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<http://www.humanitics.org/>**RESEARCH ARTICLE****Vol.VI, Issue-II, August 2023****Title- American Born: Children Rejecting their Immigrant Parent's Culture****Mr. Sandesh Vilas Rathod**

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Email ID: sandeshrathod7@gmail.com**Abstract:**

Many contemporary fiction writers include immigrant stories in their repertoire. Jhumpa Lahiri too is known for her writings of immigrants. As a daughter of Indian immigrants, Lahiri knows first-hand about the heart-wrenching lives of immigrants. She is also known for incorporating the disturbed lives of the children of these immigrants. In many of such cases, the children who are born in the immigrant country adapt well to the new situation. The main reason for this is because the children consider the immigrant country as their own along with its culture. On the other hand, they regard their parent's culture as alien and when the parents try to force their culture onto the children, they reject it with all possible means. In *The Namesake*, Lahiri writes about two such children who reject their parent's culture for the immigrant country's culture. Out of the two, the present paper will focus on one child named Gogol and how he fights his parent's Indian culture while getting attached to the American culture. The paper will closely follow in Gogol's steps to look at all the cultural rejections and acceptances.

Keywords: First culture, Second culture, Immigrants, Acceptance, Rejection

The Bengali American author Jhumpa Lahiri is best known for writing about the lives of Bengali immigrants who try to live in the alien culture of America. In the process, she also examines the conditions of the children who are born to these immigrants in a foreign land. Lahiri often uses her personal experiences to shape the minds and lives of her characters. Like the children of Indian immigrants in her works, Lahiri, the daughter of Indian immigrants from the Indian state of West Bengal and born in London, considers herself to be an American and says on the Wikipedia page "I wasn't born here, but I might as well have been." *The Namesake* is Jhumpa Lahiri's first novel which appeared in 2003. The novel is an interesting story of Bengali immigrants in America who raise their children there. While the immigrants consider the American culture alien, their children, who are born and raised there, consider

it as their own culture.

In his famous book *The Interpretation of Cultures*, Clifford Geertz extracts all the definitions of culture written by Clyde Kluckhohn's in his *Mirror for Man*, "(1) 'the total way of life of a people'; (2) 'the social legacy the individual acquires from his group'; (3) 'a way of thinking, feeling, and believing'; (4) 'an abstraction from behavior'; (5) a theory on the part of the anthropologist about the way in which a group of people in fact behave; (6) a 'store- house of pooled learning'; (7) 'a set of standardized orientations to recurrent problems'; (8) 'learned behavior'; (9) a mechanism for the normative regulation of behavior; (10) 'a set of techniques for adjusting both to the external environment and to other men'; (11) 'a precipitate of history'" (4,5). Throughout this paper, the term 'FC' (short for 'First Culture') will be used to talk about the culture in which the character is born and raised up. The term 'SC' (short for 'Second Culture') will be used to discuss about the culture which is not their First Culture and, thus, seems alien. The present paper will attempt to look at the character of Gogol from *The Namesake* by Jhumpa Lahiri and study the different cultural elements which he accepts or rejects from either his FC or SC.

Gogol is the main character in the novel *The Namesake*. For him, the FC is Cambridge and Boston (America) while the SC is Calcutta (India) which is the FC of his parents. The setting of the story is mainly in America. Gogol is born in Cambridge to parents who are from Calcutta. The family then moves to Boston where Gogol grows up. Because he is raised in America, the very early impressions of his life are linked with are American FC. It is written that he will always remember the games he played alone in the yard, the cold spring time and the sound of children in the neighborhood on their Big Wheels when he is four years old. The toys which he plays at this age are American. His parents bring toys from yardsales, toys like, "...Tinker toys, Lincoln Logs, a View-Master, an Etch-A-Sketch" (52).

Gogol's parents make every attempt to raise him according to their FC (Calcutta) which Gogol meets with increasing resistance as he grows up. When his mother is pregnant with Sonia, her second child, she tries to teach Gogol about her relatives in Calcutta, which slips easily from his memory. His mother also teaches him a poem by an Indian poet and the names of the different deities that she worships. He is taught to eat with his fingers without staining the skin of his palm, to suck marrow from lamb and to remove bones from fish. He is taught to call his mother 'Ma' and his father 'Baba'. According to their tradition, his parents try to impart on Gogol his 'good name', Nikhil, when he enters kindergarten. At this point it is mentioned, "But Gogol doesn't want a new name. He can't understand why he has to answer to anything else. 'Why do I have to have a new name?' he asks his parents, tears springing to his eyes" (57). His father tries hard to convince Gogol's American school teachers about the need to name Gogol as Nikhil. But after his father's departure, when his teacher asks Gogol what name he prefers, he replies 'Gogol'. Gogol's act of rejecting his 'good name' is in actuality, the rejection of SC which his parents force him to follow. At home, even when his parents speak in Bengali (SC), Gogol always speaks English when speaking with his sister and other Bengali children. These other Bengali children, like Gogol and his sister, hold American culture as their FC.

In comparison to the Indian festivals (SC), Gogol, with his sister, prefers Christmas (FC). It is written that, "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" (64). He and his sister love to hang the stockings, to keep milk and cookies for Santa Claus and to receive presents and the enjoyable holidays they get during Christmas. While shopping in the supermarket, Gogol is allowed to fill the cart with things like slices of cheese, mayonnaise, tuna fish and hot dogs which he and Sonia eat. It is further reported that:

For Gogol's lunches they stand at the deli to buy cold cuts, and in the mornings Ashima 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 (65).

Eating food items which are American, which are not consumed by his parents, displays Gogol's close

bonding with FC.

Later, his parents try to introduce the Bengali culture and art to him and his sister by showing them the Apu Trilogy plays and Indian dance performances or Indian instrumental recitals. They mean business when they send Gogol to Bengali language and culture lessons in his third grade. In that class, he is taught how to read and write Bengali and a little about the history of Bengal, but, “Gogol hates it because it keeps him from attending every other session of a Saturday-morning drawing class...” (66). The hatred for Bengali language is his rejection of SC. When Gogol is in sixth grade, his school class is taken for a field trip. During the trip, they visit a graveyard where the students are told to rub the surfaces of the gravestones onto papers as an art project. Gogol finds some very old graves and rubs the names, which, his teacher tells him, are old names not in use today, just like his name – Gogol. At home, his mother does not like the rubbings or the trip. She thinks it is bad for children to visit such places and refuses to display his rubbings beside his other creations. But it is given that, Gogol feels strangely attached to the rubbings, in a way he does not understand and in spite of his mother’s anger, does not throw them away but puts them safely where his mother will not find them. In a peculiar way, this attachment discloses the attachment he feels for FC.

When Gogol turns fourteen, his love for music increases. He starts listening to the Beatle and has a collection of nearly all their albums. He keeps Lennon’s obituary, which he has cut from the newspaper, pasted on the back of his room door. His hair style is Beatle-like. It is written that he does not even open the wrapper of a cassette of classical Indian music which his father gifted him. He starts, “...addressing his parents in English though they continue to speak to him in Bengali. Occasionally, he starts wandering through the house with his running sneaker on. At dinner he sometimes uses fork” (75). All these actions are pure manifestations of Gogol’s bonding with FC and deliberate rejection of SC on the other hand.

As Gogol turns fifteen, his father decides to take the family for an eight month visit to Calcutta. Gogol hates even the idea, as he cannot imagine living for eight months without a room of his own, without his music and friends. He knows that there is nothing to do in India but to visit relatives, zoo and some famous buildings. On the plane to Calcutta, he is happy because he is seated on his own, many rows behind his parents. As the stewardess comes with a cart of beverages, Gogol tries his luck and gets a Bloody Mary and tastes alcohol for the first time (his parents have never tasted alcohol according to their FC). At the final meal on the plane, he savors each mouthful of the omelet topped with grilled tomato because he knows that for many months in Calcutta, he will not get this taste (attachment with FC). After reaching Calcutta, Gogol keeps staring on the road at the way people live, eat, work and travel. He does this because everything looks so alien and unlike America. He quickly gets bored after a few days. He cannot keep up with cross-country training in the city, as he had planned, because he thinks that it impossible to run on the, “...cracked, congested, chock-a-block streets...”(83). Though he is surrounded by people at practically all the time, Gogol only speaks with Sonia and, “While the rest of the house hold sleeps, he and Sonia fight over the Walkman, over the melting collection of tapes Gogol recorded back in his room at home. From time to time, they privately admit to excruciating cravings, for hamburgers or a slice of pepperoni pizza or a cold glass of milk” (84). From this, it is rather conclusive that, even when living in the SC for many months, Gogol feels strongly attached to FC. Later, Gogol’s father takes the family on a visit to Agra (India) to see the Taj Mahal. When the tour guide tells them that all the builders of the Taj Mahal had their thumbs cut off so that the same building could never be built again, it is mentioned that Gogol is haunted by the idea. He feels that no other building has affected him so much. Upon returning to Calcutta, both Gogol and his sister fall sick, and it is reported that they wait eagerly for their departure from India. As soon as they board the plane to Boston, Gogol is filled with a feeling of deep relief to eat the breakfast, have orange juice and to watch American programmes. He listens to the top-forty songs all the way. After coming back to home, Gogol and his sister are truly happy to sleep as long as they want, to watch TV, make peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, to quarrel and talk in English and ride their bicycles to their friends. The absolute happiness which Gogol finds while performing these activities at home not only

prove his FC but also his dependency and attachment to it. Though according to Adriana Elena Stoican, “Critics have interpreted Lahiri’s children as marking the human ability to transgress cultural borders by creating their own bridge across cultures:” (68), Gogol’s clear rejection of the SC can hardly be considered as a case of bridge building.

In his high school years Gogol shows yet more attachment with FC. Though his parents encourage him to become more like them by studying more, he starts doing things which they do not suspect him to be doing. He starts smoking pot while listening to music and often drives with his friends to a close town to see movies or bands when his parents think that he is at his friend’s house. Once, when his parents are out, he goes to a party and kisses a girl for the first time after introducing himself as Nikhil. At this stage of his life, he is frustrated with his first name and wants to change it. He argues with his parents because he thinks it is their fault that he has such a name – “I don’t get it. Why did you have to give me a pet name in the first place? What’s the point?” (99). After he gets permission from his parents for it, he goes through all the required legal procedures to change his name to Nikhil. When the judge asks him that why does he want to do it, he simply answers that he has always hated his name. This hate shows his direct rejection of SC which is responsible for his ‘pet name’ to become his real name. Armed with his new name, he starts rejecting SC progressively. Around this time, his parents become concerned that he has not chosen his major yet. They expect him to choose to become an engineer or a doctor or an economist like other Bengalis. It is reported, “But now that he’s Nikhil it’s easier to ignore his parents, to tune out their concerns and pleas” (105). He then grows a goatee, starts smoking, listens to popular bands, gets a fake ID to have liquor and loses his virginity at a party. But it is mentioned that he does not ‘feel’ like Nikhil because the majority of people in his life know him as Gogol and call him so. He begins to have nightmares in which his fake identity is published in newspapers. He is of the opinion that, though he cannot blame them openly, it is his parents (SC) who are responsible for the mess that he has landed in.

Upon visiting his family during the first semester of college, Gogol finds that he sorely misses the library where he studies at night, the smoking and the listening to classical compositions which he enjoys with his friends. Once, he accidentally refers to his college as ‘home’ which upsets his mother very much. He finds his room at Yale and the surrounding buildings more comfortable because he loves their Gothic architectural beauty. According to him, this beauty is lacking in his parent’s house. Gogol’s love for the college buildings, too, points to his love for FC and rejection of SC.

Once on a train journey to home, Gogol meets an American girl named Ruth and falls in love with her. After a year, his parents come to know about her but are not pleased with the development. They repeatedly warn him by mentioning cases in which Bengali men marrying American girls ended in divorces. But it is written that he does not listen to his parents but rather pities them for never been in love when they were young (rejection of SC). According to Adriana Elena Stoican, “His first relationship with an American girl (Ruth) further emphasizes Gogol’s embarrassment with regards to his parents’ lifestyle.” (98) Later, after she returns from a course in Oxford, Ruth and Gogol have a fight and finally decide to separate. Gogol falling in love with an American girl in the face of his parents’ opposition shows his bond with FC.

An incident at the college illuminates Gogol’s mind-set like nothing else. One day, he happens to attend a panel discussion about Indian novels written in English. There, he hears the term ‘ABCD’ which, someone tells to him, means ‘American-born confused deshi’. He knows that ‘deshi’ stands for ‘countryman’ or rather ‘Indians’. At this point it is written, “But Gogol never thinks of India as desh. He thinks of it as Americans do, as India” (118). His idea about India discloses his absolute attachment with FC. This also points to his clear, not-Hamlet-like, and mind. It is written, “He has no ABCD friends at college. He avoids them, for they remind him too much of the way his parents choose to live, befriending people not so much because they like them, but because of a past they happen to share” (119). The reason he avoids other Indians, again, marks his pure rejection of SC. Natalie Friedman says that, “In *The Namesake*, Gogol, the child of immigrants, does not feel dislocated, because he is at home in America”

(114).

After graduating from an architecture programme at Columbia, Gogol starts working for a firm and meets an American girl called Maxine. He falls in love with her. He starts meeting her regularly at her house where she lives with her parents. While having food with them, Gogol automatically makes mental comparisons between the way her parents (FC) behave, talk and live and his parents (SC). Accordingly, he finds her parents to be sophisticated, cultured and accomplished in almost everything in life. By experience, he knows that his parents never comment or have views on food, movies, museums, restaurants, wine, chocolate and the designs of everyday things. While he likes Maxine's parents show their open affection for each other in public, the fact that his parents had an arranged marriage is something close to shame for him. He begins to like the small dinner parties which Maxine's parents have in comparison to the crowded parties of his parents give to Bengalis, where his parents act like caterers. Gogol starts to live with Maxine in her room from time to time and, "...learns to love the food she and her parents eat, polenta and risotto, the bouillabaisse and osso buco, the meat baked in parchment paper" (137). Gogol's love for these things is a definite move away from his parent's FC.

On his twenty seventh birthday, he decides to go with Maxine and her parents to New Hampshire, instead of going home to his parents. On his way there, he and Maxine visit his parents for a lunch. While having food, Gogol is absolutely aware of the facts that his parents are not used to passing things at the table or chewing food with their mouths completely closed. Gogol's awareness of such trivial things about his parents points out his rejection of SC ways to the minute details. After reaching Maxine's parents' vacation property in New Hampshire, Gogol cannot help but start comparing the way his parents live (SC) with the way Maxine's parents live (FC). He naturally grows to like the latter. He thinks of the alarm system in his parents' house versus the property of Maxine's parents where nothing is locked. He loves the way Maxine's family enjoys the physical and natural surroundings versus his parents. He knows that his family would never own such a house solely for vacation and relaxation purposes. It is mentioned, "He feels no nostalgia for the vacations he's spend with his family, and he realizes now that they were never really true vacations at all" (155). He remembers going to Calcutta or on road trips in America with other Bengali families, which he purely hated. As Adriana Elena Stoican observes, "Retaining the idea of missing cultural elements within Gogol's background, I would expand this argument to suggest that this perceived lack of sophistication activates Gogol's transcendent urge and his eventual transformation along trans cultural lines." (98)

Maxine's parents arrange a party on the property for Gogol's twenty seventh birthday, where some other Americans are invited. At the party, a woman, when talking with Gogol, mistakes him to be have been born in India. She thinks that Gogol can never fall sick due to his birth in India. It is written that, "Actually, that's not true," he says, slightly annoyed... "We get sick all the time..." (157). Gogol's annoyance is a result of his identification of himself as an American (FC). Later, after the death of his father, Gogol separates from Maxine because of a few differences.

Through his mother's contacts, Gogol meets a Bengali girl called Moushumi. He likes her because they both have the same FC and SC. Like him, she has tried all her life to reject the SC which her parents tried to force onto her. These facts help Gogol to understand her better and get close to her. He later falls in love with her. Just after a year of meeting her, Gogol marries her. The wedding is in the Bengali tradition but it is given, "It's not the type of wedding either of them really wants... They would have preferred as it-down dinner, jazz played during the reception, black-and-white photographs, keeping things small"(219). The wish to have a different type of wedding manifests Gogol's FC clearly and the subsequent rejection of SC. At the end of the novel, one year after his marriage, he discovers about Moushumi's affair. He is unable to tolerate the betrayal and decides to divorce her. According to his mother, Gogol's decision is typical of all Americans. She thinks, "But fortunately they have not considered it their duty to stay married, as the Bengalis of Ashoke and Ashima's generation do. They are not willing to accept, to adjust, to settle for something less than their ideal of happiness. That pressure has given way, in the case of the subsequent

generation, to American common sense” (276). Gogol’s decision to divorce Moushumi, in the light of his mother’s reactionary thinking, can be taken as his FC attitude towards such matters.

The contextual reasons for Gogol’s choices and decisions may be studied as follows: First, the SC that he indirectly comes in contact with, through his parents’ lives and occasional visits to Calcutta, is relatively less than the abundant time he lives in FC. Second, he thinks that the SC is forced on to him by his parents throughout his childhood and adolescence. So, Gogol finds freedom and a sheer release through closely observing FC ways. Third, his sister, who shares his FC, is clearly his support and shield against his parents’ SC. Fourth, when he makes studious comparisons between the ways his parents live (SC) and how American parents live (FC), he finds that he is simply attracted towards the latter. He likes the FC because it offers sophistication, appreciation and enjoyment of everything like food, clothes, nature, vacations, parties, love, and individual opinions about almost everything.

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