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The Ethnic Ghosts and “Coming of Age” of a Genre

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Abstract

The lives of immigrants are far from easy, even within a pluralistic society that highlights democracy, multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism. Individuals from ethnic minorities groups get segregated because of their language, culture as well as their physical features. Following the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s, the US has espoused official policies such as affirmative action and equal opportunities. But the official positions often belie the subtle tension that exists in contemporary America. Evidence of such racial ghosts is available in the literary works of a group of writers of ethnic origins who are voicing out their concerns before a mainstream audience. These writers are experimenting with their modes of writing, conjuring styles and stories from the cultures of their origins in order to create a new mode of expression. This experimental genre parallels the twentieth century oeuvre of bildungsromans and testifies a sign of maturity. This for me is a coming-of-age—a sign of maturity—that I have noticed in the Asian American Maxine Hong Kingston, Indian American Jhumpa Lahiri and Native American Leslie Marmon Silko. The choice of the term ‘coming of age’ is guided by the white anthropologists’ attempt to view different racial groups in ethnographic terms. The ghost genre critically engages with the racial debate while focusing their own stories of adopting to and adapting in a new culture.

Table of Content

Acknowledgement		i
Abstract		ii
Chapter 1	Introduction	1
Chapter 2	Race Relationship and the Cultural Mosaic in the US	10
Chapter 3	The Woman Warrior	18
Chapter 3.1	Introduction to the Novel	18
Chapter 3.2	You must not Tell Anyone	22
Chapter 3.3	What to be and not to be	25
Chapter 4	The Namesake	28
Chapter 4.1	Introduction to the Novel	28
Chapter 4.2	What to be and not to be	31
Chapter 5	Conclusion	34
Bibliography		38
Appendix	A Conversation with Jhumpa Lahiri	40

Chapter 1

Introduction

The great outcry for globalization and multiculturalism that has the world in its grip has made it easier for people of different cultures to come together in one place without having to declare war of invasion on each other; even though that has not always been the case. Living in homogeneous society in a cosmopolitan city often belies the racial tension that exists underneath; while the cultural mosaic of a cosmopolitan culture is made up of narratives of migration.

Historically human migration is determined by necessities such as food and security. The lure of better lives has made modern man to move from one part of the world to the other. The tale of the immigrants is full of struggle and compromises. It is easy, for example, to view London today as the curry capital of the world; but such a trophy had to be earned through hard work and dedication of a number of generations of South Asians who dared to cross the Kala Pani. Although an ethnic group has made itself available in the history of a mainstream culture, its status has to be defined through a number of individual stories. History is almost always told from the perspectives of the victors; even the stories of settlement were told from the people in power. Ethnic groups, therefore, were subjected to ethnic field notes, anthropological survey or demographic bar-coding. To come out of the discourse making system and appear as a people with stories is a sign of maturity. The literature produced by the second or third generation settlers who have opted to tell their tales of adoption of and adaptation to a new culture is

a sign of maturity. In a way, this type of writing can be characterized as a coming-of-age genre.

This is the case particularly in ‘postcolonial’ setting. UK seems to be crowded with migrants arriving from all over its former colonies in Asia and Africa. Germany has a rather large population of Muslims mostly from Afghanistan and Turkey. France has to deal with immigrants from their colonies in North Africa. The United States of America is, however, a different proposition. As a land of opportunities, it attracted migrant settlers of different ethnic origins: Asians, Africans, Europeans, and Latin Americans. The inflow of migrants, in fact, turned the native population strangers into their own land.

Literature mirrors the lives the writers see, they hear, they feel and they experience. Hence, the post Civil Rights Movement era in the 1960s in the US saw the growth of literary works that said more than just the struggle of the arrival; it spoke of the birth of the community, the growing of it, gradually towards maturity. Through the coming of age of an ethnic group, the writers and their characters begin their literary journey.

Any dictionary will define coming of age as something of a transition. Merriam-Webster defines it as the “the attainment of prominence, respectability, recognition, or maturity.” In other words growing up to the age when a person is considered as eligible to take control of one’s own as well as other’s life. It is not only the body but also the heart that matures. There is no fixed time or date when one matures though. The acceptance of the transition varies from place to place; form group to group. In many societies or tribes it is considered to be quite an important phenomenon, often celebrated through rites and rituals as suited to the beliefs and customs of that congregation. This

concept of coming of age is the phase that distinctly marks the adulthood of a person; in this phase the boys turn into men and the girls into women as they learn to take responsibilities of their own actions and to contribute to the advancements of their family as well as society. In the tribal situations, the men go out to support the clan or their immediate concerns, by joining hunting groups or a work group. The women become eligible for marriage and support households, bear and rear children for the posterity. It is the usual role distribution followed in almost every social arrangement, owing partially to the biological setup and partially to the power-play of the society. Avoiding this heated gender power-position debate, let us consider that the coming of age is equally important for both sexes, branding the changes that follow thenceforth.

There are various types of initiation rituals held in different communities, passing through which maturity is attained. These rituals may be painful, or quite pleasant. In both cases they are festive in nature. For example, in the Satere-Mawe tribe, the young men must put on a glove-like hand cover (made of wicker and filled with bullet ants) and must refrain from shouting for ten minutes. If they cry out, the ritual is conducted again (Mansuka). Quite a painful passage of rite! On the other hand, there are jovial celebrations of sweet sixteen or eighteenth birthdays that are very popular in the US and Europe; or the fifteenth year celebration of the Hispanics called the Kinsenyeta (or Quinceañera). These are usually observed with feasts and jovial celebrations. But however it is observed, the celebration highlights the fact that adulthood is a large leap in life, one that requires embracing responsibility and charges. The struggles of this transition are great and severe. They give rise to lots of sentimental issues and unprecedented feelings. The decision taken or rejected may turn out to be regretful ones.

The uncertainty of the adolescence tags along; so does the need for serious choices becoming burdens. The road not taken seems to have had the greener grass.

Literature has recorded such sentiments and feelings for ages. This kind of literature that accounts the developments and maturing of its protagonist and focuses on sharing the strife of adolescence, being neither a child nor an adult, is termed as *bildungsroman* or coming of age literature. These are traced more prominently in novels than in other genres of literature. To name a few of the numerous novels: Charles Dickens' novels, *Oliver Twist* (1837-39), *David Copperfield* (1849-50) and *Great Expectation* (1860-61); Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* (1847); Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights* (1847); Mark Twain's stories about the adventures of *Tom Sawyer* (1876) and *Huckleberry Finn* (1884); *Sons and Lovers* (1913) by D. H. Lawrence; *Of Human Bondage* (1915) by Somerset Maugham; *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) by James Joyce; and Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mocking Bird* (1960). All these novels, and more, reflect their respective ages and its adversities, focusing on the developments of a young mind swimming through hardship and adventure of their time. Besides, the process of their development in itself is a revolution. The concept of change and evolution is what maturing is all about. Jane Eyre, Oliver Twist, David Copperfield, Pip, Tom Sawyer, Paul and many other characters of the *bildungsroman* genre show the changing world around the growing characters, whose realization and ultimate coming of age offer the solace and hope for a better future world. The Industrial revolution, followed by the revolution in the fields of science and technology curved ways of evolution. Revolution is no uncommon phenomenon in history. This *bildungsroman* genre is such another revolution in the

literary field, reflecting the changes occurring in the world, perceived by growing minds. It is the growth of literature into a new form.

Bildungsroman had been quite a White-man-genre, dominating the Victorian and Modern Literary eras: the continental explorations, the revival of renaissance, the upsurge of belief in and demand for science and technology above religion, the modernist movement of fragmented structure and eventually the great depression of wars. The changing world made its way into literature by nature, awakening the existential queries of rights and demands for individuals had been arousing among people of different class, age and sex; and in the more recent years, when the racially discriminated population materialized from the dark pit of oppression, slavery and anthropological post mortem, the people of different races have joined the list. As revolts to stereotypes and mysticism, the ethnic minority epitomized the west and its development, and induces themselves into the mainstream literature. In the process they injected the western genres with their native trademarks. They adapted the postmodern idealism and curved their own pedestals in literature and history. In such they attempt to blend in, to assimilate with the new community that either sprung around them, as is the case for the Native Americans or has been adapted by them, having migrated from elsewhere. As they are growing amongst the alien others, they impart their stories. They write about their growing, the strife and struggle of not belonging wholly to either race. Thus, lately the trend of *bildungsroman* has been picked up by the minor writers of the ethnic minorities, who like their characters, are themselves struggling to make their mark in the mainstream literature (the metaphorical adult world). This new adaptation seems quite evident since the 1960s African American Civil Rights Movement. More ethnic minorities minor works,

especially of *bildungsroman*, have been published post 1960s. For example, Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* (1968), Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970), Maxine Hong Kingston's *Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* (1975), Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* (1977), Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street* (1984), Alex Haley's *Queen* (1993) and Jhumpa Lahiri's *Namesake* (2003); all these novels are founded on the basis of the coming of age of their protagonists. But these *bildungsroman* novels are not just a protagonist's dilemma of belonging to an age, but also the dilemma of belonging to multiple sects or communities. Their predecessors are doubtful about the Anglo-Americans. In case of the Asian-Americans, the doubt includes all Americans: Anglo, Native or Black. America is a land of many-coloured people. Anyone beyond one's own colour is an imposter, an outsider, the other or the 'ghost'.

The first image that comes to our mind on hearing the word ghost is a disembodied soul that looks pale and faded, often wearing white blankets or white clothes. It is often believed, as a superstition, that the liberated souls that do not cross over properly linger on the face of earth earning the name "Ghost". A ghost is an outcast in the land of the living, occupying space on others' territories. According to Kingston's version of the Chinese beliefs, anyone who is not a Chinese (and maybe Japanese) is termed with a word that somewhat means a ghost. Simone de Beauvoir argues in *The Second Sex* about the concept of "other" being dependant on the perception and not essentialism. In accordance to this logic, one race is a ghost for the other in a land of mixed ethnicity. The fear of the unknown leads to a process of mystification. At one time, the Asians were considered the mysterious people of the land of mystics. Unable to comprehend the cultures and customs of the Asians, the West depicted its oriental 'Other'

as mysterious. On the other hand, ignorant and unconcerned about the western culture, and eventually brutally being invaded, a large segment of the Asians (parts of which had kept quite aloof and rather like a forbidden kingdom) rejected and doubted them. With time and developments, these oriental 'Others' did come to live in each other's territories, setting multiculturalism in motion. Yet the preconceived notions, i.e. stereotypes, seem to dominate the inter-racial and intra-racial discourses that mystify race-relationship and make it appear like a luminous ghostly other. This paper considers these 'Other' concept as ghost, loosely drawn on Kingston's *Woman Warrior*. Kingston writes, "America has been full of machines and ghosts- Taxi Ghosts, Bus Ghosts, Police Ghosts, Meter Reader Ghosts, Tree Trimming Ghosts, Five-and-Dance Ghosts" (96-97).

When residing in a common territorial bound, these "ghosts" are viewed without any of the differences that the ethnic group might have, merely considering all outsiders to the racial group as aliens, condemning them as one whole group. This is especially the case with the ethnic minorities, who are viewed as one whole race by the dominant race; for example all the different tribes of the Native Americans are perceived with the same cultural and ritualistic findings. The Far-East or the Indian Sub-continent is categorized under fixed traits and traditions, inconsiderate of the several territorial, religious and cultural incongruities. The ethnic minorities in America arrive from all over the world, accompanied by their unique culture. Moreover, even, the histories of these ethnic minorities of America are completely different from one another, as well as from the American history. In her essay *Heterogeneity, Hybridity, Multiplicity: Marking Asian American Differences*, Lowe establishes that Asian-Americans are alone such a diversely heterogeneous community- since the migrants arriving are not just from one country but

from all across the largest continent in the world- that they should not be studied as one group but several. Simultaneously, their narrative origins are as much heterogeneous. The Native Americans have their tribal stories of origin and their struggle against the European invaders; the African Americans have their history of slavery and revolution; the Asian Americans look back to their days of hardship of immigration and resettlements. Notably, all these tribes, though commonly considered minor, form a most integral part of America and its history. So, it is also just fair that their stories be heard too. Literature has taken the charge to let them be heard, rather than being imposed with the Anglo culture on themselves. The novels, the poems, and the stories pour the tales that had remained veiled behind pride and privacy of the tribes and the prejudice and convenience of the White tribe. Thus, the secrets spill and writers bring forth the questions of existence. They attempt to carve out their legitimate space, and take the responsibility for their own rights and demands. It is typical that when a child matures, he or she claims a place among the other adults, the predecessors; simultaneously making themselves predecessor for their descendants. The hyphenated Americans thus have begun to create more history for their descendants, as well as incorporating it into the History that is to be read, so that it is no longer only the Anglo-Americans who decide the kind of history that is to be read and remembered. And here lies the thesis of this paper. This paper is to rummage through two Asian American novels namely, *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts* (1975) by Maxine Hong Kingston, *Namesake* (2003) by Jhumpa Lahiri, to evaluate the development process of the characters, the author and thereby the society, out of the blockage of nativism. It is a common phenomenon of cultural texts to expose the apparent opposition between

nativism and assimilation. However, the fact that the Asian-Americans are using the uprising bildungsroman genre to project themselves as maturing into more than fondlers in the literary field opens a new perception to the evaluation of the texts. This paper is a small scale attempt to explore how Asian American literature is moving in to build their space amidst the mainstream literature.

The choice of the Asian-American literature lies on the convenience of the researcher's awareness of the origin and culture of this periphery. The texts selected offer to allow insight into the circumstances of both sexes. It also allows perception of two different decades: the early era of revolution; and the more recent times. This should help the researcher to keep the research within the necessary petite range. The paper will explore, principally through the two concerned texts, referring back to other contemporary texts for references and collaboration. Certain theoretical essays have been used as references to understand the context of the migrants and the condition of the ethnic minorities in America, so as to authenticate the researcher's claims. The theories concerned are primarily Feminism, Post-Colonialism, and Cultural Studies of Racial and Ethnic Minorities. Some concepts of Post-Modernism and Psychoanalysis, being related to the concept of entree of the authors into a recent genre to prove their development have also made its way into the study. The role this paper can play in a wider range is that it can contribute to the genre study of *bildungsroman* novels extending into the Asian-American territory.

Chapter 2

Race Relationship and the Cultural Mosaic in the US

And of course, this multicultural approach saying that we simply live side by side and are happy about it, this approach has failed, utterly failed. (Angela Merkel)

Angela Merkel, the German Chancellor, shocks the world with her candid remarks in a parliamentary address on 17 October 2010. She talks of integration required to become a part of Germany; learning the German language being the top in the list of requirements. This is the same German Chancellor who was so excited about the success of new-German football team under the guidance of a coach of Turkish origin. She forgot her position and entered the locker room of the national football team to congratulate and shook hands with the “multikulti” stars. The bubble of the multiculturalism myth simply dissolved in thin air.

People like Angela Merkel make a study on race relationship pertinent. Although the focus of the research is the 1960s and the aftermath of the Civil Rights Movement that allowed many writers of ethnic origins to write for their rights, I start the Literature Review with Angela Merkel to suggest the currency of my topic. The ethnic majority feels threatened by a full-throttle multiculturalism that might marginalize them in their own country. Sometimes this fear is manipulated with political motifs just as the traditional tantriks once used the fear of ghosts and evil spirits.

Angela Merkel emphasizes on the immigrants to be ‘guests’. “They won’t stay,” she says, “sometime they will be gone. But that isn’t real.” The Muslims that are about

four millions in total around Germany, are now looked at with doubt as being terrorists, and thus the Muslims live with much apprehension of being misjudged (BBC News). Today, the second and third generations of the immigrants who had entered into Germany during the 1960s, live as a part of the German society. They form a cult that is popular as “Multikulti”. But in her speech Merkel has pretty much announced the death of the multikulti (BBC News).

Across the Atlantic Ocean, the Americans are setting up an opposite example. District 23, with a large Latino origin, has a choice between two Latino candidates for Mayor: Fancis Canseco, a Republican and Ciro Rodrigues, a Democrat. Each accepts his opportunity with pride and honour. The inhabitants, however, has a win-win situation. In either case, they get a Latino-originated Mayor. According to Professor Henry Flores of the Saint Mary’s University, the voters have a tendency to vote, not only by judging the qualities, but also the ethnic background (BBC News). However, in case of the 44th American President, Barrack Obama, who has a Kenyan paternal origin, the forces seem to have taken more than the race into account. The Civil Rights Movement, of which the African Americans were great stakeholders has eventually paid off, and Martin Luther King’s dream is finally realized. A “Black Man” has taken up the office to run the country. In a country with so much offered to the immigrants, the Multikulti has to be the banner with which to run. But the tension of cosmopolitan conflict has not died, despite the political endorsement on the neutralization. The questions now arise: Where does multiculturalism stand in America? How much does the ethnicity matter in the multicultural society of America? This paper attempts to explore just partially these

questions, but prior to proceeding with it, the origin of the multiculturalism in America must be understood.

Before Columbus landed on the shores of America, it was not any deserted piece of land. The inhabitants, now called Native Americans, occupied much of the lands in small tribes, for thousands of years. The Spanish and later the rest of the European invasion has almost wiped away the pre-European American existence. The explorers following Columbus' (1451-1506) first arrival in Puerto Rico in 1493, left behind deadly diseases (of those times) such as small and measles, which helped to reduce the Native American population, rapidly and in massive number, by the time settlements began to spring up by the 1600s (The History of America: Wikipedia). A new Europe came to life. An extension. A battlefield. Different Europeans snatched onto different parts around the east coast, extending from North to South. The Northern coast had thirteen English colonies. They had their advantages being a sea away. They were allowed to grow without much interference. But, eventually, the British pressed the colonies for taxes. Although the settlers in the Colonies were principally English, they received no extra privilege for it. They had no representation in the English parliament. On top of it, in the beginning of 1760s, they were demanded to pay taxes to the British Government. A revolution commenced. Headed by George Washington, along with other leaders like Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, the thirteen British colonies were led to freedom, forming the first thirteen states of America. Dominated by the descendants of the immigrants from Europe since the 15th century, the Native Americans began to lose their territories, and dilute their communities and culture due to the influence of the 'white' Americans (The History of America: Wikipedia).

The invasion did not end there. In the 19th century, with the westward expansion in progress, an Indian Removal act was passed in the 1830. The Native Indians were rounded up and put into reservations. Indifferent to the tribal origins, they were stacked within reservations. They were often forced to come round to accept the European-American cultural. Several Native Americans did eventually accept the White American ways (The History of America: Wikipedia). We see reflections of it in the literature as well. Tayo's mother and adoptive brother, Rocky, in Silko's *Ceremony* are both examples of Native Americans who integrated themselves with the white culture. The minds of the war veterans were manipulated as well; they turned into alcoholics. Emo, a veteran, get so delusional with his situation that he kills Harley and guides the white police to Tayo. Integration breaks the young people of the reservation apart. But Tayo, being an assimilated member, undertakes the series of ceremonies to rejuvenate the traditions of the tribe to become eligible for the tribe. He undertakes the initial and chooses to belong to the tribes. Louise Erdrich's *Tracks* (1988) is a novel portraying the fight of a group of people in a reservation to keep their land from being swept away by the White-Americans. There are those who stay loyal to the tribe, while others join the Anglo invasion and assimilate. Their traditions were in danger.

Revolution came in many guises. Literature was one. Momaday's *A House Made of Dawn* (1968) was one the earliest of the Native American Literature, and despite much criticism it was a successful piece. A quick follower to it was Silko's *Ceremony* (1977), Erdrich's *Love Medicine* (1984) and *Tracks* (1988). Thus, the writers from ethnic minorities are attempting to flow into the mainstream literature. In so much the picture

they bring forward of their world, is not the mysteries, but a justification for it, giving insight into the clan, an effort to allow the others to integrate.

The other ethnic minorities have attempted similar ventures. The other major population of ethnic minorities is the African-Americans. These are mostly the descendants of the African who were brought to American as slaves during the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries (African-American Literature: Wikipedia). Haley's *Roots*, traces back his families origin in America from Kunta Kinte, who was brought to America as a slave in 1767. It shows the line of descendants who eventually became a part of the American population. A large number of other writers surfaced out of the large extent of people who had become a part of the society they were enslaved in. The African-Americans led the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s. This movement ignited a series of other revolutions by the minor or underprivileged class of Americans. The feminist movement, the upsurge of the Native American writers, along with writers from other ethnicity and several other minority movements began to filter into the mainstream literary field (Rivkin and Ryan, p. 959).

The post revolution era brought a lot of promising artists and writers under the spotlight. Today, the African Americans are taking over a vast extent of the American culture. They have contributed to form new genres of songs and music and other art forms; for example hip hop, jazz, blues and raps, that are so successfully contaminating worldwide music and dance, originated from African American culture. A very famous African American example would be Michael Jackson, who was and still is claimed as the father of break-dance. Toni Morrison is an example of an experimental writer, who adapted the quite a postmodern aspect to her novels. She belongs to post movement era,

which coincides with the widespread influence of postmodernism in America. She combines genres of the mainstream with that which her community had. She mixes, for example in *The Bluest Eye*, story-telling with jazz and blue. Thus, in her own way she integrated her two worlds.

The Mexicans originated from the part of the America that was colonized by the Spanish. Over time, they gained independence and settled into what is today Mexico. Eventually they, like many other migrants, migrated for better chances and facilities to they migrated for better chances and facilities to USA. The generations that followed became part of the country, but not without the marked differences that they bear. Cisneros presents a Mexican-American society in *House on Mango Street* (1984). She portrays a Latino American neighbourhood in a Chicago Mexican ghetto, with a camera in the hands of the growing protagonist Esperanza. It is not only she but the whole community seen to be growing and developing in the snapshot chapters that the novel is divided into. It projects a Mexican-American girl, for whom life is not easily acceptable in her poor and alienated position. A shadow of rejection follows her across the years. When she grows up, she succumbs into her private little world, writing. This reflects the literary aspect of the minor-ethnic movement to gain mainstream acceptance; writing as an attempt to come out of the community cocoon, where the secret are hidden from others, veiled away to hide the “shame”.

The Asian Americans are no different from the other minority races in America. The first wave of Asians in America went to find work during the 1850s, soon adding up in population to work on the Transatlantic Project (Asian American: Wikipedia). A large number of the population had originated from the far-eastern Asian countries like China

and Japan. The World War II had changed the situation for the Japanese a lot, since Japan had been an arch enemy during the war. However, that did not stop the Asian migration. Economic and employment conditions in the highly populated Asian countries like China and India have much prompted the growing migration to America. But the first wave of Asian migrants had to struggle quite a lot, a glimpse of which can be seen in Brave Orchid's comparison of her immigration process to her sister Moon Orchid's one to America. "These new immigrants had it easy. On Ellis Island the people were thin after forty days at sea and no fancy luggage." (Kingston 115).

Lahiri's *Third and Final Continent* (2000) gives another insight to the difference in the arrival into American from Asia, rendered through the experiences of first the narrator and later his wife. The story tells a man's journey through migration; a whole life that has been a struggle to find a place of settlement; eventually integrating into the final continent, America.

We are American citizens now, so that we can collect social security when it is time. Though we visit Calcutta every few years, and bring back more drawstring pajamas and Darjeeling tea, we have decided to grow old here.

(Lahiri, *The Third and Final Continent*, p. 197)

The tide of Asian immigrants that splashed America eased access for foreigners. The flock continued, and today a large community of Asian has become an integral part of American population. As number of these minor-ethnic group increased, so did their demands for rights as members of the main body, and not and 'the other'.

Thus, with time, people from these minor-ethnic groups surfaced to make their marks. In a country, where the ISA and the RSA are controlled by one coloured-group out of the many-coloured-people, the suppressed will have to turn the hegemonic trend to make themselves heard. Thus the people of different colours have begun to take over bits by bits in all the fields. Martin Luther King Jr., Michael Jackson, Michael Jordan, Mike Tyson, Mohammad Ali, Jackie Chan, Jet Li, Bruce Lee, Kal Penn, Toni Morrison, Maxine Hong Kingston, Amy Tan, Jhumpa Lahiri, and several others have now stamped their marks in their respective fields of excellence. The revolution is sweeping by, bringing out more and more to share in the world of the White.

Chapter 3

The Woman Warrior

'Alienated from her mother culture, "alien" in the dominant culture, the woman of colour does not feel safe within life of her Self' (Anzadua 1021)

3.1 Introduction to the Novel

A very important canonical Chinese-American text, Kingston's *Woman Warrior* is usually referred to as a piece of assimilationist work of literature. It records the dilemma of alienation of a person living with a dual identity, where life at neither ends seem to be able to completely define her. *Woman Warrior* is a woman's tale of this seeking to belong and redefine herself. "I had to leave home to see the world logically, logic the new way of seeing" (Kingston 204). Lowe says in the light of the novel that "one of the most important stories of Asian American experience is about the process of receiving, refiguring and rewriting cultural traditions." This is because, the talk story that her mother filled the children with does not clearly explain the Chinese culture. It leaves them wondering and decoding: "perhaps women were once so dangerous that they had to have their feet bound" (Kingston 19). Thus, the second generation refigures and rewrites Chinese culture for themselves, often giving in to the stereotypical misunderstanding and prejudices they receive from the other races around them, especially the Anglo-Americans. The novel also brings up the conflict between the first generation immigrants, who are Chinese-born and the second generation American-born Chinese, represented by the mother-daughter clash of nativism and assimilation. The novel furthermore is a

gynotext, that is a novel (or any text) categorized as what Showalter termed as gynocritics, the writer or literature that is by women, for women and about women. And *Woman Warrior* is an exploration of a girl's life; it is a memoir of a girlhood amongst ghosts, as stamped by its subtitle. It is a girl's attempt to express and expose the multiplicity that surrounds her; to understand the alienation felt by the second generation. It is also the text of a mind and a body growing in a borderland, "shackled in the name of protection" (Anzaldua 1021). It is an exploration to find the "intrinsic nature buried under the personality imposed on" the narrator, the author and most other Chinese immigrants (Anzaldua 1021). In short, the novel is a feminist as well an ethnic text, and beyond the theory, it is fundamentally a bildungsroman or coming of age novel.

As a genre, the text is a memoir- a narrative composed from personal experiences ; an autobiography of a sort. Kingston combines fact with fiction and legends to weave the story. The conflict of the plot is the dual identity that a second generation immigrant, especially a female, has to suffer in America. It is divided into five parts, each narrating a separate story related to the life of the narrator. Since it is an autobiographical piece, the narrator is usually referred to as Kingston herself. Kingston, thus, is the girl who heard of her unnamed aunt and tries to give words to the aunt's silent protest of drowning herself into the community well. It is her mother who had broken through the Chinese traditions of bound feet and family imprisonment and became a doctor, unfortunately giving up the honour (like Kingston's father) to live in the Gold Mountain, America. It is her mother's sister who was abandoned by her husband for an American woman, and went crazy. It is Kingston, who grew out of shyness and marginality and up to success, fighting off the veiling shadows with the mighty sword of loud words. The text is so tangled with the

idea of a female status, that the coming of age theme cannot be studied but considering the feminist perspective of the otherness (Beauvoir), and social castration (Gillbert and Guber). Neither can this be justified without the link of the post colonial demand for reclaiming and reliving and redefining the origin (pre-colonial or pre-multicult). In psychoanalysis repression is a state that refers to the storing away, from the conscious mind, of certain unwanted distressing feelings, thoughts and memories, into the unconscious. *Woman Warrior* is an eruption of years of repressed ideas and thoughts injected into the mind of Kingston. Kingston is not alone in experiencing the effect of the multicultural and feminist evolution. She drags in other people's experiences to give a more general view. She is the projection of the repression of one and all. However, the text lays buried under the personal judgment and perspective, limiting the diversity of the experience. It is usually up to the reader to decode the underlying meaning that is spread out in several layers. In this, the text takes up the form of a post-modern work, granting the author access to the latest mainstream Anglo-American heights. As this paper proceeds, the researcher will explore these issues in this text to reveal the development of the characters and the author, and thereby the society.

The novel does not follow the conventional chronology of time and place, but drifts back and forth in fragments. The author's concepts, at times, seem clouded by prejudice and misunderstanding and misconception. "You can't entrust your voice to the Chinese, either; they want to capture your voice for their own use" (Kingston, 169). Such was the prejudice the young Kingston grew up with. "I don't see how they kept up a continuous culture for five thousand years. Maybe they didn't; maybe everyone makes it up as they go along" (185). Thus they misunderstood their parents' teachings and the

Chinese traditions. Deconstructing Kingston's narration in the novel, they have been brought up under strict parenting, who tried too hard to keep the traditions alive. They refused to fuse with the 'ghost' ways, and imposed their ways onto everything around. At one occasion, because a delivery man from the medicine shop mistakenly came to their house with a wrong delivery, the narrator's mother made the narrator, the eldest daughter, go to the shop to demand for sweets as compensation. This made the narrator feel like a beggar and embarrassed. Because the druggist ever since gave them free candy, the narrator's mother felt satisfied of teaching "the Druggist Ghosts a lesson in good manners (which is the same word as 'tradition')" (171).

Along with several job seeking Chinese men, narrator's father and uncles had boarded a ship and sailed to the Gold Mountain. He had left the career of a writer and scholar in China, and went through a hard life for a long time. After several years he called his wife to him, having decided against returning to China. Narrator's mother came to America as Brave Orchid, a name under which she had been a doctor back home. She left the dignified position and settled for a laundry work in the American Chinatown, taking care of a husband and six children. They had buried children back home and subsidizing them in memory, they have to be contented with raising "ghost-like" children.

The novel narrates the wars of the women, so little is revealed about Kingston's father. *China Men* (1980) is devoted to that arena. *Woman Warrior* is about the women that taught Kingston to grow out of her oblique vision of life and ripen as a responsible person. Though she talks a lot about the misogyny, the improperness and the superstitious legends of China, yet she ends with a revelation that helped her evolve. As Tayo went

through a series of ceremonies to gain entrance to his tribe, so did Kingston through these series of experiences and exposure she writes about.

3.2 'You Must Not Tell Anyone'

Kingston writes it all: the immobilization and the inspiration. The novel begins with an attack on the misogynist Chinese traditions and the defiance of the social reserve. But she finds purpose in the silence of the women. She looks back to the unnamed aunt, the ousted member of her father's family, who drowned herself and her child into the community drinking water. She finds vision in her mother's rich past. She finds strength in the Fa Mulan legend.

Kingston had grown up in Chinatown among other Chinese people, and being away from their real relatives referred to these neighbours as uncles or aunts. This is a typical immigrant situation, evident in most migrant novels. It shall be discussed later in terms of *Namesake* too. For Kingston, Chinatown was the China where girls are shames and burdens for the family. Among the Chinese, she had heard girls being called 'maggots'. It coincided with the legends she heard. She finds it discouraging. She had, like other Chinese girls experienced the feeling of being left behind at home merely because they were girls.

This brings us to the idea of social castration typically experienced by females. Being continually denied any respect or power, women, especially girls feel ousted and develop self-denial. So did Kingston. She could not sort the real from the fiction as a young girl. She began to consider herself as ugly, clumsy and worthless. She began on the wrong foot at kindergarten and flunked it. Probably because of her parents' strictness against assimilation, she was not filled in on the Anglo-American ways beyond the

Chinatown. This had been a disadvantage that she shared with all the other Chinese girls, along with the lack of voice. When she and other Chinese girls in class continually failed to produce audible sound, while children of other minor ethnic groups, like the African-Americans and the Japanese-Americans, could, she interpreted the situation: “The other Chinese girls did not talk either, so I knew the silence had to do something with being a Chinese girl” (166). She lived with that for a long time. She “quacked”, according to the several references in the novel. She did believe it though. And at one point she discovered an explanation for the habit. She had heard Chinese people talk quite loudly. Even her father wondered, “Why is it I can hear Chinese from blocks away? Is it that I understand the language? Or is it they talk loud?” as an attempt to feel accepted and less embarrassed among the Anglo-Americans, whose language is softer, the Chinese-American girls tend to speak softer. (171).

However, the degree of the softness, initiated from a non-speaking start ended up so low that they became nearly inaudible. This was a cultural conflict that had the alien culture win of the native one. Yet, Kingston must have eventually realized the fact that this feature of low-voiced speaking is as much cultural as individual, after she confronts futilely the “one girl who could not speak even in Chinese school.” Kingston grew older to individually develop the strength to speak up. (172). Similar to realizing that she was required to speak in class at times and also to pass kindergarten, she also understand that she was to ask for special-issue stamps from the postman; and she did. She also dared and spoke to and gave things to other people who were not Chinese. She at last blurted her mind out in front of her parents. She had been making lists of things to confess (like the Christian confession she had learnt about from the Christian girls from her school) to her

mother. These confessions were of such things that she had done in defiance to the culture and were against her mother's teachings. When she did say them out loud and several crucial ones all at once, she had acted child-like, putting up tantrums. But this was probably the last step in her initiation. As response to her accusation of being embarrassing, insensitive and unconcerned for the girls of the family, her mother removes the veil of misunderstanding from her view. Her mother reminds the narrator of the significant realities that she had chosen to ignore, while being governed by the legends and jokes. Her mother reminded her, the fact that the Chinese tradition is to say the opposite of the good, because they believe it is the way to keep away the evil, to fool them so they would not cause the children any harm. It is also customary for the Chinese to respect the elders under any circumstances. They believe the children are young so have little understanding of their own good. Children are kept under strict jurisdiction to avoid any wayward results. That is why her mother told about the unnamed aunt and her shameful act of adultery. She had meant to warn the girls from repeating her mistake; from becoming an ousted who would have nothing to do but die of shame. Hence the narrator realizes the need to get rid of her child sight and see clearly the reality of the responsibility she has to bear, for herself, for her family and for the society. She says that her aunt haunts her because she is telling on her aunt, yet she does not hold back.

As a family member, she finds it in her range of responsibility to offer paper to her aunt so she would not have to beg as a dead. She narrates her mother's past, in China, to project the greatness that she had sacrificed for them, the children she bore in America. She glorifies the mother she had wronged by misunderstanding and deserting. She evolves out of the cocoon having once more refigured the tales and once more with a new

interpretation of it all. Thus, she embraces her role as the odd one in the family and village who told on everyone. But in doing this, she unveils the secrets to society, beyond the silence, and beyond the reserve. Although her mother's instruction has always been not to talk to the outsiders, not to tell their stories to the ghosts, Kingston does tell them out loud. It is not just one but everyone that she attempts to reach through her talk story.

3.3 What to be and not to be

I went away to college-Berkeley in the sixties- and I studied and I marched to change the world, but I did not turn into a boy. I would have lied to bring myself back as a boy for my parents. (Kingston 47)

The first-generation American-born Chinese found it harder to feel accepted, especially in the mid twentieth century pre-revolution, with their sharp difference from the Anglo-Americans both in culture and appearance. Talking of appearances, let us consider for a moment what a typical American should be like? We usually define ourselves in accordance to the trend that goes around us. Lorde terms this phenomenon of consciousness as “mythical norm” (Lorde 855). In America, the mythical norm commonly circulated is: fair skin, blue eyes, blonde hair, thin, young (or young-looking), heterosexual, Christian, smart and financially secure (Lorde 855). Lopez adds more to these trends bringing up the 1806 case of Hudgins vs Wrights. The case was indeed slavery against freedom for the three generation Wright women. The racial tests included an inspection of the complexion, a flat nose or a wooly head of hair. It was the luck of those women that one of their hairs was straight. This single feature bought them their freedom. Even after two centuries away from this incident, equivalent racial test has not

changed itself. People still evaluate one another with their complexion or facial geography. Nevertheless the plunge into the multicultural socio-form, the far eastern remain the yellow monkey, the Africans remain the Black niggers and the Native Americans red-stained. Young Kingston's employer called her "nigger yellow" (Kingston 48), despite her nearly audible protests at the name. These ethnic minorities came to be considered homogenously: the group increasing the population of America.

The feeble voice wrapped in shyness and modesty has been explained already. The difficulty for the girl enhances not only for the interracial conflict but more so for the intra-racial pungency. As if being a polyvalent is not great enough to deal that a girl has to deal with the sexual conflict alongside too. The girls find it more necessitated to prove themselves in life, being continually referred to as disgraces to the family. Three daughters of one of the neighbours, with only one brother, were bought a typewriter by Kingston's mother so they could build careers as typist. Their father merely spoke of the possibility, showing no signs of coming forward to help the girls initiate. Kingston herself emerges out of her bindings, and improving her "child sight" (205), becomes a swordswoman, with only the difference in weapon. The pen has replaced the sword; the words have replaced the beheading and the gutting. The essentialism and existential had broken into a war within Kingston. She was a Chinese by descent as well as appearance, two phenomena she has no control over. The misogyny had made the experience bitterer for her, added over by the failure to break apart reality from fiction, truth from false. She trapped herself in a mysticism she nourished with prejudice and confusion. She is essentially a Chinese and must exist among the ghosts, the Anglo-Americans, the African-American, the Native-American and crowds of other immigrants. They will

always be ghosts, and so will Kingston, like many others who had given up the longstanding nativism and assimilated into the ghost ways. Kingston

Although, officially, she attained adulthood when she became 18 or so, but her true maturity came when she understood her mother and thereby resumed the connection that should have been there between the mother-daughter. Because the children have become ghost-like, they still fail to understand much of the emotion and culture the older Chinese generation insisted on. Even so, you can take a girl out of the Chinatown, but you cannot take the Chinatown out of a girl. Kingston still continues to figure out “what’s just my childhood, just my imagination, just my family, just the village, just movies, just living” (Kingston 205).

Chapter 4

The Namesake

4.1 Introduction to the Novel

Nikhil will live on, publicly celebrated, unlike Gogol, purposely hidden, legally diminished, now all but lost (Lahiri: Namesake 290)

One of the significant Indian-American writers, Jhumpa Lahiri is an interpreter of the Indian-American maladies of divided identities. All her works, the two anthologies of short stories and the novel *The Namesake* are focused on the dilemma of alienated or exiled characters, either in India, or in England or America. Namesake is a story of an Indian-American family of two respective generations, the Indian-born immigrants and the America-born Indians. The story begins in Central Square, in Cambridge, Massachusetts with the birth of Gogol Ganguli, and develops as he grows older. In the process he sheds himself when he changes his name, but even so the tag of it remains with him, no matter how repressed.

The novel mostly circulates around him and his life. It follows him around projecting his dilemma and confusions. The novel is a simple tale told, with occasional flashbacks and bits of stream of consciousness. The chronology of time frame is linear. The novel is commonly categorized under the dual-identity issue prominently existent in the second generation migrants. Gogol and his sister felt alienated in both among the Americans and the Indian (when they were obliged to visit India for trips), especially once they were no longer children. Surprisingly, Lahiri shows the gap that occurs even

among the immigrant children, whose parents are trying hard to keep up an Indian community around them joining with other, unrelated Indians. However, the concept of self-denial is strong. The second generation barely gets into relationship with anyone among the Indian migrants. The children usually live in separate states, go to different schools and are forced to come together on special occasions when the parents invite everyone for get together on birthdays, anniversaries or holidays.

For Gogol, the situation got worse as he was nearly at least five years older than the others. The only child, a girl named Moushumi Majumder, who was the closest in age to him (a year younger than him) was quite unfriendly and rather bookish, with a strong dislike for being dragged from UK to USA. Gogol forced his way to live an American life, getting in and out of relationships, even an uncommitted one with a married woman. He changes his name from Gogol to Nikhil to feel accepted. As an Indian with a very uncommon Italian name, he felt neither American, nor Indian. After he turns eighteen, he official changed his name no longer “afraid to be Nikhil, someone he doesn’t know (57).” He experiences a great deal of both the worlds, celebrates holidays of both religions, without the necessity to fully have faith in either. Both his parents were well-educated. They quickly got into the customs of the country making lesser mistakes in bringing up the children as time passed on. They succeeded in becoming Americanized, even after holding on to their fundamental cultures. They did not live surrounded by Indian families, but kept in touch, adopting new relations. Ashima and Ashoke are one of the oldest Indian couples witnessed in the novel. After decades of living in America, they are looked up to with respect and a source of belonging, “to collect them together, to organize the holiday, to convert it, to introduce the tradition to those who are new (286).”

The novel begins with the Ganguli family fighting to fit in and make a space for themselves in a foreign land, and ends with the achievement of more than just that space; it ends with the assimilation of the East to the West. It shows Gogol Ganguli growing amidst strangers, with a feeling of alienation, strengthened by the obscurity of his name and namesake; adapting to the world, passing through hardships and developments and eventually maturing into a true adult. Thus, among all the layers of identity crisis and hybridity, the story is an initiation process for the characters, to grow and develop and mature for the lives they become responsible for.

The characters in *Namesake* are not completely detached from the personal experiences of Lahiri herself. She shows the struggle of exile she had seen around her among the first generation immigrants. She had affected the attempts for an American-born Indian to blend into the American society; to become one of them. Other than the common affairs, the questions asked of origin or the mysteries of India or the basic stereotypical misconceptions about the Indians circulated among Americans, Lahiri had used certain untoward and unique experiences with her characters, especially the protagonist, Gogol. For example she herself had her pet-name turned to her official name at school, like Gogol (Appendix). She lingers on the dilemma of not belonging anywhere fully. In a journal published in *Newsweek*, she states, “What drew me to my craft was the desire to force the two worlds I occupied to mingle on the page as I was not brave enough, or mature enough, to allow in life” (Lahiri, *My Two Lives* 2). But like her characters, she did finally mature. Now, in her middle age, after spending 37 years in America she now considers the two cultures, belonging to the two parts of the hyphenated status she has, Indian-American, as siblings who co-exist because they have

been forced together by time. Consequently, they envy each other, compete with and excel over one another (depending on the situation), but, at the same time, are conscious about and respectful to the significance of one another. She admits that she is an Indian not because she has an Indian ancestry, or that she visited India, but because her parents steadfastly made sure the link existed, emphasizing on keeping up the practice. She is deliberately and necessarily an American to be able to run the race speeding passed her. And finally, she realizes, “As an adult I accept that a bicultural upbringing is a rich but imperfect thing” (Lahiri, *My Two Lives* 2).

4.2 What to be and not to be

He no longer looks forward to the holiday; he wants only to be on the other side of the season. His impatience makes him feel that he is incontrovertibly, finally, an adult.

(Lahiri, *Namesake*, 271)

A journey that began as a child must ended in evolving into an adult. Gogol, Ashoke, Ashima, Sonia- they all began their lives in America as children if not in age then in experience. Ashoke fought his way over the years, rejecting the American lifestyle, but often pretending it; feeling sorry for dragging his wife so far away from her family and loved ones. Ashima cried over being away and alone, especially while raising Gogol, an Indian child in exile among the American foreigners. Gogol and Sonia grew among Indians and Americans alike, regretting the duality and struggling to fit in. The conflict of polyvalency they faced had to be championed over. They eventually assimilated into the new culture and settled in the new land. They celebrated on Christmas eves and on

Thanksgivings. They spoke in English and had American friends, beside Indian ones. Despite all these adjustments, the first generation was bound to India, through visits or through connections with other Indians in America. Ashima still wore sari and Ashoke wore draw string pajamas and drank Darjeeling tea. The children rejected India much more stubbornly, pushing it back into their memory as nothing more than the land of their parents. They would not, once their parents are longer around them, keep in touch with their Indian honorary relatives. He admits to Ben's concern with remembering all the honorary relatives, "Don't worry, you'll never need to." The transformation for the second generation completes with the last string, their mother's departure. They would become more American then, growing into American adults rather than Indian ones, completing their coming of age.

For Gogol, the maturation process had not just been to become American but also to be enlightened, to grow into his name. He realizes he has truly become an adult not when he had changed his name to Nikhil from Gogol, not when he had affairs, and not even when he married; he realized he is an adult when he could pass holidays to resume his responsibilities, and return to his past to rebuild his path from the scratch. He finally begins to read Nikolai Gogol's *The Overcoat* (1842), a gift he could not value earlier. He learned the fact behind his father's expression "We have all come out of Gogol's *Overcoat*", laments over it, but not until he matured did he realize its true significance (Lahiri, *Namesake* 78). He refigures his life, returning not only to his own past but also to his father's; he digs his through the coincidental events that led to his present.

In so many ways, his family's life feels like a string of accidents, unforeseen, unintended, one incident begetting another...They were things for which it was impossible to prepare but which one spent a lifetime looking back at, trying to accept,

interpret, comprehend. Things that should never have happened, that seemed out of place and wrong, these were what prevailed, what endured, in the end. (286-287)

Gogol lost its existence under Nikhil, but the latter found its way to Gogol, the namesake, *The Overcoat*. Gogol, after his father's death begins to learn more responsibilities. While the Indian rituals and traditions had annoyed and embarrassed him in his youth, he follows every bit of it after his death. He does not even feel ashamed when his American girlfriend drops in. Surprisingly, he is irritated at the lack of feeling he sensed in her.

In Lahiri's *The Third and Final Continent* the narrator makes his journey over the world to end in America, becoming a part of its present, past and the future. Similarly, America becomes home for the Gangulis as well. When Ashima decides to sell their house and return to India, she feels that though the ashes of her husband has been scattered, according to rituals, into the Ganges River in India, the house will always be the place where her husband's memories will for evermore linger in her mind. America was a new birth for both her husband and herself, and growing older here they have actually gone through a new upbringing, coming of age amongst strangers turned friends; 'ghosts' turned friends.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

Remember that you and I made this journey together to a place where there was nowhere left to go. (The Namesake 187)

The Namesake begins where the *Woman Warrior* ends. Yet the beginning for either migrant had not been much different. Both mothers regret the migration and the fact that they had to bring up their children so far away from home and the loved ones. Eventually they did fit in, embracing the adopted life, but they did that on their own terms. They worked like many other American women, fending for themselves; even after they grew old. But they did not metamorphose into American avatars. Kingston's mother lived on with her beliefs and Gogol's mother kept her Indian appearance and customs. As they did so, they became a part of the legends that they have imparted on their children to keep them linked to the roots, the only difference is that they have re-grounded their origins. Being dispersed, the first generation attempts to pollinate a foreign ground to rebuild what they had left behind. What follows this is a cross-pollination that creates a new group altogether: a cross-breed or a hybrid; one that looks Asian, but is otherwise American. In their homes, they are kept in touch with the customs and rituals of the country their parents came from: China or India. The Chinese, Kingston's records, were sent to a Chinese school in the evening, besides being taught certain mannerisms and customs at home by their parents. When they come outside their houses, they encounter a very different world. There they learn American history, American mannerism, American cultures, American lifestyle and American stereotypes. Living between two lives,

eventually they come to a crossroad facing the necessity to choose. And they choose. They leave “home’ to become “barbarians”. They now become ghost-like. To return to life, these transformed ghosts must mature. They must learn to take up the responsibility for their two worlds and form balance between their dual identities.

In all these decades, life has changed; communities have dispersed, developed from first generation Asian-born Diaspora to second or even third generations of American-born Asians. Now it is no longer only the need for jobs that draws people towards America, but there are several other personal, emotional and even social reasons that drive people thousands of miles away from home among strangers, ghosts that have nothing in common with these new arrivals but the fact that they are all humans. Lowe’s arguments of heterogeneity and hybridity in the multiculturalism of Asia, strengthens as a diverse array of literature makes its way into the mainstream literature. The battle of being heard continues, and is a story that shall remain ever new for every newcomer in the respective communities. The stories were hidden beyond veils of reserve and stereotypes till a native voice was raised to share them with the world. Kingston says that she feels that her un-named aunt must be angry at her for “telling on her” (Kingston, 16). But she still tells it all. And not only does she tell the story that she heard, she tries to refigure it and create a defense for the aunt’s behavior. She begins by giving voice to the voiceless and continues spreading the Chinese voices that had always kept itself quite to differ from the loud noisy Chinese first generation people they saw around them.

Revolution is an integral part of a new birth, and the ethnic minority writers sweep past a revolution in the literary field, foregrounding the curtained backstage of the mainstream stage. With the induction of the talk story and other native elements and

language in the Western literary form, these striving authors create a new dimension for focus. Overshadowed by the great Anglo literary figures, these ethnic writers attempt to step beyond cloud and stand naked in the shower and storm, cleansing the mud heaved onto them for centuries. Once cleansed, the writers would emerge in the field fresh and claiming without question their rightful position in the history as well as the literature of mainstream America. These writers keep paving a clearer pathway for one another, and quite symbolically the bildungsroman genre demonstrates this development and growth. For the Asian-Americans, the struggle is newer than most other ethnic minority groups, besides being widely diverse and distinctive. The voice of revolts that they raise still lacks experience, still tampering with the notes to hit the loudest one. But the maturation process continues.

For the characters growing along with the novel, the maturing is the stage of growing out of the conflict of belonging and settling for the vicious race of survival. For the authors, this is the stage of realizing the responsibility that they have towards the tribes to which they are linked. They come out of the shells to justify their existence among the ghosts of the former Lords (the Anglo-Americans are mostly originated from the British, who had invaded and become Lords in many Asian countries) and induce themselves into their history. They have taken up pens to register and spread the talk-story had been locked within families, within tribes. Kingston and Lahiri, along with many other writers of ethnicity writers, resemble Ts'ai Yen. Hearing the barbarian reed play the tune of sorrow, she sang out loud her sad story of life. The barbarians did not know the language she spoke, but understood her heart of sadness. Like her, these authors living among the barbarians (the un-understood Americans and their customs) use the

tool of the barbarian muse to play their own song. With the postmodern era breaking free from conventions and structuralism, the ethnic writers had a scope to spread their zone. They wrote in the adapted language though, unlike Ts'ai Yen, but that is their barbarian reed pipe. Thus, the ethnicities mingle with one another, assimilating to form one. The development of the characters in the novels symbolizes the evolution of the authors into mature cross-breeds who at last learn to bring balance between the two lives. Simultaneously they begin to take up the role of producing literature in the sense that it had been produced for centuries: to mirror the lives, the tribes and generation. As Joyce's young artist Stephen or Dickens's Pip grow to realize their true goal, so does Kingston and Nikhil. The bildungsroman genre offers the same path of initiation for the characters, but each has a different story to tell at the other end, since their histories and their experiences vary. It is the same feeling of struggle, but against different enemies. As they fight their way through the obstacles and confusion, they pass through their initiation and become eligible for the responsibility of the tribe. Thus they come of age among two different worlds where one is the ghost for the other.

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Appendix

A Conversation with Jhumpa Lahiri

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

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

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

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

- ***The Namesake deals with Indian immigrants in the United States as well as their children. What, in your opinion, distinguishes the experiences of the former from the latter?***

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

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

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

It was always a question of allegiance, of choice. I wanted to please my parents and meet their expectations. I also wanted to meet the expectations of my American peers, and the expectations I

put on myself to fit into American society. It's a classic case of divided identity, but depending on the degree to which the immigrants in question are willing to assimilate, the conflict is more or less pronounced.

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

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

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

➤ ***Did you feel as rebellious as your character Gogol does early in your novel?***

Neither Gogol nor I were terribly rebellious, really. I suppose I, like Gogol, had my moments. But even ordinary things felt like a rebellion from my upbringing -- what I ate, what I listened to, whom I befriended, what I read. Things my American friends' parents wouldn't think to remark upon were always remarked upon by mine.

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

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

➤ ***You write frequently from the male point of view. Why?***

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

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

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

At the same time, there's something more forgiving about a novel. It's roomier, messier, more tolerant than a short story. The action isn't under a microscope in quite the same way. Short stories, now matter how complex, always have a ruthless, distilled quality. They require more control than novels. I hope I can continue to write both.

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

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

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

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

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