

## Exploring Immigrant's Experience And Quest For Identity In Jhumpa Lahiri's The Namesake

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### Abstract

The dictum “Life touches a person sometimes with a bouquet of flowers and sometimes with a thorn of bushes” points out the fact that everyone in the world enjoys the bliss of good things and suffers from the agony of misfortunes. And Lahiri is no exception to this universal truth and so she portrays in this novel the simple joys and happy moments as well as struggles, sacrifices, and sufferings of the immigrants. The novel is a narrative about the assimilation of the Ganguli's family, an Indian Bengali Family from Calcutta into America, over thirty years (1968-2000); the cultural dilemmas experienced by them and their American born children in different ways; the spatial, cultural and emotional dislocations suffered by them in their effort to settle “home” in the new land. The novel shows how the immigrants face cultural predicaments in the foreign land, and their quest to stick to their own cultural beliefs and customs steadily imbibe the cultural ways of the host country too. In this paper, the approach will be to illustrate from the diverse perspectives of theorists the concept of the ‘culture’, ‘identity’ and ‘home’ by focusing on the text of the novel THE NAMESAKE.

**Keywords:** Diaspora, Identity Crisis, Cross-cultural Relationship, Culture, Home, Assimilation.

### Introduction

Jhumpa Lahiri, a second generation Diaspora writer and the winner of Pulitzer Prize for **Interpreter of Maladies**, has expressed her cross-cultural identity, which is torn between the present American life and nostalgia of the past Indian life in her all works. Jhumpa Lahiri writes about the human conditions, difficulties of existence, cross-cultural identity, hybridization, cultural Diaspora of the people, and about the loss, nostalgia and homelessness. As an India-American born immigrant, Lahiri has been always writing about the problems concerning the identity and belongingness, because, as pointed out by Meenakshi Mukherji, Indianess of Indian English Writer is a matter of identity. The diaspora experience, in the writings of the third world writers, is not always conscious. Their identity which is “at once plural and partial (Rushdie

15),” is sometimes expressed unconsciously, as an aeration of suppressed emotions and nostalgia for their own homelands. In this context and about her personal experience, Jhumpa Lahiri claims, “When I first started writing I was not conscious that my subject was the Indian-American experience. What drew me to my craft was the desire of force the two worlds I occupied to mingle on the page as I was not brave enough, or mature enough to allow in life” (qtd in Das 12), and this corroborates the claim of unconscious.

Jhumpa Lahiri had earlier in her life made her reputation by writing some short stories; later, her collection of stories, **Interpreter of Maladies**, which won the Pulitzer Prize, marked her position in the circle of major contemporary Diaspora writers. Her experience of moving from short story to novel was ‘liberating’ and at times ‘overwhelming’ for her (qtd in Das 3). “The original spark” of **Namesake**, as she herself says, “was the fact that a friend of my cousin in India had the pet name “Gogol”(qtd in Das 13).

Firstly, this paper examines Lahiri’s delineation of the brighter side of the life —many an advantage or a benefit—of the immigrants in their hostland in the novel **The Namesake**. Although the immigrants in this novel find it initially a little difficult to adapt to the way of life of the host country, they lead a sophisticated life which makes their stay in the alien land more comfortable. They earn as much as possible and are contented with their income. Lahiri has explicated in **The Namesake** the exuberant life, some of her characters lead. They get slowly adapted to the alien culture. For instance, in the beginning of the novel Ashima prepares her favorite Indian food and at the end of the novel she has learnt to prepare Christmas cake. As an immigrant in the USA, Ashoke enhances his educational qualification by pursuing Ph.D. in Electrical Engineering at MIT, and as a result he gets employment in a University, and in course of time even he purchases a house on Pemberton road which helps his family lead a comfortable and sophisticated life. His immigrant status has helped him promote his academic and professional pursuits, resulting in intellectual and economic gain.

Secondly, , Lahiri’s depiction of the darker side of the immigrant experiences in **The Namesake** is analyzed in this paper from various perspectives and at different depths of meaning. In this novel, the important characters such as Ashima, Ashoke, Gogol, and Moushumi experience loneliness and alienation. As the host society does not fully accommodate their wishes, they feel alienated. The term **alienation** is inextricably tied to loneliness as to Ashima. While Ashoke is pursuing his studies at MIT, most of the days, Ashima is alone in her apartment feeling terribly lonely. And then again she feels the pangs of loneliness when she is admitted at the maternity ward, with no known persons around her either to comfort or to console. She is exceedingly afraid of raising a child in a country where she is related to no one, where she knows

so little, where life seems so burdensome and worrisome that she fumes with indignation: “I’m saying I don’t want to raise Gogol alone in this country. It’s not right. . I want to go back” (33).

Lahiri in her novel ‘The Namesake’ also shows how these immigrants are making efforts to preserve their ‘home culture ‘in their new homes. The first generation immigrants train their children in Bengali language literature and history at home and through special Bengali Classes and expose them to their own family lineage, religious custom, rites, beliefs ,food tastes, habit and mannerisms. They also groom them to cope with the way of life in America. Lahiri shows that the immigrants in their enthusiasm to stick to their own cultural belief and customs, gradually imbibe the cultural ways of the host country too. Ashima teaches Gogol ‘to memorize a four line children poem by Tagore, names of deities at the same time when she goes to sleep in the afternoon she switches the television to channel -2 and tells Gogol to watch ‘sesame street’ and the electronic company “in order to keep up with the English he uses at nursery school” (54). Though initially Ashoke did not like the celebration of Christmas and thanks giving but as Gogol recalls that “...it was for him, for Sonia (his younger sister) that his parents had gone to the trouble of learning these customs” (286). Their own children groomed to be ‘bilingual ’and ‘bicultural’ face cultural dilemmas and displacement more though forced to sit in pujas and other religious ceremonies along with the children of other Bengali families. Gogol and Sonia, like them, relish American and continental food more than the syrupy Bengali dishes and enjoy the celebration of the Christmas.

In fact, migrants live a “complex existence” that forces them to confront and rework different hegemonic constructions of identity developed in their home or new nation state(s) and “reterritorialize” their practises as well as their identities.” (Bill, Griffiths, Helen: 1989). For example, as Ashima and other Bengali immigrants in ‘The Namesake’ feel deterritorialized in the United States, the attempt to restructure the territory by starting to celebrate Christian festivals in their own way. They celebrate Christmas and thanksgivings the way they would deserve Hindu festival like Dipawali and Durga Pooja. By doing so, they integrate US culture that crosses national boundaries.

Towards the second-half of ‘The Namesake’ Gogol celebrates his twenty seventh birthday at his girlfriend Maxine’s parents Lake house in New Hampshire without his parents. Maxine and her mother Lydia throw a dinner to celebrate his birthday. At dinner Gogol encounters Pamela, a middle aged white woman who insists on viewing him as Indian, despite his polite response that he is from Boston. Although Gogol must never get sick when he travels to India. When Gogol denies it, she asserts, “but you’re an Indian... I’d think the climate wouldn’t affect you given your heritage” (156). Maxine’s mother corrects Pamela, asserting that Gogol is American, but in the end even she hesitates, asking him if he actually was born in the United States (157). Even Gogol’s United States citizenship does not guarantee his identity as an American. This tendency to categorize Gogol as an Indian might be viewed as an example of “othering” of “Indian” immigrants in the United States, where individual are identified according to their roots, rather than their country of residence or citizenship. However ‘The Namesake’ is a

novel that celebrates the cultural hybridity resulting from globalization and the interconnectedness of the modern world and rethinks conventional immigrant's experience. Lahiri is aware of the existing problem of cultural diversity in the multicultural United States, and she argues that the struggle to grasp a transnational identity becomes an urgent issue for immigrants in this environment. While she represents Gogol as someone who is confused about his identity, she also presents Gogol as a prototypical transnational agent who lives between two different worlds with the possibility of creating multiplicity of identities. Infact Lahiri offers a revision of the contemporary United States not as a static and insular territory but a participant in transnational relations. Given the nature of mobility of people and their culture across nations, Lahiri deterritorializes the definite national and cultural identities of India suggesting that individuals cannot confine themselves within the narrow concept of national and cultural boundaries in this globalised world characterized by hybridity, transculturalism and migration.

Gogol doesn't think of India as his country or 'desh', he sees himself as purely American. Though Gogol considers himself an American, he is brought up by between two diametrically different cultures, similar to Bhabha's in between space where people can, to a certain extent, move and negotiate within their worlds (Homi: 1-2:1994). He is both Indian and American. He belongs to Indian parents on a different geographical space than India and is accultured as an Indian at home but outside the house, he is an American. He thinks of India as a 'foreign country' far away from home, both physically and psychologically (*The Namesake* 118). He struggles to reconcile his dual culture. On one hand, he is fascinated with the free and happy lifestyles of his American girlfriend, Maxine. On the other hand he feels a sense of obligation towards his parents. Like that of every immigrant child Gogol's real challenge is to secure an identity in the midst of differences influenced by US lifestyle

Lahiri portrays the sufferings of the second-generation immigrants in *The Namesake* as a consequence of cross-cultural conflict. For instance, Gogol, sandwiched between the cultures of the country of their parents and the country of their birth, struggles to carry the burden of two cultures and two names. Gogol's name Nikhil resembles an American name, and yet Gogol and his past life follow him everywhere as a shadow. He makes all efforts to erase his native identity and as a result he even does not introduce his parents to his American girlfriends, Ruth and Maxine. The death of Gogol's father brings about a great change in him. He is convinced that he cannot abandon or diminish the importance of both cultures. He realizes "identity as a production, which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside representation" (Hall, 10). He learns to strike a balance between the two cultures. The realization that he is made up of two cultures strengthens his pride, instead of weakening his morale. He has assimilated American culture and values without losing Indian identity altogether. He feels no shame for his name, and also, he feels proud to be called Nikhil Gogol Ganguli.

## **Significance of the Study**

Lahiri's focus on the tension between past and present complicates Hall's idea of 'being' and 'becoming'. For instance Gogol lives between the world of past and present. Although he attempts to escape from the past by denouncing his cultural roots and changing his name, he is someone how connected to his roots. He is uncomfortable with his past. He likewise cannot understand the significance of the name Gogol that his parents chose for him. Rather it is because of the very name, he is being teased by his friend. As a result, when he turns eighteen, he goes into a Massachusetts courtroom and asks the judge to change his name. Gogol thinks that by switching his name to Nikhil he would get rid of his past, but his parents still calls him by his original name. This shows that a simple name change does not alter the fabric of a person. Later he comes to know from his father Ashoke that how his name 'Gogol' is connected with his father's past life. Ashoke tells Gogol, 'the story of the train he had ridden twenty - eighty years ago, in October 1961...about the night that had saved him and about the year afterward, when he'd been unable to move'. Ashoke survived the accident because he was reading Gogol "The Overcoat" when the accident occurred near two hundred and nine kilometres away from Calcutta "killing the passengers in their sleep". Gogol realizes how his life had been interwoven between the past and present. However, although Gogol is living in the in-between space and struggling to balance the two different world, he still longs to balance the two different world, he still longs to escape from his cultural roots and venture into his US girlfriend's life.

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