Culture Re-contextualized: A Comparative Study of Jhumpa’s The Namesake and Jaishree’s The Ancient Promises

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Abstract: In the recent past, discussion on cultural imperialism has evoked staggering amount of critical speculation. The present paper endeavours to study The Namesake by Jhumpa Lahiri and Jayshree Misra’s Ancient Promises which present before us the sense of dislocation that characterizes the migrant sensibility of the protagonists. The Namesake helps us look into migrant sensibility of the Indians settled abroad; through this one can fathom the queer challenges that arise in the wake of the oriental and the occidental cultures forging together. While focussing on Gogol of Jhmupa Lahiri’s The Namesake, the paper tries to push close to him the character of Janu nee Janaki of Jayshree Misra’s Ancient Promises. The paper intends to suggest that Gogol’s angst and Janaki’s drift is not caused by their being on the ‘margin,’ owing to their cultural ‘outsidedness.’ By focusing on the queer patterns of rootedness and dislocation, the paper proposes to re-contextualize the term culture and contest its redemptive powers by suggesting that crises may erupt both within and beyond the frontiers of the known and the familiar.

1. Introduction

The binary struggle pitching the self against the society has always invited creative reflections and critical speculations. Believing in the dictum of art for society’s sake, most of the writers today write with a view to exploring the complex relationship that an individual shares with the society. In times of belief that human consciousness, rather than dwelling in a state of being, is actually in a constant flux of becoming, the process how through such opposing forces a “hybrid” culture is formed in which the “identities are never total and complete in themselves, like orderly pathways built from crazy paving,” as John McLeod observes, has increasingly become a focal point of attention for many a writer. By delving deep into the variegated nuances of the relationship that characterize the complexity of this equation, an abundance of literary and artistic works today help us peep into the variegated strands of human experiences. Consequently, a great deal of critical speculation tends to focus on the ‘expatriate’ overtones of the work and seems to frequently surmise, for works such as Jhumpa Lahiri’s The Namesake, that they talk about the “immigrant experience and the clash of cultures in the U.S,” where Jhumpa “mines the immigrant experience in a way superior to Bharati Mukherjee and others.”

Written by Pulitzer Winning author Jhumpa Lahiri The Namesake, published first in 2003 in America and in the subsequent year in India was hailed as “most eagerly awaited novel of the year 2004.” Regarded as a lucid and powerful manifestation of expatriate sensibility, the novel was initially termed as an expression of a cultural struggle which was “more than a book about a name,” and was “about finding an identity in a country that will treat you as an alien even if you were born there.” The present paper however, proposes to adopt a slightly variant stance. By tilting the mirror a bit, the paper peeps into the struggles faced by the central figure Gogol in the novel and draws parallels and proselytizes to suggest that his life seems to have correspondence with another character Janu in Ancient Promises by Jaishree Misra. By pitching both these protagonists whose inner cultures are constantly grappling with that of those who seem to have been entrusted with the task of defining identities, the paper attempts to establish that though well versed with the culture of their choice, both Gogol and Janu get bewildered by the “totalizing systems of representations,” and contest the idea of “cultural essentialism.”

Before venturing further, one needs to concede to the face that the keynotes struck in the beginning of The Namesake are beguilingly close to lead even a perceptive reader into believing that the work is about a family that seems to struggle while finding its home in an alien American culture. In fact, keeping firmly in consonance with such diasporic concerns, The Namesake, begins on a note of empathy by focusing on a pregnant Ashima
Ganguli who is shown to have been faced with a daunting task of delivering a baby in an alien land. At the outset, the author underlines Ashima’s sense of dislocation as cultural vacuum grips Ashima’s thought process: Ashima thinks it’s strange that her child will be born in a place most people enter either to suffer or to die. There is nothing to comfort her in the off-white tiles of the floor, the off-white panels of the ceiling, the white sheets tucked tightly into the bed. In India, she thinks to herself, 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.9

By letting us peep into Ashima’s thought process, Jhumpa seems to have proposed the cultural dialectics that are likely to form the very fulcrum of her work. Ashima’s painful retrospection stands for her disjunction from her roots and seems to be groping for the idea that her “imaginary homeland… which stands for shelter, stability, security, and comfort.”10 While depicting Ashima in labour pains, the author subtly draws our attention to the deeper psychological aches, that characterize the protagonist’s sense of discomfort and outlines her cultural aloofness while being in unknown world and delivering a baby in a country where despite their “…public declarations of affection, in spite of their miniskirts and bikinis, in spite of their hand-holding on the street and lying on top of each other on the Cambridge Common, [people] prefer their privacy” (The Namesake, p.3). In revealing Ashima’s discomfiture, the author skillfully sets the tone of her novel as she ventures to depict the “…spatial, cultural and emotional dislocations suffered by them in their efforts to settle ‘home’ in the new land.”11

In The Namesake the author keeps building on this sense of rootlessness that Ashima experiences by reflecting her obsessive state of mind as on having been told by the doctor: “Everything is looking perfectly normal. We are expecting a perfectly normal delivery, Mrs Ganguli,” (The Namesake, p.6), Ashima’s response seems almost like a mental smirk as her heart convulses for “…nothing feels normal to Ashima. For the past eighteen months, ever since she’s arrived in Cambridge, nothing has felt normal at all. It’s not the pain, which she knows, somehow, she will survive. It’s the consequence: motherhood in a foreign land,” (The Namesake, p.6). The novel thus immediately seems to be settling into highlighting the expatriated sense of loss that Ashima continues to harbor throughout as she seems extremely terrified with the proposition of having “…to raise a child in a country where she is related to no one, where she knows so little, where life seems to tentative and spare…” (The Namesake, p.6).

Through such subtle, yet explicit exposition, the novelist sets her work on a voyage where Jhumpa seemingly engages herself in a narrative of a Bengali couple, who in their pursuit of leading their life with security and respect; attempt to find their feet in a foreign land. Gradually however, the novel acquires subtler connotations where the struggle is pitched between two generations and not between two cultures. With two kids Gogol and Sonia coming along in due course of time, the focus apparently begins to shift to the the displacements of the younger Gangulis, particularly Gogol who contests the “exclusionary, fixed, binary notions of identity,” and whose lack of cultural discomfiture seems to have stemmed from his being part of ABCD – American Born Confused Deshi – generation. It is here that by titling the mirror and adopting a slightly variant stance which helps us peep deeper into the meandering depths of Gogol’s alienation, one comes to realize that an otherwise ostensibly conspicuous term culture is indeed a rather nebulous and elusive phenomenon where identities are formed not from one’s cast, colour, religion, language or nationality but from one’s ability to have a choice. Seen thus, the events that unfold acquire a subtler connotation as they seem to focus on question of choice that comes to acquire a central space in the relationships shared by both the generations of the Gangulis.

The family’s visit to India serves as a significant testimony to the ruptured relationship that the two generations of Gangulis seem to conjoin. The fact that what senior Gangulis – Ashoke and Ashima – seem to celebrate and what apparently scares the younger Gangulis – Gogol and Sonia – clearly reflects the familial conflicts that characterize the relationship between the two generations of Indians settled abroad. Ashoke and Ashima’s visit to Calcutta for eight months can actually be seen an attempt on their part to extract emotional sustenance that would, they believe, see them through their alienation in America. Devoid of their Indian roots, their own kids however, regard the visit as a dreadful prospect. Initially, they see it as a cruel joke that they would be going to India for eight months but as they come to know “…that the tickets have already been booked, the plans already made” (The Namesake, 79), they begin to realize the prospective threat that the visit poses to them. Gogol “dreads the thought of eight months without a room of his own, without his records and his stereo, without friends,” (The Namesake, 79). The Gangulis’ visit to India becomes a focal point of contention as in deciding to revisit their lost world for as long as eight months, the senior Gangulis seem to have announced their interminable association with India. Correspondingly, it also seems to be a denunciation on their part of their acquired world. On the part of the younger Gangulis however, it is a scary side of their parents. Sonia’s reaction, “I am scared, Goggles,” (The Namesake, 82), serves to suggest the gaps in their priorities. It is clear that Gogol and Sonia are not really comfortable with their parents slipping into newer entities. Jhumpa unmistakably brings to the fore the difference in their perspective by delving deep into the fear that grips Gogol and Sonia:
Within minutes, before their eyes Ashoke and Ashima slip into bolder, less complicated versions of themselves, their voices louder, their smiles wider, revealing a confidence Gogol and Sonia never see on Pemberton Road. (The Namesake, 82)

Subsequent to their visit to India, the fault lines between the two generations of Gangulis keep widening all the more visibly throughout the rest of the novel. Unlike their parents, for them it is India that is an alien land and they know that would miss their America as much as their parents miss India. Their anguish deepens with the fact “… that they depart Christmas Day driving with their massive collection of luggage to Logan when they should be home opening gifts…” (The Namesake, 80). Obviously, it is America and the Western way of living that the younger generation of Gangulis identifies with. Gogol and Sonia have developed identities that are starkly different from those of their parents. It is from this moment on that the novel begins to focus on the “in-betweenness,” of both the younger Gangulis, particularly that of Gogol. It is from this moment on, that discarding himself as an “essentialized subject”. Gogol hurts himself into redefining his identity which to him is always a “discursive product”. In Jhumpa’s own words too it is Gogol’s struggle to straddle two cultures – the imposed and the acquired – that motivated her to write The Namesake: “I just wanted to write something focussing on the experiences of Bengali-American kid.”

Viewed from this perspective, The Namesake seems to depict Gogol as a victim of what is entrusted on him. Seen as a perpetuation, an extension of their own selves, Gogol is expected to be a savior of their beleaguered culture in a foreign land. It is in this sense that the ritual of the name and naming acquires profoundly complex and symbolic overtones in the overall tapestry of the work. The whole chaos begins with Ashoke and Ashima’s decision to wait for the ‘good name’ for their son to be suggested by ‘their people’ in Bengal when the little child is born to them. Partly because of Ashoke’s ardent admiration for Nikolai Gogol, the Russian author whose work helped him emerge out of the accident wreckage during rescue operations by the search teams, and partly owing the official exigencies that demanded the child be named before he is discharged from the hospital, it is named Gogol. However, when it comes to admitting Gogol to school, the couple believes that he should be given a proper name. Since, the ‘good name’ from Ashima and Ashoke’s family never reached them, they decide to give him Nikhil as his good name.

What happens on the first day of his school though proves that continuing to savour such cultural delicacies in a foreign land, can turn out to be an onerous task. The necessity to carry two names confuses Mrs Lapidus, the Principal of the elementary school where Ashoke is seeking admission for his son. When the child does not respond on being called Nikhil, Ashoke’s insistence that Gogol is “…what we call him at home only, but his good name should be – is – Nikhil…” (The Namesake, 58), does not find much favours from the Principal as she resorts to the convenience of the child who identifies himself more with Gogol, the name he has been listening to, rather than Nikhil, which the necessity of having a decent name requires. Ironically both these names are given by his parents; even then, they fail to reconcile to the fact that their son should be known to the world by the nickname and not by his good name.

In a bid to keep their culture afloat in an alien world, Ashoke and Ashima place on his son’s shoulder a Sisyphean boulder that he always finds unwieldy to manage. Adapted to American culture but encumbered with the task of redeeming his parents’ dwindling Bengali identities in America, he hates being the centre of their aspirations. Gogol “…hates that his name is both absurd and obscure, that it has nothing to do with who he is, that it neither Indian nor American but of all things Russian. He hates having to living with it, with a pet name turned good name, day after day, second after second…” (The Namesake, 76). This is how despite his effortless assimilation into his ‘host’ country, the ghosts of his Bengali roots keep haunting him. It is this cultural dilemma that the second generation Indians settled abroad confronts particularly because of the “…migrant history of their parents and grandparents.”

The Namesake thus, transcends facile interpretations often used to interpret an extremely complex and intriguing term “culture.” It arouses in us a misgiving as to how to interpret the term culture. The major conundrum that strikes us is - what is Gogol’s culture? Is he an American? Or a Bengali? It is in pursuit of answer for these questions that Gogol seems to be moving “perpetually in motion, pursuing errant and unpredictable routes, open to change and reinscription.” Pitched against Ashoke and Ashima – those who seem to have parachuted to an alien territory America - Gogol certainly appears to be a creature very much rooted in American ethos. His partly flagrant and partly disdainful attitude towards quintessential Indian customs, rituals, relations and emotions evidently establish his complete disjunction from the roots that his parents once savoured and now crave for. It is obvious that what concerns Ashoke and Ashima fails to bother Gogol. As the novel progresses, his disdain for the pressure that his parents build on him in urging him to embrace his cultural heritage, mounts on him and he begins to drift into relationships beyond his own cultural spaces. His physical
intimacy with Kim, Ruth and Maxine serves as a testimony to his voyage as he sets himself on an existential odyssey rejecting the “certainty of roots” and preferring the “contingency of routes.”

Gogol’s cross-cultural escapades in pursuing his “identity” as a “discursive product” evokes parallels in the brave resistance to her roots by Janu, the protagonist of Ancient Promises. A Keralite by birth but born and brought up in metropolitan Delhi, Janu, much like Gogol, is urbanite in outlook and attitude. Ancient Promises, a sensitive account of a girl’s efforts to find her destination in life, is full of keen psychological observations, and culminates in a sane and balanced view of life. Transplanted from her home and the familiar world of Delhi at the age of eighteen to a highly conventional and aristocratic Nair family in Kerala, suffering from the pangs of separation from her first love, married to a man who is neither good nor bad but simply an ‘expert in the art of escape’, and surrounded by nasty and sly in-laws who will never let her belong to their world, the problems Janu has to face are numerous. Her bold affair with Arjun, a Punjabi boy of Delhi confirms her debonair repose – a young girl from Delhi goes through the excruciating process of losing her identity to a stranger to; surrounded by nasty and sly in-laws who will never let her belong to their world, the problems Janu has to face are numerous. Her bold affair with Arjun, a Punjabi boy of Delhi confirms her debonair repose – a young girl from Delhi goes through the excruciating process of losing her identity to her unbridled spirit and in love with a Punjabi boy Arjun, Janu is aware of the little chance that their alliance could have been separate universes. (Ancient Promises, p. 62)

It is interesting to observe that though at an apparently naïve stage of adolescence, Janu is capable of displaying a temper that is mature enough to understand the exigency of an existence that is dependent and needs validation from others who seem to profess their love and care for her.

When she writes a letter to Arjun to inform him of her impending wedding, her justifications display a combination of rational thinking and filial loyalty:
“...I’m tired of fighting off my family, they’ve proven their love for me in the eighteen years it’s taken to bring me up. And I just can’t believe they’d push me into something that would be wrong for me. I know you think of it as a stupidly blind kind of trust, but there it is. (Ancient Promises, p. 63)

Unable to find herself capable of envisioning a matrimonial alliance that, as a corollary, forges together the two cultures – the open and rather debonair culture of Arjun and a rather prescriptive culture of Janu’s family, the young girl gives herself to aspirations of her family suffocating in the process, her prerogative of choice. Her aspirations to emerge from the slippery foundations of her juvenile love and firmly settle on the solid foundations of her cultural heritage coupled with social approval and familial security, suggest that to Janu the world of cultural comfort is far more realistic and dependable than the seemingly inane though passionate love that Arjun offers.

Married into an orthodox Keralaite family, she finds it increasingly difficult to retain her individual self as like any other conservative family, the affluent Maraar family, too seek to surrender herself on the altar of the society. Terribly alienated in a world of an insouciant husband and snooty mother-in-law, Janu tries to slip into accepting feminine obligations and begins to imagine herself resurrectin from a dubious existence to the forefront of recognition by coming out in flying colours of her motherhood. In a touching description, Jaishree lets us peep into the working of her mind as she optimistically begins to romanticize her glory as a proud mother and fulfilling daughter-in-law:

Perhaps, just perhaps, having a child would solve my problems more easily than a BA and a job. That’s what I’d do. I’d have a child! She, as their grandchild, would be loved. Especially if she turned out to be the much-longed-for first grandson. And, as his mother, I’d receive a sort of instant double-promotion, so to speak. Be elevated to the position of Good Mother and Good Daughter-in-Law. And spin out the rest of my days basking in a kind of reflected glory and blissful motherhood. (Ancient Promises, 113)

Keeping in consonance with the tragic trajectory of her fate, she delivers a baby girl and is out of reckoning for any solicitude she had been expecting to have come from her in-laws. Her crisis reaches its culmination when it is discovered that the baby girl delivered by her is mentally challenged. More repugnance and scorn is heaped on the daughter-mother duo until Janu decides to resurrect herself and her daughter from a plighted, powerless existence. With her willing suspension of disbelief evaporating, Janu faces a stiff challenge where she has no other option to stage a fight back. Pushed to the edge of her existence, Janu has to rise from the crippling surroundings around. The frightening dark road ahead dares her to tread on it. It offers to her a shuddering menace; but it offers to her the possibility of a choice. With nowhere else to go and nothing to fall back upon, it is Janu’s choice whether to grovel pleadingly to the coercive patriarchal structure or to raise her spirit beyond her challenges. The frightening possibility assigns to her an opportunity to exercise her choice. With the smokescreen of social obfuscation merging into a sordid reality, Janu begins to feel the whiff of freedom striking her, emboldening her and eventually empowering her:

She [Riya] was not going to provide me with a passport to their love and affection, she did not in fact have one herself. My struggle was over. I grabbed at the realization with a weary but dizzy, almost overwhelming sense of liberation. I was free. I neither had to struggle for their approval any more, nor put Riya through the same hopeless loop. I wasn’t sure why I had so easily given up my own right to be loved, allowing it to fade into oblivion somewhere long ago. But a child like Riya, left unloved, would simply wither and perish. Couldn’t they see that her kind of innocence could only understand love, not the lack of it? My own rights had not seemed worth fighting for, but Riya needed me to be her voice and a battle on her behalf would be far more satisfying. I was soon going to become the thorn in the Maraar side. (132-133)

The events that unfold, establish Janu not just as a mother or woman but also as an individual who strikes with all her diminutive might to topple to monolithic power structures entrenched in patriarchy. A part of her battle is also for her mentally challenged girl Riya and Janu’s effort acquires profound intensity in rescuing her child from a debilitating atmosphere. It is interesting to observe that Janu’s adversity starts from her being a migrant in Maraar family. Ironically it is this very disqualification of hers that comes to catapult her into a rebellion that ultimately assigns to her the authority to make her own choices in life. Viewed thus, we come to understand Janu as a character whose migrancy, her perpetual sense of rootlessness and uncertainty ultimately exonerates her from a stifling and structured living. Seeing her retrieve herself from the clutches of perpetual periphery, we are reminded of how Rushdie in his “Imaginary Homelands,” realizes the power of such partial and plural views as the get reflected through the broken images, as to in the words of John McLeod:

“The migrant seems in a better position than others to realize that all systems of knowledge, all views of the world, are never totalizing, whole or pure, but incomplete, muddled and hybrid. To live as a migrant may well evoke the pain of loss and of not being firmly rooted in a secure place; but it is also to live in a world of immense possibility with the realization that new knowledges and ways of seeing can be constructed out of the
myriad combinations of the ‘scrap’s which Rushdie describes – knowledges which challenge the authority of older ideas of rootedness and fixity.”

Ironically, though Janu prefers the open Delhi culture to the conservative culture of the Maraar family, she does not seem to be without adequate discomfort even with the former. Being a Keralite her assimilation in the mainstream of the capital city and its ways is hardly ever fully realized. Compared to Gogol, it is she, and not Gogol, who seems to have been repudiated by both the cultures. She recalls how in being a Delhite her Keralite roots are an impediment just as her being a Keralite her Delhiness is a hurdle. The author sums up her cultural predicament quite illustratively:

There was something too Delhi about me and Kerala had not liked that much. Just like the childhood holiday friend who had described me sneeringly as ‘too fashionery,’ reducing me to tears...The odd thing was that Delhi had never taken me completely to her bosom either, possessing as I always did that faint Kerala edge. In my name and the way my parents spoke and the idlis I carried in my school lunch box instead of parathas and pickle or even salami sandwiches. Halfway children, we could have founded a world-wide club of people belonging nowhere and everywhere confused all the time by ourselves... (Ancient Promises, 169).

It is remarkable to observe how it is in this rootlessness lie the seeds of her belonging. Disjuncted both from her Keralite roots both owing to her ingenuity initially and disenchantment subsequently, and her discomfited assimilation into the boisterous Delhi culture, she is cut off from all roots that could find her to a root of fixity. Paradoxically, however, it is this rootlessness of hers that finally paves way for her eventual emancipation as she knows that for her to survive meaningfully, making a choice is mandatory. Of course it is the force of the situations that catapults her into choosing. Circumstances force her to make a choice between what is imposed by the forces beyond herself or the power within. Rejecting to be cowering before the monolithic cultural ossifications, Janu raises her dainty spirit beyond the challenge and is able to turn things around by sticking to her choice – in choosing what she actually owns rather than what is imposed on her superficially and moves further into her life as future smiles on her courage obligingly: “Tomorrow, the next chapter would begin.” (Ancient Promises, 305)

In Gogol’s case this trend seems to have been reversed. Throughout the novel, Gogol seems to struggle against the culture of his parents. Having imbibed an open American culture, he finds it impossible to relate to the conservative Bengali culture. Interestingly, he does not seem to harbor the roots of Bengali culture of which he is supposed to be an inseparable part. All this association to his ancestral cultural roots is only through his parents. Sans his parents’ compulsion, Gogol is an American whose beliefs, emotions, thoughts and actions are quintessentially occidental. Repeatedly as can be seen, it is Ashoke and Ashima who try to mount on Gogol a cultural pressure. Swearing on their past they remind Gogol that he – the one who disdainfully disregards Indian ritualism, indulges freely in an unrestrained, frank and open corporeal existence, hob nobbles with American girls without going through any cultural compunction – is essentially a Bengali boy whose parents have invested in him their anguish, aspiration and beliefs. It is through Gogol’s future that Ashoke and Ashima intend to relive their past – something they so nostalgically seem to cherish. Gogol’s ejection after the death of his father, therefore is a guilt that emanates owing to an intense emotional conflict caused mainly because of his parents’ insistence that he carry their cultural legacy further. In reconciling finally to his parents’ Bengali ways of observance therefore, rather than suggesting his return to his Bengali roots, is actually a surrender as torn between a love-hate relationship with his parents, he seems to have been overwhelmed with an emotional vacuum particularly after his father’s death.

The circumstances that lead to Gogol’s capitulation to Bengali ritualism are hardly suggestive of any renewed interest in his Bengali roots. Forced by family obligations, he seems to have resigned to his lot which requires him to carry the boulder of his conventional roots after his father’s death. The cultural crisis depicted in the novel is not the one that Ashima and Ashoke experience for having settled abroad. It is the cultural dislocation of Gogol that is sharply focused in the novel. Ironically he does not experience any rootlessness just because he is a Bengali and lives in US. On the contrary, he seems to be quite comfortable with the way things are in US. Born and brought up in US, Gogol does not face the challenge to assimilate himself into the western world. The novelist deftly highlights his absence of discomfort with Maxine’s parents which, as a corollary, insinuates his sense of unease with his own cultural roots: “From the very beginning he feels effortlessly incorporated into their lives. It is a different brand of hospitality from what he is used to; for though the Ratliffs are generous, they are people who do not go out of their way to accommodate others, assured in this case correctly, that their life will appeal to him.” (The Namesake, 136)

Obviously therefore, it is the tussle within the four walls that continues to unnerve Gogol. Therefore, it would seem unfair to believe that the major concern of the novelist in The Namesake is to orchestrate the travails and
alienation of an immigrant Bengali family settled abroad. The text specifically seems to focus on Gogol’s disintegration as forced to bear the albatross of his cultural roots despite his overt predilection and endorsement of American ways of living. His life voyages into myriad relational and emotional turmoil.

The crisis that seems to present itself before both Janu and Gogol is that of loss of power, loss of assertion and loss of choices. When explored through the struggle of Ashima and Ashoke, both of whom suffer from a chaos, Gogol seems to lead a life of hardly any nostalgia, compunction or sense of loss that comes in the wake of alienation from his roots. Gogol’s deprivation arrives not in the sense of loss of belongingness but because of the pressure mounted on him by his parents who are over-anxious in protecting their culture in an alien territory through him.

Jhumpa adds enough illustrations to suggest that essentially the expatriate sensibility does not disturb him. Though born as an Indian, he does not seem too keen to attach himself to India in a sentimental vein. It is in this context, one episode in the novel acquires symbolic connotations. It would be worthwhile to revisit the episode in author’s words:

One day he attends a panel discussion about Indian novels written in English. He feels obliged to attend; one of the presenters on the panel, Amit, is a distant cousin who lives in Bombay, whom Gogol has never met. His mother has asked him to greet Amit on her behalf. Gogol is bored by the panelists, who keep referring to something called “marginality,” as if it were some sort of medical condition. For most of the hour, he sketches portraits of the panelists, who sit hunched over their papers along a rectangular table. “Technologically speaking, ABCD’s are unable to answer the question “Where are you from? The sociologist on the panel declares. Gogol has never heard the term ABCD. He eventually gathers that it stands for “American-born-confused- deshi.” In other words, him.

In the overall tapestry of the novel, this episode acquires crunching significance. It highlights how Gogol, though born in a Bengali family and given a Russian name, hardly harbours any association with any of these two continents of the world. It is here that we get closest to the main concern of the novel. Written in an ironic, mocking vein, the passage cited above suggests how Jhumpa envisions her protagonist Gogol relating to the theoretical treatise that interprets the second generation Indians settled abroad in terms of “marginality” and “hybridity.” The tone of the text seems to reveal the mild scorn that the author has for all such critical speculations that seems to focus too exclusively and great alacrity the concept of “in-betweenness” as a condition of second generation Indians in the Western world.

In fact, rather than relating to all such nostalgic allusions, Gogol feels annoyed at being in the centre of such unaffordable appendage. Rather than being proud to be part of his father’s preferences and passions, he feels cheated to have been named after “an eccentric genius,” who also was “hypochondriac and a deeply paranoid, frustrated man.” Feeling deeply humiliated and upset over such unsavoury associations, “he quietly winces.” He feels cheated and fumes over the fact that “his parents never told him any of this.” (The Namesake, p.91). In a rearguard attempt to redeem himself from such encumbrances, he changes his name and asserts “I am Nikhil.” (p.96). Though arising out of an exigency when he runs into Kim, the first girl he kisses in his life, his changed name serves as a boost to his rebellion, that lay dormant in him thus far. The author discerns how unmistakably the changed name also gives him a sense of liberation from his roots, something that he always regards as something unnecessary as she deftly observes: “…he is brave that evening, kissing her [Kim] lightly on the mouth…his legs gently against her leg on the sofa, briefly running a hand through her hair. It is the first time he’s kissed anyone...(p. 96). Later on when his friends express astonishment at the act of bravery on his part, Gogol realizes and confesses,”…it was not me,” with the author crucially adding for us “…he does not tell them that it hadn’t been Gogol who’d kissed Kim. That Gogol had nothing to do with it.” (p.96).

It is obvious that being Gogol is sharing a family burden. In a bid to shrug it aside permanently, Gogol gets it changed forever. In telling the judge “I hate the name Gogol…I have already hated it,” (102), he only seems to express his despise for his roots. What follows is a more pronounced endeavor of our protagonist into a life of profligate promiscuity that also suggests little reverence for his parents’ insistence on a life of morality and culture. The author observes how by changing his name, Gogol intends to assert his individuality as “…now that he’s Nikhil it’s easier to ignore his parents, to tune out their concerns and pleas.”(The Namesake, 105).

It is in this sense that Gogol’s crisis is not that of culture but of choice. It is his struggle to keep his action in consonance with his choices and not that of his parents that leads to his torn self. He feels guilty not in turning his back to his roots, but in denying his parents the pleasure of seeing him act in harmony with their desires. Ensnosed in being Nikhil, Gogol continues to drift away from the culture of his roots. The conflict between his choices and those of his parents deepens. Gradually it becomes established in the novel that despite their familial ties, there is nothing that can relate Nikhil to his earlier identity, or the lack of it.
In Gogol’s uneasiness hence is hidden a contumaciously restive nature – something that emanates from him having to bear the brunt for being born as the torch-bearer of his parents’ expectations. It is this restlessness within that makes him feel crippled and leaves him devoid of power of being able to pick, choose and decide. Compared to him, Janu, living on edge of her existence in an affluent Maraar family of in-laws, too is faced with a crisis related to choices. Having to bear the burden of carrying the boulder of being a conventional Keralite daughter-in-law, she is left clueless as to how to surmount her Sisyphean existence. Catapulted from being a breezy and chirpy Delhite, Janu is asked to lead a life of choicelessness.

Pitted against Gogol’s, Janu’s dilemma brings us to the basic contention of the paper. Surprisingly, it is the Kerala-born -Delhi-brought up Janu who seems more ‘confused’ and ‘conflicted’ than the supposedly American-born-confused-deshti, Gogol. Now Janu has moved within the travesty of her own country, from Kerala to Delhi for education and then from Delhi to Kerala for marriage. Within her own country, she feels torn, displaced and alienated. This makes us wonder whether it is the cultural gap that leaves Janu dislocated within her own country. With her Indian roots essentially intact, she appears to be as bewildered and challenged as seems Gogol in America. Ironically, Gogol, the Indian, is more rooted in America than Janu, the Keralite in Delhi or Janu – the Delhite in Kerala. Moreover, Gogol finds himself uprooted, disquieted and disturbed among his family members. Beyond the circumscribing four walls of the inside, he feels rooted, related and composed. Ironically enough, it is the apparently fragile, infatuating, deeply attached and romanticizing Janu who emerges as a triumphant figure in getting reunited with her lover Arjun and firmly in control of her daughter’s care while it is a seemingly objective and detached Gogol whose life seems to move like a rudderless drift subsequent to the death of his, the departure of his mother to India, his separation from his girlfriend Maxine and the easily forgettable matrimonial debacle he shares with Moushumi.

It is in this sense, that the term culture gets re-contextualized. Viewed thus, it seems that the term culture unmistakably seems related to the position of being in a position to choose, decide and believe. Both Janu and Gogol suffer from conflicted existence but not because they consort alien cultures but because their they seem to oscillate between being in varied positions. When they are in a position to decide, they feel rooted and related. Out of such equations however, they feel conflicted, torn and bewildered.

It is thus the presence or absence of power, position and authority that determines whether one finds oneself inside or outside the cultural comfort. Thus we find a Bengali Gogol assured and rooted in an alien American culture but ostensibly dislocated in the familiarity of his household. Similarly, Janu’s fate swings between her being rooted her losing the rootedness before it is finally regained. A Keralite by birth, she experiences the greatest alienation of her life in the quintessentially Keralite family of her in-laws. Again, it is the loss of power, and not that of affinity or culture that leads to her anguish, turbulent and consequent rebellion and eventual emancipation. In creating Gogol and Janu, it therefore seems that Jhumpa and Jaishree have provided fresh dimensions to the assumptions that beloningsness does not necessarily lie in being within the familiarity of one’s cultural fold. It is the extent of control one wrests over one’s environment that determines the extent of one’s rootedness or the lack of it.

VI. References

[7] Ibid., 229
[8] Jumppa Lahiri, The Namesake (New Delhi: HarperCollins Publishers India,2004), p. 4. All the subsequent references have been taken from the same edition of the text, hereafter cited with relevant page number(s) within parentheses.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Ibid.