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The Concept of Re-Orientalism in *The Namesake*

Hasan Boynukara[1] Cengiz Karagöz[2]

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Abstract

This paper attempts to offer an original insight into Jhumpa Lahiri's novel The Namesake by exploring it in the light of Re-Orientalism which has arisen out of the outlooks of the South Asian writers. If Orientalism discussed by Edward Said means that there are negative stereotypical images in the Oriental nations and sharply determined lines between the West and the Orient, Re-Orientalism points to the perception that the diasporic South Asian writers seek to reflect backward, patriarchal and negative stereotypes about the South Asian culture and conventions in their literary texts. Lahiri's work needs to be analyzed through this perspective since she could be said to draw upon patriarchal tendencies that place Indian women within the frontiers of ignorance and minor status, Indian parents' lack of empathy for children's desires and generation gap due to the parents' obsession with clinging to unnecessarily rigid rules of Indian traditions. While the second generation Indian immigrants display manners that symbolize the signs of the Western ideals such as freedom of speech, gender equality and individual autonomy, their parents as the first generation Indian immigrants in America represent the backwardness, the fact of silencing women in the family as well as the construction of insurmountable barriers between themselves and modern thoughts.

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1. Introduction

Orientalism is often counted as among the most noted subjects which focus on the relationship between the West and the Orient in many respects. This discussion dates back to the publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism* which is one of the books that

[1] Prof. Dr., Namık Kemal University, e-mail: boynukarahasan@yahoo.com
[2] Lect. Dr., Namık Kemal University, e-mail: ckaragoz@nku.edu.tr

pioneered the outset of arguments concerned with postcolonialism. Said's claims may be thought to inspire many other noteworthy outlooks of other scholars that aim to deal with what resides in the Western nations' attempts to colonize the Oriental territories and the ways the Western societies employed during exploitation of the Oriental nations.

One of the most clear aspects of Orientalism is that it is based upon "binary divisions" which are claimed to distinguish the West from the Orient from all perspectives and which are believed to exist inherently in the Western and the Oriental nations (McLeod 2000: 40). These divisions are utilized by the Western societies in defining themselves and their differences from the Oriental peoples; in other words, the West means what the Orient does not possess or reflect. Said argues that the image of the Oriental peoples "was naturally reinforced by sciences (or discourses, as I prefer to call them) that took a backward and downward direction towards the species category, which was supposed also to be an ontogenetic explanation for every member of the species" (1979: 231). The basis of the Orientalist notions derives from discrimination, categorization and totalizing views that encompass each of the Oriental societies without any exception. Highlighting the Western nations' attitude to the Oriental people which sets out to generate stereotypes in *Orientalism*, Said claims that "this doctrine was fashioned out of the experiences of many Europeans, all of them converging upon such essential aspects of the Orient as the Oriental character, Oriental despotism, Oriental sensuality, and the like" (1979: 203). These fixed depictions of the Oriental peoples were produced by the Western nations and based on subjective interpretations and observations instead of any objective and sustainable evidence. In addition, "Orientalism's repeated emphasis on the barbaric primitivism of the Orient offered the European the justification for his civilizational mission and political dominance over the helpless 'native' of Africa or Asia" (Nayar 2015: 119). It was the so-called duty of the West to bring light, development and modern reasoning to the darker and backward territories that were called the Orient by invading these regions of the world with an emphasis on such false pretences.

Mentioning the concept of re-orientalism which is a term associated with diasporic South Asian writers, Nayar argues that:

> Orientalizing is now performed by the Orientals themselves, especially by diasporic Oriental authors from the South Asian region. Whereas in colonialism the outsider- European represented the Oriental, in 're-orientalism' the power of representation is in the hands of somebody who is at

> once insider and outsider – being a diasporic member of the Orient. Unlike the European these diasporic authors are not entirely alien to the cultures they represent (hence 'insiders'), and their identities are drawn from their Oriental ancestry and affiliations (2015: 131-132).

Orientalism has gained a new dimension since the authors from South Asian countries moved to the Western metropolises and had an analytical look upon their former homeland. One of the faulty approaches being observed in the writings of these literary figures is their "inclination to generalise with totalizations, sweeping statements appearing more the norm than the exception" (Lau 2009: 584). The handling of these oversimplified assumptions on the cultural structures of South Asian societies may amount to reaching erroneous conclusions which allow the Western reader to adopt falsified facts about South Asian nations. Also, these South Asian authors who aim to grab the attention of the Western readers in an implied manner by giving the impression of achieving complete authenticity and not desiring to be seen as native South Asian individuals harshly criticize obsolete and archaic conventions of South Asia while exhibiting evident approval and compliment of the Western standards such as "freedom of speech", "equality of individuals" and condemning "patriarchal" tendencies (Lau 2009: 585). The reader often witnesses the problem of generation gap which arises from the conflict between the modern values of the Western civilization and the conservative habits of the Oriental nations. Whereas the younger generations seek to adapt themselves to the recently growing trends and modern attitudes, the older ones prefer to remain in the frontiers of their ancestors' values and dedicate themselves to the preservation of their local customs.

The Namesake is one of the most well-known works among South Asian writers and portrays both the Western cultural tendencies and specific local traditions that are practiced by Indian families in America. Lahiri's work will be examined in the light of re-orientalism by referring to the ways it dominates the text.

2. Re-Orientalism and *The Namesake*

The Namesake is an Anglophone postcolonial novel which could be analysed in the light of re-orientalism by placing particular emphasis on the contrasting borders between American and Indian cultural patterns. The conception of re-orientalism may be said to come into view once it is recognized that the first generation Indian immigrants, especially women, plainly embody the central attributes of the Oriental culture whereas the second generation immigrants stand for the modern, open-minded and advanced insights that belong to the Western civilization. Lahiri seems to depict a marked account of the divided world that comprises the Western

civilization in which the reader repeatedly witnesses the dominance of freedom, tolerance, women who lack patriarchal restrictions and who have self-determination on the one hand and the Oriental visions which Indian traditions are an integral part and in which patriarchal domination, prejudice, intolerance and resistance to the new and modern ideas abound.

2.1. Patriarchal Indian Family

The reason the writer handles the subject matter of oppression of Indian women possibly goes back to "the case of *sati*" which means "the practice of the self-immolation of widows on the funeral pyres of their husbands" (Young 2005: 206) even though she does not make any evident reference to this practice. This tradition proves to render invalid Indian women's fundamental right to live after their husbands die and forces them to commit suicide in the cremation ceremonies of males. Mani raises the oppression and sufferings of Indian woman during these ceremonies in the following way:

> What is surprising, though, is that officials persisted in describing as victims even those women who resisted attempts to force them into the pyre. The annual reports of sati include many instances of women being coerced. Representations of such incidents, however, do not stress the resistance of widows but the barbarity of hindu males in their coercion. The widow thus nowhere appears as a subject. If she resisted, she was seen to be dominated by hindu men. If she conceded, she was considered victimized by religion. Despite the difficulty of ascertaining the meaning of "willing" satis, given the absence of women's voices and the historical and cultural variability of such terms as "agency" and "subjecthood," it seems to me that the volition of some widows can justifiably be seen as equal to the resistance of other (1987: 129).

This acknowledgement throws light on the fact that the agency of Indian women were negated by Indian males' tyranny, torture and strict pressure on widows which force them to be burnt in the flames on the dead bodies of their husbands. Concerning the basis of the practice of sati, Mani claims that "Official discourse on sati rested on three interlocking assumptions: the hegemony of religious texts, a total indigenous submission dictates, and the religious basis of sati. These assumptions shaped the nature and process of British intervention in outlawing the practice" (1987: 128). Even though it is not applied in India today as it is said to be illegal, this does not demonstrate that the position of Indian women is elevated to a much better and dignified status when compared to their male counterparts.

In the novel, what is relevant to the argument of patriarchal structure of Indian society is that Lahiri may be claimed to discuss that Indian wives' attitudes toward their husbands reveal a different mode of oppression and that the fact that sati is abolished in India does not mean that Indian men and women live in accordance with the same standards in their domestic life. Ashima is a Bengali female immigrant whose roots are Indian in basic terms and who is married to Ashoke. This couple has a son called Gogol and a daughter called Sonia, both of whom are born in America. The relationship between Ashima and her husband seems to be predicated upon a one-way dependency, authority, respect and self-sacrifice which Ashima always displays towards her husband. The writer relates that:

> When she calls out to Ashoke, she doesn't say his name. Ashima never thinks of her husband's name when she thinks of her husband, even though she knows perfectly well what it is. She has adopted his surname but refuses, for propriety's sake, to utter his first. It's not the type of thing Bengali wives do. Like a kiss or caress in a Hindi movie, a husband's name is something intimate and therefore unspoken, clearly patched over (Lahiri 2004: 2)

Through the narration of this Bengali tradition, Lahiri probably conveys the idea that Indian women lack even the freedom of uttering their husbands' names openly in their calling and that such an attitude is undoubtedly condemned in Indian society; however, her husband does not have to comply with such a rule and has the right to call her name openly whenever he wants to call Ashima. In a similar way, the authority of Ashima's husband could be traced when the letter from India in which a name for the child is written by Ashima's grandmother does not arrive in America. Ashoke decides to name the child Gogol without asking his wife's opinion as regards whether she desires such a name for their child or she prefers to give another name to the child. The writer attempts to reveal that Ashima consents to her husband's decision without any complaint and objection as a typical Indian wife whose opinion about anything does not carry any significance.

Her self-devotion to her husband becomes evident once it is observed that the reason why she leaves her homeland and immigrates to America is mainly because she feels it crucial to become a loyal wife to her husband and live with him in America where her husband has a career. Ashima leaves her grandparents, parents, relatives and friends behind in India and decides to continue her life in a foreign land in which she does not have any relatives and close friends. Before deciding to settle in America, she is possibly aware of the fact that she will suffer from being lonely in an alien

country in which she cannot share her problems frankly with her husband whose name she is not allowed to call out because of their patriarchal customs. Alfonso-Forero makes it clear that "The distress she feels as a result of her foreignness, which predates her pregnancy, seems insurmountable. Ashima cannot imagine raising a child so far from her homeland, away from her family and friends ..." (2007: 855). Lahiri is very likely to present Ashima as an Indian female who is persistently in need of her family members and indigenous connections whose absence turns her into a powerless and depressed person. In other words, she is reflected as an Indian wife and mother whose self-reliance and self-sufficiency are rarely seen in the novel. In the novel, her anxiety and the feeling of loneliness are narrated as follows:

> Without a single grandparent or parent or uncle or aunt at her side, the baby's birth, like most everything else in America, feels somehow haphazard, only half true. As she strokes and suckles and studies her son, she can't help but pity him. She has never known a person entering the world so alone, so deprived (Lahiri 2004: 24-25).

Though she has a healthy son and experiences the feeling of motherhood that makes probably every woman taste the highest pleasure in the world, she cannot get the utmost satisfaction of this because the fear and boredom of being very remote from her family members prevent her from reaching the full delight of being a mother. She becomes concerned about even her son who she thinks will grow in a foreign setting in which none of his ancestors and grandparents live and who will not be able to absorb the real implications and essence of their native civilization.

In the beliefs and perception of the Indians, an acutely drawn border can be recognized between the "home" and the outer "world" both of which evoke totally contrasting meanings for Indian individuals since the realm of the "home" which "must be unaffected by the profane activities of the material world" encompasses "one's inner spiritual self, one's true identity" and represents "woman" while the "world" occupies "the domain of the material" and "a treacherous terrain of the pursuit of material interests" (Chatterjee 1989: 624). Considering this fact, Lahiri treats the association of Indian women with their home in such a way that Indian wives in the novel restrict their lives mostly to the frontiers of their home and spend their time preparing meals for their husbands, washing the dishes and cleaning instead of participating in outdoor activities. When it is taken into account that Indian female immigrants in America, particularly the first generation ones, set up their lives in a foreign territory and building their homes in this unfamiliarity, it appears that their sense of the outside world becomes doubly critical and

considerable. The attempts of these Indian women to retain the borders between their homes and the outside world gain more significance and priority because of being surrounded by the dominant Western culture in America and the vast distance from their native cultural values and ancestors.

2.2. Conflicts between Generations

In *The Namesake*, the first generation Indian female immigrants' tendency to confine themselves to the borders of their homes and their persistent resistance to change, modern thoughts practices, freedom and outdoor activities is criticized or insulted by their children who absorb the Western cultural norms almost in all respects and who try to associate themselves with the Western civilization as the second generation Indian immigrants in America. For instance, the author exposes the feelings that pass through the mind of Moushumi who is one of the second generation female Indian immigrants and a well-educated girl and who openly objects to her mother's avoidance of the outside world in the following way: "For even after thirty-two tears abroad, in England and now in America, her mother does not know how to drive, does not have job, does not know the difference between a checking and a savings account" (2004: 247). In some sense, she complains of her mother's so-called ignorance and incompetence despite of living for long years in the Western countries and thus implying that Indian women try to maintain their lives only within the limitations of a narrow worldview rather than improving their skills in harmony with the development and technological progress of the Western world. On the other hand, the novel also conveys what Moushumi thinks about herself: "And yet she is a perfectly intelligent woman, was an honors student in philology at Presidency College before she was married off at twenty-two" (2004: 247). While denouncing the ways her mother deals with the recent matters and developments in social and working life as well as technology, Moushumi praises her virtues such as education and intellectual skills that make her more superior than her mother and that terminates her dependency on her husband.

It is also narrated in the novel that Moushumi challenges the broadly accepted traditional and patriarchal norms of Indian nation by refusing to adopt her husband's surname after marriage. When she gets married with Ashima's son Gogol Ganguli, she does not change her surname as it is underlined in the novel:

> Only she is not Mrs. Ganguli. Moushumi has kept her last name. She doesn't adopt Ganguli, not even with a hyphen. Her own last name, Mazoomdar, is already a mouthful … But the thought of changing her last name to Ganguli has never crossed Moushumi's mind. When relatives from India continue to

> address letters and cards to "Mrs. Moushumi Ganguli," she will shake her head and sigh (2004: 227).

The narrative uncovers the fact that adopting her husband's surname for an Indian wife is of central significance to the basic necessity of a marriage while pointing out how Moushumi ignores such a deep-rooted tradition and her relatives' potential disapproval. Indeed, she desires to demonstrate her lack of dependence on her husband and the possibility of living with her own surname even after marriage. As an independent woman who needs to dispense with the shade and domination of her husband, Moushumi seeks to display that a wife could be successful and strong enough in her career without changing her surname after marriage.

Arranged marriages of Indian culture are among the subject matters of the novel which the writer questions and implicitly disapproves of when compared to the Western conventions and tolerance. The marriage of Gogol's mother and father exemplifies such a marriage in which it is stressed that "It was only after the betrothal that she had learned his name" (2004: 9). This type of marriage is reflected as the one which silences the preferences of marrying young individuals and which foregrounds the interests of the elder ones between families. Lahiri relates Gogol's opinion about his parents' arranged marriage in the following lines: "To him the terms his parents' marriage are something at once unthinkable and unremarkable; nearly all their friends and relatives had been married in the same way" (2004: 138). As is possibly known, arranged marriages in India are implemented only through parents' decisions and approval without asking youngsters' feelings, which stands in stark contrast to the ways marriages are achieved in the Western countries. Through their love affairs in which they meet their partners and break up freely, the second generation Indian immigrants try to prove that America, unlike India, offers more freedom and opportunities before marriages. As opposed to strict Indian conventions in arranged marriages, the Western world allows young people to meet their partners, go out with them, spend time comfortably and even share the same house before marriage. To illustrate, before marrying Gogol, Moushumi experiences numerous love affairs with men who are "French for the most part, but also German, Persian, Italian, Lebanese" (Lahiri 2004: 215). Her freedom in America can be observed to be at odds with Indian conventions that forbid such relations between partners before marriage. The writer imparts that "From earliest girlhood, she says, she had been determined not to allow her parents to have a hand in her marriage. She had always been admonished not to marry an American …" (Lahiri 2004: 212-213). When it comes to the thoughts of the second generation immigrants on their

parents' intervention in their marriage, the fact that Indian parents want their children to marry not partners from foreign races but from their own race underlines these parents' meaningless opposition to interracial marriages and their lack of respect for their children's self-determination. For the second generation immigrants, their parents' insistence on trying to inhibit their marriage with partners who belong to other races appears as a pointless effort to protect Indian racial line through bothering their children with warning them all the time.

Concerning the relationship between parents and their children from the viewpoint of Indian and American cultural norms, the writer probably holds the notion that Western parents get on well with their children and can have communication that brings to mind friendship whereas Indian parents establish intractable and unsettling walls between themselves and their children who do not feel comfortable enough to share their secrets and problems with them. Before meeting and marrying Moushumi, Gogol has a love affair with a girlfriend called Maxine who comes from Europe and introduces her parents to him. What makes Gogol astonished by Maxine's parents is that their relationship and dialogues with their daughter involve free speech that is expressed with relief and respect. Gogol seems to admire the relationship between Maxine and her parents as it is stressed in the novel: "Gogol is unaccustomed to this sort of talk at mealtimes, to the indulgent ritual of the lingering meal, and the pleasant aftermath of bottles and crumbs and empty glasses that clutter the table" (Lahiri 2004: 134). What catches the fancy of Gogol is the fact that Maxine's parents permit their daughter and him to eat or drink whatever they want without any limitations. This indulgence prevents the meal times from being only moments in which the parents and their children like Gogol and his parents fulfill a formality by meeting their nutritional needs. Sounds of glasses and bottles and conversations between each other which extend the meal time become really pleasing for Gogol. The novel reveals how much Gogol is surprised by the ways "Maxine emulates her parents, how much she respects their tastes and their ways. At the dinner table she argues with them about books and paintings and people they know in common the way one might argue with a friend" (Lahiri 2004: 138). His sense of astonishment is caused by the fact that he is not accustomed to such relations in his family where it is not found pertinent to speak openly each subject with his parents according to Indian customs. When he observes the dialogues between Maxine and her parents during his stay in Maxine's house, he remembers the uneasiness and restrictions he feels whenever he spends time with his parents. This fact is told in the novel as follows: "There is none of the exasperation he feels with his own parents.

No sense of obligation. Unlike his parents, they pressure her to do nothing, and yet she lives faithfully, happily, at their side" (Lahiri 2004: 138).

In the novel, Indian parents' preoccupation with certain details that they try to sustain in their relations under the discourse of respect, authority and customs is one of the noticeable points which the second generation immigrants like Gogol approach with discomfort and anger. To illustrate, the writer relates that:

> On the way to Massachusetts, he tells her things he figures she should know in advance – that they will not be able to touch or kiss each other in front of his parents, that there will be no wine with lunch (2004: 145).

Such a truth proves that certain social parameters in Gogol's family and their local culture differ greatly from those of Maxine's family. In front of Indian parents, behaving with comfort and intimation is not allowed. Couples have to preserve a great deal of distance between themselves in order to prove their respect for the parents. What Gogol suggests Maxine in an implicit way is that she should be aware that, unlike the Western culture, the cultural norms which guide the family relations of Indians inhibit behaving with comfort and freedom when one spends time with elders in the family. Maxine finds such rules pointless as the novel conveys it:

> The restrictions amuse her; she sees them as a single afternoon's challenge, an anomaly never to be repeated. She does not associate him with his parents' habits; she cannot believe that she is to be the first girlfriend he's ever brought home (2004: 146).

Considering that Gogol and she can stay at her home even when her parents are away for days or weeks, Maxine is astonished at the presence of such restraint in a family. She also cannot believe that Gogol lives in such family atmosphere as he indulges in individual freedom and comfort that America offers him. She discerns that Gogol is different from his parents in many respects in that he feels uncomfortable and ashamed of his parents' manners. Even though Gogol's parents make preparations for Maxine and Gogol's mother prepares special Indian foods for their guest, the family atmosphere appears not as comfortable and intimate as the one in Maxine's home. As the writer puts it, "His parents are diffident about Maxine, at first keeping their distance, not boisterous as they typically are around their Bengali friends… But Maxine is immune to their awkwardness, drawing them out, devoting her to them fully ..." (2004: 148). Unlike long and reassuring conversations as well as friendly attitudes, gravity pervades the meal time. Gogol's parents do not treat Maxine warmly as they do their countrymen in America, probably because she

belongs to the Western world. While Maxine leaves, she keeps on behaving them in a friendly way, which is reflected in the narrative: "In the driveway, there are hugs and kisses good-bye, initiated by Maxine, his parents reciprocating clumsily" (2004: 150). Possibly, neither Gogol nor Maxine take pleasure in the visit and meals due to the lack of engrossing conversations and exchanging ideas about any subjects such as books, films, music and others. The conversations between them generally involve the questions that are asked to know each other in the phase of acquainting.

After a while, Ashima thinks that she cannot approve of their marriage as it is told in the novel: "Though she'd been polite enough the one time Gogol had brought Maxine to the house, Ashima doesn't want her for a daughter-in-law. She'd been startled that Maxine had addressed her as Ashima, and her husband as Ashoke" (2004: 166). Lahiri portrays a typical Indian parent who is disturbed by a teenager's addressing her with her name instead of using an expression that includes marks of respect. Ashima seems not to recognize that each society has its own social norms that govern the family relations and that are naturally different from others. Far from tolerating such minor differences in attitudes between cultures, Ashima represents Indian parents who reach judgement about people from other nations through the lens of their rigid principles in Indian culture. This can also be interpreted as her tendency to preserve the racial and cultural frontiers of Bengali against the penetration of the Western values. Ashima is reflected as an Indian parent who closes herself to having the chance to meet different cultural values in the Western land.

Lahiri offers two opposing family patterns one of which belongs to the Western civilization in which mutual understanding, intimate relations and outspoken opinions dominate the bonds with parents and the other of which is composed of a family atmosphere in which there are silenced and oppressed children who worry about facing the strict and offensive reactions of their parents before speaking something. As opposed to the American family life which grants happiness and trust to children, the ambience of Indian families brings about merely generation gap between parents and children who cannot find any cosy relationship but merely anxiety and cold contact which deepens the lack of communication.

3. Conclusion

The Namesake could be interpreted through the discourse of Re-Orientalism which Lahiri can be said to employ via the patriarchal relations in Indian families and generation gap between the first generation Indian parents and their second generation children. Through the first generation female immigrants, the writer tends to treat Indian women as the ones that are silenced and reduced to a minor

status by their husbands. They lag behind the recent requirement of the present period by confining themselves to their homes and resigning themselves to the dominant roles of their husbands. As for the relations between Indian parents and their children, the writer seems to imply the idea that Indian parents put unnecessary pressure on their children in order to impose the local customs on them while the Western families incorporate free speech, tolerance, lack of generation gap and happiness. The second generation immigrants indeed are inclined to adopt the Western ideals and exhibit an apparent turn away from the so-called backward structure of Indian culture. In this novel, Lahiri might be claimed to be one of the diasporic Indian women writers who often make the mistake of producing stereotypical images about Indian culture and civilization by means of reflecting specific parts of Indian traditions in such a way that can enable the reader to have totalizing views on India and the South Asian continent.

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