke rising from a neighbour’s chimney, shiver in a car waiting for the glass to defrost and the engine to warm” (p. 64). The process of acculturation that was very important to writers like Bharati Mukherjee is seen in the adoption of customs in order to adapt to their new surroundings:
They learn to roast turkeys, albeit rubbed with garlic and cumin and cayenne, at Thanksgiving, to nail a wreath to their door in December, to wrap woolen scarves around snowmen, to colour boiled eggs violet and pink at Easter and hide them around the house. For the sake of Gogol and Sonia they celebrate, with progressively increasing fanfare, the birth of Christ, an event the children look forward to more than the worship of Durga and Saraswati. (p. 64)

Multicultural experiences could lead to a fragmentation, almost akin to schizophrenia as Nayantara Sahgal suggests, in many of her novels.

Ashima and Ashoke try hard to hold on to their Indian-ness – a concept of their culture that they cannot let go. “They make a point of driving into Cambridge with the children when the Apu Trilogy plays at the Orson Welles, or when there is a kathakali dance performance or a sitar recital at memorial hall. 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” (p. 65)

Personal names and appearances demarcate the borders – the native and non-native divide becomes obvious. Yet, the expatriate attempts to tide over all this by constantly shedding cultural mores, food habits, tastes etc in keeping with the local tastes:

There are other ways in which Ashoke and Ashima give in .... In the supermarket they let Gogol fill the cart with items that he and Sonia, but not they, consume: individually wrapped slices of cheese, mayonnaise, tuna fish, hotdogs. For Gogol’s lunches they stand at the deli to buy cold cuts, and in the mornings Ahsima makes sandwiches with bologna or roast beef. At his insistence she concedes and makes him an American
dinner once a week as a treat, Shake’n Bake chicken or Hamburger Helper prepared with ground lamb. (p. 65). Gogol grows up with a name not meant to be his official one but even the Ganguli is something he cannot seem to accept. As the school field trip to the cemetery proves, there will be no one there with a name like his. And hence he feels a special affinity for names which have an odd-ness about them. He rolls up his rubbings from the cemetery and brings them home. Being different from others is the eternal plight of the expatriate and Gogol realizes this very well on this trip:

For reasons he can not explain or necessarily understand, these ancient Puritan spirits, these very first immigrants to America, these bearers of unthinkable, obsolete names, have spoken to him, so much so that in spite of his mother’s disgust he refuses to throw the rubbings away. He rolls them up, takes them upstairs, and puts them in his room... (p. 71).

To the expatriate, a visit to the land of one’s birth is a pilgrimage that he looks forward to as well as a journey that he dreads. Yasmine Gooneratne, a Srilankan expatriate in Australia, in her novel A Change of Skies describes this annual visit to the homeland. The attitude of the people at home is that “Expats make scenes, expats complain.... Exapts make fools of themeselves ...” 6 As Sonia and Gogol visit India with their parents, the fact of not belonging strikes them again and again. “They stand out in their bright, expensive sneakers, American haircuts, backpacks slung over one shoulder” (p. 82). Each experience seems to be a new one and strikes them as strange, “In the days that follows, they adjust once again to sleeping under a mosquito net, bathing by pouring tin cups over their heads” (p. 82). The feeling of being homeless strikes the second – generation expatriate in a
different way. When Gogol’s father tells him that they will be staying in Calcutta (away from the US) for eight months, “He dreads the thought of eight months without friends” (p. 79). Such a long stay seems to Gogol to be as bad as moving there permanently - a possibility that most second - generation expatriates never consider. As they travel around the country, visiting Delhi etc. they have a variety of experiences, some not very comfortable and they fall sick: “it is the air, the rice, the wind, their relatives casually remark; they were not made to survive in a poor country...” (p. 86).

In portraying only these conditions, Lahiri exposes a neo-colonial stance- the Westerner viewing the East with a jaundiced eye as a land of dirt and filth, and of disease and a lack of hygiene. Ashoke and Ashima fit more easily between the two continents - the two world - because to them home is still the land of their birth. And so Lahiri writes,

Gogol and Sonia know these people, but they do not feel close to them as their parents do. Within minutes, before their eyes Ashoke and Ashima slip into bolder, less complicated versions of themselves, their voices louder, their smile wider, revealing a confidence Gogol and Sonia never see on Pemberton Road. ‘I’m scared, Goggles ‘Sonia whispers to her brother in English, seeking his hand and refusing to let go. (pp. 81-82)

In total contrast to this is their return to Pemberton Road which brings a sense of relief to both Gogol and Sonia to whom India has always been the alien land.

On this end, there is no effort involved. They retreat to their three rooms, to their three separate beds, to their thick mattresses and pillows and fitted sheets. After a single trip to the supermarket,
the refrigerator and the cupboard fill with familiar labels... Gogol and Sonia sleep for as long as they want, watch television, make themselves peanut butter sandwiches at any time of day. Once again they are free to quarrel, to tease each other, to shout and holler and say shut up..... And so the eight months are put behind them, quickly shed, quickly forgotten, like clothes worn for a special occasion, or for a season that has passed, suddenly cumbersome, irrelevant to their lives. (pp. 87-88).

This novel constantly focuses on the contrasting experiences of the two generations of expatriate - Ashoke and Ashima who do not attempt to or are not inclined towards getting Americanized while Gogol and Sonia constantly face the need to belong. They develop tastes and ideas more in keeping with the society in which they live. They seem to realize that diaspora can lead to transculturation which occurs in ‘contact zones or social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination’.7 Gogol, troubled by the unusualness of his name, is relieved when he changes his name to Nikhil – he begins to feel he is reborn. Being and becoming are two interchangeable states for both of them and each experience in this land of their birth re-emphasizes this difference. Imagination and memory often act as the bridges which link the two countries, the two cultures. It is Ashima who faces the greatest difficulty in ‘becoming’ a part of this culture. And hence, in the end she decides to shuttle between the two worlds – six months in India and six in the US.

Ahsima feels lonely suddenly, horribly, permanently alone, and briefly, turned away from the mirror, she sobs for her husband. She feels overwhelmed by the thought of the move she
is about to make, to the city that was once home and is now in its own way foreign. She feels both impatience and indifference for all the days she still must live ....Now she’s worked.... she will miss the country in which she had grown to know and love her husband. Though his ashes have been scattered into the Ganges, it is here, in this house and this town that he will continue to dwell in her mind. (pp.278-79).

The need to connect to one’s origins and yet be a part of the new land is important to Ashima but not to Jhumpa Lahiri. She can be compared to Sonia as she has forged an identity for herself as an expatriate Indian and does not find it necessary to keep shuttling between two worlds. The second - generation expatriate has certainly fewer battles to fight, has a clearer identity and is closer to hybridity.

References

3. Jhumpa Lahiri, The Namesake. All the textual quotations are given parenthetically.
