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<http://www.humanitics.org/>**RESEARCH ARTICLE****Vol. V, Issue-II, August 2022****Title- Straddling Across Two Boats: Partial Acceptance of the Other Culture****Prof. Sandesh Vilas Rathod**

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Abstract:

Jhumpa Lahiri is known to write about Indian immigrants in USA and their struggles to survive in that alien land and culture. Her first novel *The Namesake* is a story of such a struggle and survival. The couple, the husband Ashoke and wife Ashima, move to Cambridge (USA) and raise their son and daughter. Ashoke seems to have no problem in making the required adjustments but Ashima struggles all along. Actually, she is quite homesick and longs to be back in her elemental culture in Calcutta (India). She does not like the way people dress, behave etc. around her because she always compares her Indian culture with that of American culture, thus, finding the latter strange. To assuage her troubled mind of the situation, she dresses in sari all the time, eats only Indian food; talks in Bengali with her husband and with her unwilling children; names her first boy with a “good name”; mixes only with other immigrants from Calcutta; spends time remembering the faces of her mother, father and other relatives; rereads the Bengali novels which she has brought from home. She along with her husband tries to teach their American born children about Bengali culture, art and language by celebrating Indian festivals and making them to attend special class. But there is gradual change in Ashima’s attitude towards American culture after her husband’s death. It is seen that towards the end of the novel she has accepted nearly half of the American culture while retaining her own culture. The paper will try to see both her own culture and the American culture closely and try to see her changing mindset and the reasons for the change.

Keywords: Minority culture, dominant culture, immigrants, acceptance, rejection etc.

The Namesake is Jhumpa Lahiri’s first novel which appeared in 2003. Even from her first published book in 1999, which is a collection of short stories, Lahiri has been doing her best to open before her reader’s the not well-known world of a minority culture of Bengali immigrant struggling to live within a foreign culture (USA). In order to survive in a foreign land, many of her characters learn to partially accept elements of the other culture. This strategy works fine as it not only lets the immigrants

adjust to the new cultural ways but also helps them retain some of their own dying culture. Each character individually chooses his / her own elements for acceptance according to their particular circumstance and temperament. This acceptance is accompanied by a strategy of rejecting some elements of the other culture too.

Culture, according to the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, is, “the customs and beliefs, art, way of life and social organization of a particular country or group” (306). In his notable book, E. B. Taylor describes culture as, “...that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man and a member of society” (1). For this paper, culture has been divided into minority and dominant. The minority culture will be the culture of the minority group of immigrants. This minority culture is the culture in which the immigrants have been raised up and which, thus, is a part of their psyche. From the immigrant's point of view, the dominant culture is the other or foreign culture to which they have to adjust. The present paper will attempt to look at the character of Ashima from *The Namesake* and study the different cultural elements which she accepts and rejects from the dominant culture in order to survive.

Ashima is one of the main characters in *The Namesake*. The setting of the plot is mainly in America. The acceptance and rejection of the dominant culture which Ashima shows is quite interesting. She is born and raised in Calcutta (India) where she is married to Ashoke. Ashima and Ashoke move to Cambridge (USA) where Ashoke is completing his educational degree. Later, their son and daughter, Gogol and Sonali, are born. For a long period of time, even when she starts living in America, Ashima is homesick and, accordingly, exhibits her complete attachment with the minority culture and full rejection of the dominant culture. It is written that when she is two weeks before the due date of delivering Gogol, she is eating a dish which contains Rice Krispies, Planters peanuts, chopped red onion, salt, lemon juice and thin slices of green chili pepper. She wishes that there should have been mustard oil around the house to add to the dish. It is mentioned, “Ashima has been consuming this concoction throughout her pregnancy, a humble approximation of the snack sold for pennies on Calcutta sidewalks and on railway platforms throughout India, spilling from newspaper cones” (01). The love for this food item clearly displays a love for the minority culture. When she is in the hospital for the delivery, she is served cold baked chicken at meal times. Looking at it, Ashima feels disgusted because the chicken has skin on it, whereas, in her own culture the skin is removed before cooking the chicken. While in the house, to pass her lonely hours, she rereads the same five Bengali novels (minority culture) that she has brought from Calcutta. Novelist Manju Kapoor describes similar experiences of her protagonist Nina who, when living in another country, passes her time in reading books, “It has been a month, and she was keen to set down roots that would make her feel more at home. In India these relatives had seemed peripheral, more tourist than family. Now her perception has changed. She wanted to be close to them” (132). About Ashima it is given that she does not call her husband by his name but instead uses the interrogative that replaces it, which translates as “Are you listening to me?” Ashima never thinks of her husband's name because it is not something Bengali (minority culture) wives do, “Like a kiss or caress in a Hindi movie, a husband's name is something intimate and therefore unspoken, cleverly patched over” (02).

For her clothing, Ashima wears only the Indian sari and rejects any other form of clothing available in the dominant culture. To her utter surprise, when she is admitted in the hospital for the delivery, she is told to remove the sari and wear a cotton gown. She finds this embarrassing because the gown reaches only to her knees which she thinks is immodest (rejection of dominant culture). Lying on the hospital bed, when she hears nearby an American man saying, “I love you, sweetheart” to his wife, it is written that these are words which, “...Ashima has neither heard nor expects to hear from her own husband...” (03). This represents her expectations which are shaped according to the minority culture. In the hospital she realizes that this is the first time that she is sleeping alone, because all her life she had slept either in a room with her parents or with her husband (minority culture). She feels all alone in the curtained bed and contemplates on the cultural differences between her own culture and American culture in matters of

privacy. She finds that the Americans, in spite of their public declaration of affection and clothes such as the miniskirts and bikinis, prefer privacy in such situations (hospitalized), which, according to her, is incorrect. She also observes that, "In India women go home to their parents to give birth, away from husbands and in-laws and household cares, retreating briefly to childhood when the baby arrives" (04). At regular times the doctor comes and says to Ashima that everything is normal, but it is mentioned that for the last eighteen months, since she has arrived in Cambridge, nothing has felt normal to her (strangeness of dominant culture). Further, she is clearly frightened to, "raise a child in a country where she is related to no one, where she knows so little, where life seems so tentative and spare" (06). For consoling herself in the hospital, Ashima reads a Bengali magazine over and over again and tries to remember her parents and the house in Calcutta with all the possible details. It is mentioned that before her marriage she used to tutor neighborhood schoolchildren in English but she still speaks wrong English at times. This is because her mother tongue (minority culture) has more control over her mind than English language (dominant culture).

When the baby is born, both Ashima and her husband become very happy but according to the minority culture she wants to wait in order to name the baby. It is mentioned, "In India parents take their time. It wasn't unusual for years to pass before the right name, the best possible name, was determined. Ashima and Ashoke can both cite examples of cousins who were not officially named until they were registered, at six or seven in school". (25) Ashima wants to wait for a letter that will be posted by her grandmother from Calcutta with the name of the baby in it. But she becomes very upset when the compiler of the hospital birth certificates tells them to choose a name for the baby, without which a baby cannot be released from the hospital. Ashima desperately tries to tell the man that they cannot possibly name the baby themselves. And when the man asks if they have any other name in reserve (if they did not like the grandmother's name) it is written that, it has never occurred to Ashima to question her elder's wishes. The man suggests the tradition of naming the baby by the name of one of the ancestors as they did in England and France. But Ashima thinks that such a name will only be ridiculed in her country. Finally, Ashoke thinks of the name 'Gogol' for the baby. The whole episode of naming the baby in the hospital, accompanied by the anguish of Ashima, highlights her complete attachments with the minority culture and the subsequent rejection of the dominant culture.

Now, while living with her husband and the baby in Cambridge, Ashima finds it very difficult to cope with the American way of life. She does not like the way that there is, "...no one to sweep the floor, or do the dishes, or wash clothes, or shop for groceries, or prepare a meal on the days she is tired or homesick or cross. She has accepted that the very lack of such amenities is the American way". (32) The reason she finds this so difficult is because in Calcutta (minority culture) she could have easily found such amenities. Frustrated, she even tells Ashoke to hurry up and finish his degree so that they can return to India.

Once, she is left in tears as she finds that there is no rice in the kitchen. She then asks help from her American neighbors who offer her brown rice which she throws away sadly after coming home. Here, the white long-grain rice she wants stands for her minority culture and the brown rice which she throws away is the dominant culture. Following this, she goes to buy a bag of rice from the store, with baby Gogol in a pram. At the store many American strangers stop to admire at the baby and congratulate her, which boosts her morale to go out daily for shopping. Afterwards, Ashima makes a daily schedule in which she goes out with Gogol in the afternoons to buy things, wander the streets and meet Ashoke on the bench. Before this incident she used to lock herself in the house for the whole day. This seemingly insignificant episode is the first that marks a shift in her approach towards the dominant culture. But even at this stage, Ashima longs for her own culture like never before. Her mother's letters, written in Bengali (the alphabets she had seen everywhere all her life), are the ones which she eagerly waits for. It is mentioned, "Ashima keeps her ears trained, between the hours of twelve and two, for the sound of the postman's footsteps on the porch, followed by the soft click of the mail slot in the door" (36). At times, she longs for her own culture and tries hard to recollect how her mother, father and brother look by just looking at her baby's eyes, face and

smile. When she gets the news that her grandmother is slowly dying in India, she becomes terribly homesick. It is mentioned that before coming to America, unlike the rest, her grandmother was the only person who had not admonished her not to eat beef or wear skirts or cut her hair; the only person to predict that Ashima will not change even in America. Here, her grandmother stands for Ashima's strong attachments with the minority culture, attachments which Ashima believes she will never reject in favour of the dominant culture. In course of time, the circle of her Bengali acquaintances in America increases and they drop at each other's houses along with their families on Sundays. On such occasions, they sit in circles on the floor, singings songs in Bengali, arguing about their favorite Bengali filmmakers and Indian politics. When writing about such situations, M. G. Kadam writes, "The restlessness of Bengalis in America where they cannot vote is revealed through their discussions about Bengali arts, music, drama, literature and politics. They experience the spatial, cultural and emotional vacuum in their efforts to settle and adjust in an adopted new land during these days of globalisation." Gogol's sannaprasan or rice ceremony, when he is six months old, is celebrated by Ashima in typical minority cultural style. But she has misgivings about the ceremony because it is not perfectly according to the rules. It is mentioned, "Ashima regrets that the plate on which the rice is heaped is melamine, not silver or brass or at the very least stainless-steel" (39). These gatherings and ceremonies help ease and fulfill Ashima's strong longings for her own culture to some extent.

The second incident which marks the change in Ashima's attitude towards the dominant culture is again trivial if considered at surface level. At some point, Ashima and Ashoke decide to visit their relatives in Calcutta. Ashima becomes extremely happy and goes shopping for presents for her family. But by mistake she forgets her bags, full of the purchases, on a train. Naturally, she becomes distressed and humiliated to think about going to Calcutta empty-handed. At home, Ashoke calls the MBTA lost and found and the bags are returned the following day with nothing missing. It is written, "Somehow, this small miracle causes Ashima to feel connected to Cambridge in a way she has not previously thought possible, affiliated with its exceptions as well as its rules. She has a story to tell at dinner parties" (43)

But the feeling that the dominant culture is strange and incomprehensible never really leaves Ashima. In 1971 Ashoke gets a job as an assistant professor of electrical engineering and the family shifts to the university town outside Boston. It is mentioned that this move is more distressing for Ashima than the shift from Calcutta to Cambridge had been. It is mentioned:

Though no longer pregnant, she continues, at times, to mix Rice Krispies and peanuts and onions in a bowl. For being a foreigner, Ashima is beginning to realize, is a sort of lifelong pregnancy – a perpetual wait, a constant burden, a continuous feeling out of sorts. It is an ongoing responsibility, a parenthesis in what had once been ordinary life, only to discover that the previous life has vanished, replaced by something more complicated and demanding. Like pregnancy, being a foreigner, Ashima believes, is something that elicits the same curiosity from strangers, the same combination of pity and respect. (50)

In the new place, where little Gogol goes to a nursery, she tries her best to fill the empty hours with writing letters to her mother or reading Bengali magazines and books from Calcutta. Once a week she starts preparing some *samosas* (dish from minority culture) to sell at the international coffeehouse on the campus. She has already started teaching Bengali language to Gogol and when he turns five, she tries to teach him about her family in Calcutta with the help of a photo album. Gogol is also taught to memorize a Bengali poem of Tagore and the names of the different Indian deities. At the time when Gogol has to go to kindergarten, Ashima and Ashoke insist on calling Gogol by a 'good name' (minority culture), Nikhil, to the distress of Gogol and his teacher. Ashima also compares the difference in the way Gogol is taught in school and the way she had learned. At this time, she repeatedly dreams of the lost letter, posted by her grandmother, containing the 'good name' for Gogol. These actions and desires again highlight Ashima's terrible pull towards her own culture and rejection of the dominant culture. After they buy a house of their own and start filling it with things, Ashima's minority cultural attitudes hamper her from easily accepting

the dominant culture. It is written that she does not like the idea of owning toys for Gogol or furniture and utensils bought from yard sales. She has a feeling of shame when thinking of buying something that originally belonged to strangers. The other activities which she enjoys doing are nothing like the dominant cultural way of doing them. It is given that the family does not go to swim or sleep in the sun and they always go to the beach when the crowd has gone, where Ashima wears a sari.

Slowly but surely Ashima starts partially accepting some elements of the dominant culture, while still retaining her own culture. When Ashima is pregnant again with Sonia, it is written that she forces herself to eat a slice of toast, only because her husband has prepared it and is watching her while she eats it. In the afternoons when she has to sleep, Ashima switches the television on for Gogol to watch 'Sesame Street' and 'The Electric Company', programmes needed for his English at school. This seemingly small information (the toast and the T.V. programmes) indicates Ashima's reluctant movement towards accepting the American culture. But at the same time, Ashima teaches Gogol, "...to eat on his own with his fingers, not to let the food stain the skin of his palm. He has learned to suck marrow from lamb, to extract the bones from fish" (55) which demonstrates Ashima's attachments with the minority culture. Ashima desires to meet her relatives instead of just hearing them talk on the phone. But it is also written that she feels strange when she watches them every few years when she visits Calcutta. The reason mentioned for this feeling is because she knows that her relatives will never see her life in America, which includes the air of damp mornings, shivering in a cold car waiting for the glasses to defrost and the engine to warm. It is also stated that, "...the Gangul is, apart from the name on their mailbox, apart from the issues of *India Abroad* and *Sangbad Bichitra* that are delivered there, appear no different from their neighbors". (64) Ashima, along with her husband, accepts some dominant cultural customs like observing Christmas, the Thanksgiving with a roasted turkey, nailing a wreath to the door in December, clothing the snowmen and to colour Easter eggs and hide them in the house. But at the same time, Ashima is seen celebrating, with her family, the minority cultural festivals like worshipping the Durga and Saraswati. She and her husband also try to 'educate' their children in the minority cultural ways by showing them Indian movies like the Apu Trilogy, cultural programmes like Kathakali dance and by sending Gogol to Bengali language class. Once, when Gogol is in sixth grade, his school field trip goes to a grave yard. After Ashima comes to know this, she is horrified. It is reported that she makes comparisons between the minority culture and the dominant culture in angry words:

What type of field trip was this? It was enough that they applied lipstick to the corpses and buried them in silk-lined boxes. Only in America (a phrase she has begun to resort to often these days), only in America are children taken to cemeteries in the name of art. What's next, she demands to know, a trip to the morgue? In Calcutta the burning ghats are the most forbidden of places, she tells Gogol... (70).

In the year 1982 Gogol turns fourteen, and for his birthday party, Ashima cooks lamb curry with potatoes, luchis, channa dal with raisins, pineapple chutney, sandeshes from ricotta cheese (minority culture food items). While going to Calcutta she always has Hindu meals on the plane with her husband. After she meets her relatives at the Calcutta airport, a change comes over her. It is mentioned that she now has a louder voice, wider smile and reveals confidence which her children have never seen in America. Once, when the whole family goes to Calcutta for eight months, Ashima becomes a different person who roams the city, shops and goes to movies with her old school friends, never stepping in the kitchen to prepare food all the time.

Back in America, where her children are raised, Ashima's attachments with the minority culture are still fresh. She is afraid that young Sonia will colour a streak of blond to her already cut hair and that she may have additional holes pierced in her earlobes according to the American style. She gets annoyed when Gogol once refers to New Haven (his college) as 'home' and says to him that even after living for twenty years in America, she still cannot force herself to refer to her house in America as home. When Gogol meets Ruth, an American girl, and introduces her as his girlfriend to his parents, Ashima persuades him to

change his mind and not to marry her. One of Lahiri's reviewers writes:

The first wave of settlers has arrived for long; some have switched to the new culture aggressively even as some stick to the old far-off land. Then there are some who are straddling across two boats. Food, clothes and customs rendered unpalatable by the Indian ethos pose major stumbling blocks to smooth transition for some. Unable to cope, they fiercely cling to the earlier ways of life, almost as if mourning. The problem takes an acute turn when they succumb to the basic biological urge of perpetuating their existence through their children. (Pandey)

Gogol himself is keenly aware of the attachments of his mother to the minority culture and remembers it when he goes to eat dinner at Maxine's (his next girlfriend) home. While having the dinner he thinks, "His own mother would never have served so few dishes to a guest. She would have kept her eyes trained on Maxine's plate, insisting she have seconds and then thirds. The table would have been lined with a row of serving bowls so that people could help themselves". (133) At the time when Maxine comes to meet his parents at lunch, Maxine offers Ashima a cellophane-wrapped basket of tinned pates and jars of cornichons, but Gogol knows that his parents will never open them because of their attachments to the minority culture. At lunch time, Gogol is aware that his mother and father are not used to passing dishes around the table or to chewing food with mouths fully closed as it is expected in America. Gogol is also regrets that his mother's marriage was arranged, that she has only Bengali friends, cooks Indian food every day, never shows physical affection to her husband in the public and never puts a bathing suit or swims, things which make his mother different from American women. It is stated that, "Though she'd been polite enough, the onetime Gogol had brought Maxine to the house, Ashima doesn't want her for a daughter-in-law" (166). At this stage, her decision of not accepting Maxine is symbolic of her rejection of the dominant culture.

Later in the novel, when she turns forty-eight and has been living in America for many years, Ashima still does not completely cut her minority cultural connections nor does she completely accept the dominant culture. When Christmas is around, she sends cards only to those Bengali families whom she and Ashoke have known over the years. It is stated that whenever she buys cards, "She is careful to choose ones that say "Happy Holidays" or "Season's Greetings" as opposed to "Merry Christmas", to avoid angels or nativity scenes in favor of what she considers firmly secular images – a sleigh being pulled through a snow-covered field, or skaters on a pond" (160). When she makes her own cards at home, she draws an elephant decked with red and green jewels (minority cultural image). While writing the list of names of the family members on the cards she does not write Nikhil but Gogol because no parent in her own culture uses the 'good name' of their children. Living alone in the house, when Ashoke goes to another university for some months, is a thing which she comes to hate. She does not agree with her children when they tell her that it is nothing and that everyone should live on their own at some point of life. Another thing which she hates is the chilly and short days of early winter when darkness comes very quickly in the afternoon. It is written that Ashima does not like it when Gogol and Sonali do not come regularly to home on holidays and it is reported, "Having been deprived of the company of her own parents upon moving to America, her children's independence, their need to keep their distance from her, is something she will never understand" (166).

When Ashoke dies in another city and Gogol goes to settle what his father possessed there, Ashima does not want Gogol to bring anything back as a reminder of his father, because according to her, "It's not our way" (175). The keeping of reminders of the dead (dominant culture) is clearly not her (minority culture) way. After the death of her husband, according to the minority cultural tradition, Ashima erases the vermilion from her part, takes off her bracelets, cooks the mourner's diet without fish or meat for ten days and has a religious ceremony at home. When her friends suggest she go to India to lessen the sorrow, it is written that, "...for the first time in her life, Ashima had no desire to escape to Calcutta, not now. She refuses to be so far from the place where her husband made his life, the country in which he died". (183)

This desire of Ashima marks a clear transformation of her mind towards the dominant culture. Afterwards, it is mentioned that Ashima has decided to spend six months in India and six months in the states, which is symbolic of her partial acceptance of the dominant culture. At this point it is given:

For the first time since her flight to meet her husband in Cambridge, in the winter of 1967, she will make the journey entirely on her own. The prospect no longer terrifies her. She has learned to do things on her own, and though she still wears saris, still puts her long hair in a bun, she is not the same Ashima who had once lived in Calcutta. She will return to India with an American passport. In her wallet will remain her Massachusetts driver's license, her social security card. (276)

Now, she even feels fortunate when Gogol and his wife Moushumi decide to separate instead of living under the pressure of an unhappy married life, as the Bengalis of Ashoke and Ashima's generation did (acceptance of some dominant culture and rejection of some minority culture). When the time comes for her to move from the house which she and husband had bought, it is written that she feels very sad. She also thinks that she will miss her part time job at the library, the women with whom she has worked and the driving which she has done sometimes. It is told that, "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 in this town, that he will continue to dwell in her mind" (279). In her heart she knows that the house she lived in on Pemberton Road, the house which her husband and she bought and lived in, is not her 'home'. But still, she feels an attachment with it and, indirectly, with the dominant cultures itself.

1) The contextual reasons for Ashima to remain strongly attached with the minority culture for the first half of the novel may be reflected as follows: First, she comes to live in America for the sake of her husband who studies and later works there and because she wants to raise a family with him. With these reasons in mind, she does not want to accept the dominant culture but rather stays closely connected with the minority culture. Second, before coming to America, her relatives and friends warn her to live according to only the minority culture and not to accept the dominant culture in any way. They tell her not to eat beef or wear skirts or cut her hair or forget her family while living in America. These admonitions may have kept her from accepting the dominant culture for a long time. Third, it is observed that while Ashima is about to go to America, it is only her grandmother who shows faith in Ashima's strong attachments with the minority culture and predicts that Ashima will not change or, in other words, will not accept the dominant culture. This faith, shown by an elderly person, may have boosted Ashima to remain 'loyal' to the minority culture by not accepting the dominant culture for a long time. It should be noted here that, Ashima accepts some of the dominant culture only after the death of her grandmother.

2) The contextual reasons for Ashima to change in the later part of the novel could be examined as follows: First, at the end of the novel, Gogol's observations on the decision of his parents to accept some American (the dominant culture) ways are helpful. According to Gogol, "...it was for him, for Sonia, that his parents had gone to the trouble of learning these customs" (286). So, it could be said that Ashima accepts the dominant culture partially for raising her children in America. Second, the small episode, where she gets her lost bags back through the MBTA lost and found service, attracts her to the dominant culture in a strange way. This is because she knows that her lost bags would never have been found if the bags had been lost in Calcutta (the minority culture). Third, the house which they buy on Pemberton Road may have become a reason for her to accept the dominant culture, because it is written that she has to fill the empty house with many American things, things which she is initially reluctant to accept. Fourth, the American people, with whom she works part time in the library, are the people who persuade her to accept the gradual detachment of the children from their parents in America. Fifth, her husband's own acceptance of some the dominant culture elements may have triggered Ashima to follow suit. Sixth, after the death of her husband, Ashima feels that it is the dominant culture that can somehow help her to stay connected with her husband's memories – which pushes her to accept the dominant culture to some extent.

The dominant culture elements which Ashima accepts, actually, do not betray her love for her the minority culture in any way. She accepts only the following the dominant culture elements:

- 1) Elements which support her to live according to the minority culture even in America.
- 2) Elements which help her to live independently and alone after the death of her husband and when Gogol and Sonali are away from her.

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