

**THE REPRESENTATION OF THE THEME OF IDENTITY IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S NOVEL, *THE NAMESAKE***

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**Abstract**

*The Namesake* is the first novel written by Jhumpa Lahiri which deals with a touching saga of its characters enmeshed in severe identity crisis because of being caught in between two equally dominating cultures. The novel was published in 2003 in the form of a novella which appeared in *The New Yorker* and was later expanded into a full-fledged novel.

While dealing with the tribulations of immigrants, the author brings out the yearnings of the birth land by showing the alienation faced by those who have migrated to foreign countries. In an era of globalization and fast transportation, boundaries have now become redundant and cultural harmony is expected to bloom and blossom.

However, anxiety and discomfort perpetuates everywhere there is a confluence of people belonging to two different cultures. The novel also has an autobiographical approach to it but the author has successfully delineated herself and given a universal approach, theme and identity to the novel altogether.

**Keywords:** identity crisis, immigrants, yearnings, alienation, cultures

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In *The Namesake* by Jhumpa Lahiri, every character faces identity crisis as they often feel the tug and pull of different cultures, different traditions and different dreams. Gogol, the protagonist, in particular, is torn between two cultures – the Indian traditions of his parents and the mainstream American culture in which he grows up. Lahiri enriches several themes in this novel but the one I've dealt with is of identity as it carries with itself a sense of universality and connectivity since identity formation and identity crisis is something which we all face at some point in our lives.

At first I'm dealing with identity crisis faced by Ashima Ganguly, the mother of Gogol. She is a character stuck between cultural alienation and loss of identity. The novel opens with Ashima Ganguli trying to make a spicy Indian snack from African ingredients -Rice Krispies and Planters peanuts but "as usual, there's something missing"(Lahiri 1). Being an Indian woman, Ashima is taught from childhood to renounce her own needs and craving in order to gratify her husband and her family. So for her, the pain, the longing for going back to her own country, own land has been bottled up in some secluded corner of her heart, to herself. She does not like

to share her longing to her native country as it would hurt her husband Ashok or worry her parents. Ashima feels upset, homesick and sulks alone in their apartment that is “too hot in summer and too cold in the winter, far removed from the descriptions of houses in the English novels she has read” (Lahiri 10). Feeling dislocated, she often re-reads the letters from her family. It is an uphill task for Ashima to form an identity and assimilate in the new American culture.

While Ashima is at the hospital about to go into labor, she feels uncomfortable and embarrassed with the whole process of being put in a hospital gown and being checked upon frequently. It is obvious that this is something Ashima is not adjusted to, although the nurses are trying to make her feel as welcomed as possible. Motherliness for Ashima does not bring only cheerfulness but also the menace and apprehension of raising the child all alone in country of strangers. The child's birth was a lonesome celebration and the realization that his entry in the world was, “unaccompanied and deprived” laid the foundation of that predicament that small child had to experience throughout his life (Lahiri 25). I find her to be progressively adjusting to the American culture. By the time Gogol is six months old, Ashok and Ashima know enough people to entertain on a proper scale on the occasion of Gogol's Annaprasan. The connection, the contact with Indian culture is kept integral by firmly following the rituals that are part of Indian culture. Ashok and Ashima create a sense of ‘Indianness’ for themselves, by getting themselves familiar with all the Bengali families living around. She also maintains address books in which she has recorded the names and address of every Indian whom she comes across. She prides

herself on each entry and feels fortunate to "have the fortune to share rice with them in a foreign land"(Lahiri 213).

“Ashima creates an atmosphere in which continuity of traditions and values can be preserved” (Batra 87). For instance, her attire remains the same, her cooking is done the Bengali way and she continues celebrating Gogol’s birthday in Bengali fashion. Ashima seems like a typical Indian immigrant who celebrates traditional events with families and same ethnic group and still holds the identity as Bengali. “How they keep alive the memories of their homeland and culture in their ‘new-home’ in some other ways is shown by Lahiri by giving a peep into different Bengali homes” (Kaur 269). In between all these things, the character of Ashima however lacks individuality. It is only when Ashok begins living away that she shows signs of growing up as an individual, riding cars, doing a job in a library, going out meeting new people and making new friends.

I do not consider her as a strong female character because there is absolutely no role which she plays apart from that of a wife and a mother. But I accept that her character is marked by growth and maturity and it is only during the end of the novel that she shows signs of strength as a woman, standing elegantly and bravely in the last party which she throws to her Bengali friends before returning to India finally. The whole of Ashima’s discomfort with the life around her as portrayed in the novel represents the incomprehensible world of American immigrants

who are born in one country but squander their life either gracefully engrossed or completely drowning in the civilization of another people.

Exploring the theme of identity crisis with respect to the character of Gogol, he can be said to represent the “second generation who finds itself presented with two conflicting realities and cultures and sets of expectations—one of the host countries through the socio-cultural surroundings and the other of the home country through their parents”(Batra 50). Gogol’s name is one of the chief causes which make him feel alienated. His loneliness starts from the moment he enters the world. His mother thinks to herself -“She has never known a person entering the world so alone” (Lahiri 24). The difference between the naming process in Indian and American cultures pushes him into a chaos. Ashima wants her grandmother to suggest a name but the name is not received, the letter having been lost in transit. I believe that the identity crisis which Gogol seems to experience begins from this loss of the letter itself. Gogol suffers from the condition of namelessness right after birth. And this is a condition that plagues him throughout the rest of his life. Ashok, his father names him Gogol after the name of his beloved Russian author, Nikolai Gogol, thinking of it as a pet name only, which is a common practice in India. For Ashok, the name ‘Gogol’ signifies a beginning and a survival as this book had once saved him from dying in a train accident. But this very name, the first identity of their son, is the very first factor which contributes to the problem of identity crisis, one of the chief causes which make him feel alienated.

Gogol does not understand the emotional significance of the name. He does not like to be known by a name which is neither Indian, nor American, nor even first name. He does not want to read books of Nikolai Gogol because he thinks it “would mean paying tribute to his namesake, accepting it somehow” (Lahiri 92). The identity crisis faced by Gogol is similar to one faced by the author herself. . Having been born of educated middle class Bengali parents in London and grown up in Rhodes Island, Lahiri authentically portrays her diasporic experiences in her first novel *The Namesake*. In this novel Lahiri’s experiences of growing up as a child of immigrants resemble that of her protagonist, Gogol Ganguly. Lahiri belongs to the second generation of Indian Diaspora whose ongoing quest for identity never seems to end. They feel sandwiched between the country of their parents and the country of their birth. They are to maintain ties between the ideologies of these two countries which are poles apart. But in this process they are caught between acute identity crisis from where there is nowhere to go. Lahiri finds herself quite a stranger to both of the countries -in India she is an American and in America she is an Indian. Lahiri had admitted in an interview, “I wanted to please my parents and meet their expectations; I also wanted to meet the expectations I placed 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. As a young child, I felt 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 separate lives.”

Unable to cope with the peculiarity of the name, Gogol changes his name to 'Nikhil'. With the rejection of Gogol's name, Lahiri rejects the immigrant identity nurtured by his parents. "The name Nikhil goes on to represent his individuality and separation from his parents. It also represents him accepting American culture and distancing away from Indian culture" (Sharma 123). But this outward change fails to give him inner satisfaction. "After eighteen years of Gogol, two months of Nikhil feels scant, inconsequential." (Lahiri 105) Nikhil resembles American names, yet 'Gogol' and his past follow him everywhere. He experiences a feeling of being in-between. He is considered an 'ABCD' "America-Born Confused Desi" but he considers himself an American. American society however says, "But you're Indian" (Lahiri 157). Gogol is an outsider in American society whereas he does not feel intimacy with 'Indianness'. So 'who he is' becomes a great problem. Lahiri has movingly portrayed the ache of the next generation, who has no land, to be called their own. They are living in a land, which they 'own' by birth, but do not 'belong to the land' because of being an alien. Edward Said in his *Orientalism*, comments regarding migrant's identity: Migrants history of their parents and grandparents. The Orientals continue to be looked down upon by the "Occidentals"(69).

Gogol's experiences, his dilemma cannot only be limited to Indian Diaspora, living in America. Even in India, people who are migrating from their native state to other states in order to earn their living face the same problem. "We can take the example of the people migrating from hills to different parts of India in search of well-paid jobs. Immigration takes place yet it is at a smaller scale, but the pain, the anguish that the people experience can be well compared to

the agony experiences by Ashok and Ashima. This feeling of loss of identity is not only widespread in the Indian Diaspora but can also be felt in the hearts of those Indians who even though living in India, find themselves detached from the land of their birth” (Mangayarkarasi 59).

Thus, we can see how identity can be explored through the concepts of location and name in case of Ashima and Gogol. The characters live their lives trying to answer the questions of identity and search for answers through their relationships, actions and dreams. Their journey leads them to finding the answers they need, as they fight to continue the search for truth. However, they all seem to accept that they cannot abandon or diminish the importance of either culture but must learn to mesh the two together. They realize that their identity is embellished by both cultures and come to know “identity as a production, which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside representation” (Hall 10). Hence it can be concluded that the degree of assimilation in a different environment, conflicts among generations and the bonds of traditions contribute to identity formation.

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