

# Study on the Cross-cultural Conflict Phenomenon and Coping strategies in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*

Xiaopei Lv

Xi'an Petroleum University, Xi'an City, Shaanxi Province, 710000

**Abstract:** In recent years, with the in-depth development of globalization, the cross-cultural communication between the East and the West is increasing. However, the differences in cultural background and historical tradition between the East and the West lead to the great differences in social values, thinking patterns and behavior norms between the East and the West, which leads to the emergence of cultural conflicts in cross-cultural communication and brings adverse effects on cross-cultural communication activities. Therefore, in this study, the author analyzes the cultural works of *The Namesake* by Jhumpa Lahiri, and analyzes the cross-cultural conflicts. Finally, by analyzing the phenomenon of cross-cultural conflict and coping strategies, the paper concludes that only by strengthening communication and cooperation on the basis of seeking common ground while reserving differences can the East and the West effectively avoid the phenomenon of cultural conflict in cross-cultural communication.

**KeyWords:** Jhumpa Lahiri; *The Namesake*; cross-cultural conflict phenomenon; coping strategies

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Research Background

In recent years, with the in-depth development of globalization, the cross-cultural communication between the East and the West is increasing. However, the differences in cultural background and historical tradition between the East and the West lead to the great differences in social values, thinking patterns and behavior norms between the East and the West, which leads to the emergence of cultural conflicts in cross-cultural communication and brings adverse effects on cross-cultural communication activities. Therefore, in this study, the author analyzes the cultural works of *The Namesake* by Jhumpa Lahiri<sup>[1]</sup>, and analyzes the cross-cultural conflicts.

### 1.2 Purpose and Significance of the Study

With the advancement of world integration, the wave of globalization is impacting on politics, economy, culture and other fields. The establishment of the World Trade Organization, the prosperity of immigration and the increase of Confucius institutes are all remarkable manifestation of globalization. Nowadays, international exchanges have been increasingly frequent, and cross-cultural communication has become a normal life. However, with the communication and collision between different cultures, conflicts also follow, and the improper handling of conflicts will not only affect the harmonious interpersonal relationship and the normal work and learning, but also seriously affect the international image of a country. Therefore, it is necessary and urgent to make an in-depth discussion and research on cross-cultural conflicts. How to effectively alleviate and reduce cultural conflicts and greatly benefit cross-cultural communication is a problem that the academic circles at home and abroad have been committed to studying. The research scope of cross-cultural communication in China is not wide enough, mainly focusing on the field of teaching Chinese as a foreign language and foreign language education, and not paying enough attention to the aspect of cultural conflict. In addition, it has a late start and a short development history, so there are few research achievements. Based on the case of cross-cultural conflict in the novel *The Namesake* by Jhumpa Lahiri, this paper makes an in-depth analysis and exploration of the cultural conflict in cross-cultural communication, then further analyzes the impact of cultural conflict on cross-cultural communication activities, and puts forward relevant coping strategies on the conflict issues.

The mitigation and reasonable solution of cultural conflict is not only conducive to the smooth progress of cross-cultural communication, but also conducive to the establishment of the harmonious relationship between the two sides of communication. It has important practical significance and reference function for future cross-cultural conflict events, and also has a good guidance for cross-cultural communicators, which is the significance and value of this study.

### 1.3 An Overview of Cross-cultural Conflict

Cross-cultural conflict is one of the basic forms of social conflict. Cross-cultural conflict refers to the process in which different forms of culture or cultural elements are mutually opposed and mutually exclusive. Jonathan H. Turner defines it as a conflict caused by "the contradictory cultural values and belief differences between people".<sup>[2]</sup>

cross-cultural conflict refers to the state of mutual opposition, mutual exclusion, mutual contradiction and mutual negation between different cultures and subcultures. The result of cross-cultural conflict may be cultural integration, cultural substitution, or

the separation of two or more cultures, declaring the failure of cultural contact<sup>[3]</sup>. Cultural conflicts are generally carried out in mental, emotional, ideological and other spiritual fields. The result is that people change unconsciously, and cultural conflicts are intrinsic. Culture is the core of ideology, and the conflict of culture is often manifested in the conflict of ideology.

## **2. An Analysis of Cross-cultural Conflict Phenomenon in The Namesake**

### **2.1 Conflict in Physical Culture**

Physical culture influences people's communication behavior imperceptibly, including various aspects of social life, such as clothing, food, housing and transportation<sup>[4]</sup>. In *The Namesake*, the conflict of physical culture mainly involves in the aspect of diet and clothing.

### **2.2 Conflict in Values of Name**

Indian culture is very particular about names. In India, a wife's surname follows her husbands, and there is a taboo against giving names. Husband and wife should not call each other by their first name. Even in an emergency, a wife should not call her husband's name. For this reason, Ashima did not call her husband's name when she was about to give birth and was in great pain. "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". The taboo of calling each other's name directly is closely related to religious belief. Therefore, this taboo is very common in India and deeply rooted in people's minds. This makes the first generation of immigrants, Ashima and Ashoke, adhere to this taboo even when they are abroad. However, in the second generation of immigrants, the taboo of name calling between husband and wife is not compatible with the culture advocated by the United States. Moushumi thought this taboo was incredible. She not only called Gogol's name directly, but also didn't follow her husband's surname after she got married. After her marriage, she kept her family name and did not approve of being called "Mrs. Ganguli". She still used her original name to write about French feminist theory in prestigious academic journals.

India attaches great importance to the name and is very particular about naming, which is related to religious thought. In the Indian state of Bengal, everyone usually has two names, one is a pet name and the other is a good name. In Bengali the world for pet name is *daknam*, meaning, literally, the name by which one is called, by friends, family, and other intimates, at home and in other private, unguarded moments. A good name is used in public, appearing on envelopes, diplomas, in telephone book and in all other public places. It represents respect and noble quality. In India, naming is a very important event, and there is also a naming ceremony.

### **2.3 Conflict in Language Communication**

Language is a part and carrier of culture. When different cultures collide and communicate, they often cause conflict because of the semantics, pragmatics or communicative style of the language. Language communication is one of the problems faced by all ethnic groups immigrating to the United States. In order to better retain the identity of their own ethnic groups, many Indian immigrants in the United States still adhere to the use of native Indian language in their daily life. For Gogol and Sonia in *The Namesake*, English has become their main language. With the deepening of Americanization, more and more Indian immigrants are aware of the importance of language in maintaining their national identity. Ashima is aware of this problem and insists that her children use their mother tongue at home; lets them listen to Bangladeshi language and culture classes; and always speaks Bangladeshi to them in daily life. But what makes Ashima helpless is that the children have no interest in learning Bengali.

Secondly, unlike the open discourse environment in the United States, Ashoke, the father of the novel, embodies the state of discourse inhibition. The novel constructs Ashoke as a tough, little spoken and introverted father image, but showing steady and deep love for his family. As for the secret of his son Gogol's name, Ashoke has been buried in his heart, and does not want his son to bear the heavy burden behind his name too early. He doesn't disclose the story of Gogol's name until he is ill. Although Ashoke has a decent job in the United States, realizes the American dream of the middle class, and basically integrates into the social interaction in the United States, his silence speech inhibition fully reflects his Indian cultural roots and spiritual wandering state.

## **3. An Analysis of the Causes of Cross-cultural Conflicts of The Namesake**

### **3.1 Great Cultural Distance between the United States and India**

Babiker, Cox and Miller (1990) put forward the concept of cultural distance, which is considered as a moderating variable of stress and adaptation problems experienced by travelers<sup>[5]</sup>. Cultural distance refers to the difference between the two cultures. For example, the cultural distance between Britain and Germany in western countries is relatively small, while the cultural distance between China as an eastern country and France as a western country is relatively large. For travelers, the greater the cultural distance, the greater the difficulty of cross-cultural adaptation.

In the novel *The Namesake*, the protagonists from Indian families also face a relatively large cultural distance in the United States, so their cross-cultural process is also accompanied by various difficulties and discomfort. The United States has a diverse culture and people from different backgrounds. The social environment is relatively open and free, men and women are more equal, and people's self-awareness and rights awareness are relatively high. However, India is different. In traditional Indian culture, the caste system and the idea of men being superior to women still run through modern life. The social environment is relatively closed, and people's freedom is relatively low. For Ashoke and Ashima in the novel, although they are in the free and unrestrained America, they never have any intimate action or nickname in front of outsiders or children. Ashima never directly calls her husband's name, because in Indian culture, the husband's name is private, not directly called by Bangladeshi wives. However, Gogol was born in the United States, deeply influenced by American culture. When he brings his white girlfriend Maxine home for the first time, her American behavior is obviously beyond the acceptance of Gogol's parents. Although Maxine has tried her best to restrain herself, Maxine unconsciously exchanges several kisses with Ashima and Ashoke on their first meeting, and Ashoke and his wife are obviously slightly embarrassed. During the meal, the intimate action of Maxine and Gogol also makes Ashima slightly uncomfortable. All these details show the deep cultural differences between India and the United States, which makes the diaspora always in the contradiction between reason and

emotion.

### **3.2 Lack of Intercultural Knowledge**

As the representative of the first generation of Indian immigrants in the novel, Ashima's generation grow up in India and receive the traditional culture education of India. The culture of their home country can be said to have taken root in them. After coming to the United States, although they have tried hard to maintain their Indian cultural traditions and identity from the beginning, they are in a country with strong ideological and cultural penetration and fierce multicultural collision. It is almost impossible for them to realize their ideals by building a "enclave" cultural island. On the one hand, the exotic life is not like that in India after all, where all the Indians live and share the common cultural customs and habits. Here, the strength of Indian immigrants is very weak. On the other hand, under the strong Western cultural environment, American culture influences and changes their daily life and ideas all the time.

### **3.3 The Negative Effects of Ethnocentrism**

Ethnocentrism is an important cause of cross-cultural conflict. The occurrence of cross-cultural conflict more or less contains the factor of ethnocentrism. Ethnocentrism refers to understanding and measuring everything in other cultures according to their own cultural concepts and standards when thinking and evaluating other cultures. Ethnocentrism has universality and unconsciousness. In cross-cultural communication, ethnocentrism will lead people to unconsciously evaluate other cultures by referring to their own values, and make wrong attribution to the behaviors of people from other cultures, thus leading to cross-cultural conflicts between people from different cultures.

When people from the same cultural background communicate according to the same cultural norms, there will be no cultural conflict. However, there are both language problems and cultural differences in cross-cultural communication. The differences lie in values, ethics, customs, etc. In cross-cultural communication, when the communicators come into contact with another culture, they tend to judge another culture according to their own cultural frame of reference, thus forming ethnocentrism and interfering. In cross-cultural communication, communicators use the existing language model and the corresponding cultural concept system to consciously or unconsciously compare, evaluate and screen each other's language and culture.

The first generation of immigrants represented by Ashima have a clear and unshakable self-identity: Bengali. Their culture belongs to India, so when they came to the United States, they always tried to maintain their home country's diet, language, religion, customs and etiquette and other lifestyle, rather than give up easily; they tried to maintain any contact with the mother country's culture and refused to replace their cultural origin with western culture. So it's hard to really integrate into American culture. In order to keep her children's traditional culture in mind, Ashima asked her children to maintain their Indian way of life. This is also what Gogol can't understand. His parents adhere to the Indian traditional culture. The more heavy the deposition of Indian tradition is, the more constant it is to give up, the more difficult it is to identify with American culture. Gogol's parents are more rootless than him, which is why he has been unable to understand his parents' trip back to India every year.

## **4. Strategies for Cross-cultural Conflicts in The Namesake**

### **4.1 Adopting American Culture**

The first way to solve the cross-cultural conflict should be acculturation. Acculturation refers to the process that people from different cultural backgrounds gradually adapt to a new cultural environment. The novel *The Namesake* focuses on the life of the Ashoke's family who immigrated to the United States, showing the cultural adaptation process of the first and second generations of immigrants in the family life dominated by Indian culture and the social life dominated by American culture. At the beginning of the novel, Ashima's homesickness and melancholy for her hometown were shown. She mixed the only food such as cereal, peanut kernel, salt, lemon juice together in the large but cold apartment, trying to copy the snacks on the streets of Calcutta, India, so as to turn her yearning for her hometown into her longing for food. This transformation reflected her adherence to traditional culture and homeland. Ashima alleviated her worries and found a sense of belonging through food and cooking. After the birth of her son Gogol, Ashima often cooked Indian food or held Indian style parties for her children at home, and often took them back to India for holidays, which showed her yearning for her family and Indian culture in a strange country. But with the gradual stability of life in the United States and the passing of time, Ashima gradually accepted American culture. In order to her children grow up healthily in the United States, Ashima also began to celebrate Christmas and other American festivals for her children, and made American food such as Turkey. At the same time, she found a job in the library and began to communicate with her American colleagues, which gradually changed from psychological adaptation to social and cultural adaptation. After her husband's sudden death, Ashima decided to divide her life into two parts, traveling between India and the United States. "For thirty-three years she missed her life in India". So she would eventually return to India, but at the same time she would also miss the United States, because it was here that she gradually became familiar with her husband and fell in love with her husband.

At this time, it can be seen that Ashima has regarded the United States as her second hometown, which means that Ashima, as a woman in the context of globalization, has finally regained her spiritual freedom and become a multicultural world citizen, just as the Indian language meaning of her name indicates "she who is limitless, without borders".

### **4.2 Accepting the Different Culture Identities**

"The issue of identity is always a difficult one, especially for those who move culturally, such as immigrants. They grow up in two cultural worlds at the same time"<sup>[6]</sup>. They are swaying between the two cultures, unable to have peace in their hearts. They hope to determine their cultural belonging as soon as possible. First of all, Ashima merged two cultures and built her own home in her own way: a wooden tile colonial building with second-hand furniture, which was bought from a yard sale; "They don't look different from their neighbors". In many things, Ashima and Ashoke did as Romans did. They began to celebrate Christmas and took their children on holiday. Secondly, at the social circle level, Ashima is an active and competent organizer. She connected Bangladeshis who immigrated to the United States like them, making close friends and relieving their homesickness. Thirdly, Ashima went out

of her family and tried to contact with different cultures in a way that suited her. When Gogol was a child, “once a week she makes thirty samosas to sell at the international coffeehouse, for twenty-five cents each”. When the children grew up and left home, “three afternoons a week, and two Saturdays a month, she works at public library, just as Sonia had done when she was in high school”. This was Ashima’s first job in America, and her first job after her marriage and family. Finally, after her husband’s death, “Ashima has decided to spend six months of her life in India, six months in the States”. For her, India’ Calcutta “once her home, now quite estranged from her”, and the American town will remain in her mind. All of these “True to the meaning of her name, she will be without borders, without a home of her own, a resident everywhere and nowhere”. Under the background of transnational migration, Ashima broke through the lowliness of women’s identity in the original culture. She was surrounded by American cultures but not completely assimilated by them. She actively made a choice. Her active reconstruction of her personal and family history dispelled the so-called “cultural drift” and “discrete thoughts”. Therefore, only with a global perspective and global consciousness can she define the identity of herself and all immigrants.

### 4.3 Sticking to Indian Tradition

Cultural dependence in cross-cultural communication refers to what kind of culture the communicative parties represent or embody. For example: after Ashima got marriage and immigrated to the United States, her family life style still tried to maintain the habits in India as much as possible, such as making rice ceremony when her child is six months old, celebrating Indian festivals, keeping her own clothes and food as Indian as possible. “Though Ashima continues to wear nothing but saris and sandals from Bata.” “After twenty years in America, she still cannot bring herself to refer to Pemberton Road as home”. In addition, during her thirty-three years in the United States, she made friends with Bangladeshis in the United States and held various banquets. But “these acquaintance are only substitutes for the people who really ought to be surrounding them”. Ashima sent Gogol to Bengali class, arranged a blind date between her son and daughter with the same background, helped her son to hold an Indian wedding, etc.

## 5. Conclusions

In the context of globalization, the mixing of different cultures around the world has become a trend. The United States has gradually changed from a melting pot to a salad bowl. Different ethnic groups pay more attention to preserving their ethnic identity and cultural characteristics in the cross-cultural process. In the process of cultural adaptation, immigrants adopt different culture strategies, which reflects the different choices and living conditions of travelers. The mixture of dual cultures is no longer a relationship of opposites, but a unity of mutual integration and parallel development. Under the background of dual culture, immigrants have developed dual self-awareness and gradually become citizens of the world. As said by Said: in the 20th century, the post-colonial immigrants are the real free people, whose cultural and identity awareness has been updated and expanded in content<sup>[7]</sup>. Their ultimate goal is to transcend localization and pursue globalization. This point of view is undoubtedly conveyed by the novel *The Namesake*. In the process of cross-cultural conflicts, the immigrant realizes the pursuit of self-identity and the tolerance of multicultural.

### References:

---

- [1] Jhumpa, Lahiri. *The Namesake*[M]. Wu bingqing, Lu Xiaohui, translate. Zhejiang: Zhejiang Literature Publishing House, 2019.
- [2] Jonathan H. Turner. *Sociology*[M]. New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2005.
- [3] Zhou Oupeng. On Cultural Conflict in Cross-cultural Management[J]. *Mountain flower*, 2008(13):142-144.
- [4] Hu Wenzhong. *Introduction to intercultural communication*[M]. Beijing: Foreign language teaching and Research Press, 1999.
- [5] Chen Hui, Che Hongshen , Zhu Ming. Review on the influencing factors of cross-cultural adaptation[J]. *Advances in Psychological Science*, 2003(06):704-710.
- [6] Mei Xiaoyun. Beyond Names [N]. *Journal of Northwest University(Philosophy and Social Science Edition)*.2008(1): 157-160.
- [7] Edward Waefie Said. *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*[M]. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2000.