

Mimicry, Hybridity and Navigation of the Third Space in *The Namesake*

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Abstract

Concentrating on the immigrant experience of Ashima, a first generation Diaspora, this research article traces her journey from an “other” (in the American culture) to a hybrid monster. Ashima indulges in the process of mimicry; embodies hybridity, accepts her in betweenness and becomes what her name means, a person “without borders, without a home of her own, a resident everywhere and nowhere” (Namesake 276). She creates a space (third space) for herself beyond the dichotomy of “Home” and “Foreign”, where her identity is continuously negotiated and reinvented. Engrossed in impermanence, unsettlement and dislocation, she accepts her hybrid identity and eulogizes her being - a product of both American and Indian culture. This implies that she accepts her ambivalent position, as she now is okay with the slippage between her identities.

Keywords: Cultural Difference; Hybridity; Mimicry; Space; Third Navigation.

Homi K. Bhabha derived his theory from Edward Said, Franz Fanon, Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida and others. His important contribution to the postcolonial theory is his concept of “Mimicry” and “Hybridity”. According to Bhabha, colonial encounter is not monolithic or unidirectional i.e. it is not an encounter where the colonizer colonized the native and their identities are stable, instead this encounter is a transaction between the colonized and the colonizer. This encounter is ambivalent and involves mimicry and reverse mimicry. Before Bhabha, mimicry was considered a negative term and those who were involved in the process of mimicry were laughed at. A mimic man was seen as a caricature of the master. However, Bhabha considered mimicry as a positive term. According to Bhabha, mimicry is empowering. In the process of colonization, when the colonized mimics his master, he empowers himself in this

process as he learns some aspects of the colonial power. When the native imitates the language, culture, habits, customs, politics of the colonizer he exhibits the hollowness of the symbolic power and becomes a threat to it. When the native imitates the colonizer, the mimicry is not just a simple repetition of the colonizer but the native does it with some innovations and differences that result in to his/her hybridity i.e. he/she becomes a hybrid. Homi K. Bhabha gives example of the Bible. When the Christian missionaries disseminated Christianity in India, the natives translated the Bible in their own way, which involved repetition with difference. Bible lost its originality in the repetition as some nuances were added to it.

Therefore, in the process of mimicry, the native repeats the colonizer but with some differences. As a result, he/she becomes a "hybrid" i.e. he/she becomes a hybridized native. He/she is neither pure native nor white. He/she is an anglicized native. Now he/she both refuses the colonial gaze and sees the problems in his/her own culture. He/she shows both deference and disobedience and becomes the mixture of both the cultures. Hybridity becomes an in-between space termed as "third space" by Bhabha a site where from resistance occurs, a space where the essentialist subject position and culture of colonizer and colonized is negotiated and subverted. Third space emerges as a space of productivity, which creates new possibilities of cultural meaning and questions the fixed binaries of culture and identity.

In her novel *The Namesake*, Jhumpa Lahiri centre stages the mimicry, hybridity, and inbetweenness of Ashima and the creation of "third space" by her. She encounters a totally alien culture due to migration. She is a first generation Diaspora who has spent nineteen years of her life in India, a country totally different (in terms of food, clothing, environment, season, culture, language, social norms) from the one she had migrated to after marrying Ashoke. When the novel opens, Ashima is pregnant (and is in America) and as in the concoction that she has been eating throughout her pregnancy, she continuously feels that something is missing from her life. Ashima draws a continuous comparison (in her mind) between her culture (Bengali culture) and American culture. She realizes the difference between the two in terms of expression of emotions, privacy norms, socialization, cultural norms etc. Ashima reflects on this void when she is on her bed in the maternity hospital, as she hears:

A man's voice: "I love you, sweetheart." words Ashima had neither heard nor expects to hear from her own husband; this is not how they are. It is the first time in her life she has slept alone,

surrounded by strangers; all her life she has slept either in a room with her parents, or with Ashoke at her side. She wishes the curtains were open, so that she could talk to the American women. Perhaps one of them has given birth before and can tell her what to expect but she had gathered that Americans in spite of their public declaration of affection, in spite of their miniskirts and bikinis, in spite of their hand - holding on the streets and lying on top of each other on the Cambridge Common, prefer their privacy. (Namesake 3)

Through an encounter with the culture that is different from her own, she learns some aspects of this foreign culture like privacy norms, which gradually becomes a part of her hybrid identity that emerges over the course of time. When Ashima is presented with food (in the maternity hospital) which contains chicken among other things, she is told not to eat the chicken, “Ashima would not have touched the chicken, even if permitted; Americans eat their chicken in its skin [Bengalis don’t eat chicken that way]” (Namesake 5). Ashima speaks in English with her nurse Patty. But when Patty asks her whether she is hoping to have a baby boy or baby girl Ashima replies “as long as there are ten finger and ten toe” (Namesake 7), Patty laughs and Ashima realizes that she has said ‘finger and toe’ instead of ‘fingers and toes’. She mimics English people and culture by speaking English but with difference as she has mixed Bengali expression in it “in Bengali, a finger can also mean fingers and a toe toes” (Namesake 7).

After giving birth to a child (in the hospital) Ashima’s experience regarding the naming of her son is totally different (culturally) from the one she would have experienced in India. Dr. Wilcox informs Ashima and Ashoke that they must name their son because a child can’t be discharged from the hospital without a birth certificate and a birth certificate needs a name, while in India:

An infant doesn’t really need a name. He needs to be fed and blessed, to be given some gold and silver, to be patted on the back after feedings and held carefully behind the neck. Name can wait. 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 their cousins who were not officially named until they were registered, at six or seven, in school. (Namesake 25)

This cultural void inculcates a feeling of fear, loneliness, alienation and

home sickness in her. Settling in a foreign land makes her experience dislocation, and dislocation leads to the cross-cultural encounter, which affects her life. She suffers anxiety, confusion and depression. This country, which seems cold to Ashima (like its weather) is devoid of love and her loved ones, so she takes refuge in her past (memories) back home. She reads and rereads the letters of her parents, cries softly in her bed, and continuously thinks about her family and her home on Amherst Street in Calcutta (where she imagines evening tea will have been served with Mari Gold biscuits, her father will be sketching and smoking, Rana will be reading, her mother will be untangling her hair at this time). These memories, evoked by past time, people and place are flushed by nostalgia and imagination. Memories of home haunt her present and augments her anguish of personal loss. Over a period, Ashima lost every person she had once known and loved, and those family members who are still alive seem dead somehow, lingering around her existence just as memories or voices on the phone.

After the birth of her son Gogol, Ashima enters in to another phase of her process of mimicry and ultimate hybridization. She bears the consequences of being a mother in a foreign land. She has to do everything on her own while taking care of her son, while back home she would have been assisted by her in-laws, her mother and aunts. Motherhood provides her with the courage to go out in this foreign land alone. With Gogol in his pram, she comes out of her house alone for the first time (to buy rice). Presence of Gogol saturates her fear of being alone in a foreign country and culture. Now she goes on her own to super markets, Cambridge Park, and other places with Gogol. Presence of Gogol reduces her social awkwardness. Strangers smile at her and often stop her to congratulate her and ask about her child (the child's gender, name, age, etc). Gogol's presence fulfills her emptiness and loneliness by affirming her connection with this new environment and surrounding.

When Ashima gets pregnant with her second child, Ashok and Ashima has decided the name of a boy and a girl prior to the birth of a child. They have learned, from the situations surrounding the birth of their first child, that in America a child needs a name before anything else. Ashoke and Ashima also decide to do away with the Bengali way of naming i.e. having a pet name and a good name in favour of the English way of naming a child i.e. having only a good name to avoid confusion. However, they shortened the good name of their daughter Sonali to a pet name Sonia creating a hybrid by mixing the two ways of naming cultures (India and America). They mimic the western way of naming but with a difference

i.e. inducing Bengali way of naming into it.

Gradually Ashima learns to adjust in this foreign land (America) i.e. she gets involved in the process of what Bhabha calls "Creative Mimicry" and over the years, Ashima assumes a hybrid identity. She makes both Bengali like dal, rice, lamb curry, biryani, fish, and American foods like and makes sandwiches, hamburgers, cooks turkey etc. Ashima learns to roast turkey but adds an Indian tang to it by rubbing garlic, cumin and cayenne on it (repetition with difference). She speaks both Bengali and English, she celebrates both Christmas and Durga Pujo, she makes both Bengali and American friends as she enlarges her friend circle from Bengali associates to the women working with her in the library, she yearns for the family togetherness and looks forward to it. She accepts the loneliness - living on your own, absence of children, and starts to accept the independence and the need of her children to keep distance from her. She accepts both the decision of her daughter to marry an American boy and her son's decision to divorce a Bengali woman. Ashima becomes a hybrid and this hybrid space becomes a site of resistance from where the essentialist notion of cultures and fixidity of binaries is questioned.

After the death of her husband, Ashima fully acknowledges her position (i.e. her in betweenness) - to be both here (in America) and there (in India), and nowhere. Ashima's total acknowledgement of her transnationality can be seen when she decides to sell the house, in which she had lived with Ashoke for twenty seven years and where she will always imagine her husband in her mind. This acknowledgement is further seen in her decision of spending six months in India with her younger brother Rana and six months in America with her children and Bengali friends. Ashima asserts her hybridity - her being the product of both the American and the Indian cultures, and her epistemic advantage as she's at the margin of both the cultures. As Bhabha puts it:

For me the importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace two original moments from which the third emerges, rather hybridity to me is the 'third space' which enables other position to emerge. This third space displaces the histories that constitute it, and sets up new structures of authority, new political initiatives, which are inadequately understood through received wisdom. (Rutherford 211)

Now at this point for the first time in her life, Ashima is not afraid of being alone and being on her own (travelling in a train, boarding plane, and going to strange places), America has taught her all these things. Ashima

is no longer the same Ashima who migrated to America thirty three years ago i.e. pure native. Now she possesses her social security card, American passport, driving license etc:

For thirty three years she missed her life in India. Now she will miss her job at the library, the women with whom she's worked. She will miss throwing parties. She will miss living with her daughter, the surprising companionship they have formed, going into Cambridge together to see old movies at the Brattle, teaching her to cook the food Sonia had complained of eating as a child. She will miss the opportunity to drive, as she sometimes does on her way home from library, to the University, past the engineering building where her husband once worked. She will miss the country in which she had grown to know and love her husband. (Namesake 279)

Ashima's life time longing to regain her lost home culminates into the creation of a different version of home. Now she inhabits a place (third space) beyond the dichotomy of home and foreign. For her, the idea of home is more conveyed in her being between the two places instead of being rooted in one, "where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion" (Location of Culture 1). Ashima has already overcome her fear of the changing designation of home and the accompanying nervousness about homelessness. Home is not the real geographical place located in some spatial territory, but a space she invents for herself embodied in impermanence, unsettlement and dislocation where she can continuously negotiate and reinvent her hybrid identity, as Ilan Kapoor argues that third space is a "non-dialectical space standing in between the binary structures of orientalist representations and imperial power" (Kapoor 566).

Ashima's happiness is now no longer connected to a place but to the people (her family, relatives and friends). She eulogizes her inbetweenness (both in terms of her identity, culture and geography) in spite of cultural and spatial barriers. Ashima becomes a hybridized native as she is a cultural, racial, linguistic, religious mixture who not only adopts the host culture (selectively) and is critical of her own culture but also shows both difference and disobedience to the dominant discourse of nationality, ethnicity, religion, culture etc. This hybridity creates a third space, which becomes the site of resistance.

While assimilating Ashima assumes a hybrid identity (embodied in multiculturalism, multilingualism, multinationalism) by continuously interrogating, questioning, negotiating, reinventing her identity, and subverting the ridged relationships between self and place. She both yearns (for the past life) and looks forward (to a new life). She embraces the metaphysics of multicultural flux and becomes what Bhabha terms as "Mimic-man". She suppresses a part of her native identity and adopts some aspects of the host culture which challenge the symbols of power of host culture, enriches her personality, empowers her and exhibits her resistance to any form of essentialization. As a result, Ashima occupies an ambivalent space by taking on the attributes of both the cultures (home and foreign culture) and forms an identity (hybrid identity) which does not place itself completely here (in American culture) or there (in Indian culture) i.e. it has traces of both the extremes of binary positions (home and foreign). In this novel, Jhumpa Lahiri presents a balanced representation of both cultures (American and Indian) by creating a diasporic space i.e. an in-between space, where Home - a familiar and secure territory (not a geographical one) lies where the meaning of cultural and political authority is negotiated and transnational identities (located in heterogeneity) emerge. Lahiri resists totalization (of Ashima in terms of identity) and produces other spaces of subaltern significance.

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