

Who am I?: The Hybrid Nature of Identity in Jhumpa Lahiri's Novel
The Namesake

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ABSTRACT

Jhumpa Lahiri's fiction is autobiographical in nature and frequently draws upon her own experiences as well as those of her parents, friends, acquaintances, and others in the Bengali communities with which she is familiar. Lahiri examines her character's struggles, anxieties, and biases to chronicle the nuances and details of the immigrant psychology and behaviour. *The namesake* is an example of a Diasporic Novel since it follows the lives of an immigrant Indian American family. The novel centers on Gogol Ganguli and his family. From the very beginning, the novel presents a picture of immigrants who struggles to settle in America. Jhumpa Lahiri, as a writer of Indian diaspora, inspects the problem of identity, nostalgia, alienation and the clashes between the two different cultures.

Keywords: Jhumpa Lahiri, The Namesake, Gogol Ganguli, Ashima, Ashoke, Sonia, Maxine, Moushumi, Diaspora.

Postcolonial literature frequently discusses the notion of immigrant experience, or the feelings and motives of action experienced by those integrating in to a new country. Immigration and emigration are currently so common that an increasing number of people are concerned with the consequences. Jhumpa Lahiri is an American-Indian writer. She was born in London to Indian parents and has spent most of her life in America. Lahiri's fiction is autobiographical and frequently draws upon her own experiences as well as those of her parents, friends, acquaintances, and others in the Bengali communities with which she is familiar. Lahiri examines her character's struggles, anxieties, and biases to chronicle the nuances and details of immigrant psychology and behaviour. *The namesake* is an example of Diasporic Novel since it follows the lives of an immigrant Indian American family.

Diasporic literature is a broad concept. It consists of all literary works written by the authors, who have settled outside their native country and have written on the culture and tradition of their homeland. In this concept all those writers are called as Diasporic writers. "Diaspora" refers to the dispersion of a people from their homeland. A simple definition of Diaspora literature then would be works that are written by authors who live outside their native land. The term identifies a work's distinctive geographic origins. According to Couches, Migration is a complex social, political, economic issue that poses numerous policy challenges for even most stable democratic states. Migration is one of the common facts in the twenty first century. People migrate to different part of the world for one reason or the other. They migrate for different reasons like historical, political, and economical issues including business, higher education, better life and Marriage. In ancient period the

people of India believed that crossing a sea was a taboo or breaking a proscription. Large number of Indians crossed the sea during the pre-colonial and colonial period.

This paper deals with the adequate issue of the migration, to present the pain and the problems that are faced by the immigrants by contrasting the subject of diaspora in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*. It also examines how Lahiri deals with subject matters like identity, dilemma, nostalgia and alienation faced by the immigrants. She presents the pain through her writings and this makes us understand the problems that are faced by immigrants in the foreign land.

Jhumpa Lahiri is a contemporary American writer of Indian origin. She was born in London to Bengali parents. She is a graduate of Barnard College where she received a B.A in English literature, and of Boston University, where she received an M.A. in English, an M.A. in Creative Writing and an M.A. in Comparative Literature and a Ph.D. in Renaissance Studies. She has taught creative writing at Boston University and the Rhode Island School of Design. Her works which are often characterized by the use of plain language and deal mainly with the scenario of Indian immigrants in America who are caught up between the two cultural influences and are finding various means to settle themselves in as the new habitant.

Jhumpa Lahiri, as a writer of Indian diaspora, inspects the problem of identity, nostalgia, alienation and the clashes between different cultures. As an Indian immigrant she brings her own experiences and relates it to the crises that are faced by the so called immigrants. For her, writing is a kind of freedom and exploration and not obligation. Jhumpa Lahiri's first novel *The Namesake* presents a story of an immigrant family, the Gangulis, settled in America. Lahiri's story shows not only the troubles experienced by the immigrants, but has also created a compelling story about the entire immigrant family. In Lahiri's novel the focus is on the first born son of immigrant parents. The novel shows how this child struggles to find a balance between the countries he was born and the country of his parents. Her parents live in a diasporic community which consists mainly of Bengalis, while the life of the children outside their home is very different. It's a typical American life.

The novel centers around Gogol Ganguli and his family. At the beginning of the novel we could see that Gogol's parents who were settled in America as his father was a doctoral candidate for electrical engineering at MIT. After Gogol is born they move on to Boston as his father becomes a professor in a university. From the very beginning, the novel presents a picture of immigrants who struggles to settle in America. Here, at first Gogol's mother, Ashima, finds it very difficult to live a life in America and becomes very homesick. "Before Gogol's birth, her days had followed no visible pattern. She would spend hours in the apartment, napping, sulking, and rereading her same five years Bengali novels on the bed"(35). Being a foreigner, Ashima begins to realise that life is a sort of lifelong pregnancy –a perpetual wait, a constant burden, a continuous feeling out of sorts. It is an ongoing responsibility, a parenthesis in what had once been ordinary life, only to discover that the previous life has vanished, replaced by something more complicated and demanding. Like pregnancy, Ashima believes, it is something that elicits the same curiosity from strangers, the same combination of pity and respect. (*The Namesake*, 49-50).

Ashima is reluctant to change her customs and way of life and fights hard to live in her own way despite being a foreigner in a new country. Both Gogol's parents find it difficult to understand that their children have American passports since they were born in American soil make them Americans. They always uphold their Bengali life style and expect that their children should also have the same feelings. But they are astounded when children do not want to leave for holidays to India, or do not enjoy their Bengali parties and the company of their Bengali friends. This clash between first and the second generation of immigrants is visible throughout the novel; they both struggle in their life but in very different ways. The second generation immigrants only know the country they live in and view it as their home. Their parents on the other hand are always loyal to their motherland and for them "home" is somewhere else. This is what makes life very difficult for the children of immigrants. Gogol and his sister feel and think of themselves as Americans but see their parents as foreigners. An example of Ashima and Ashoke's bi-cultural identities can be seen when the family leaves for a vacation in India and is greeted by relatives at the airport. "Ashima, now Monu, weeps with relief, and Ashoke, now Mithu, kisses his brothers on both cheeks, holds their heads in hands. Gogol and Sonia know these people, but they do

not feel close to them as their parents do. Within minutes, before their eyes, Ashoke and Ashima slip into bolder, less complicated versions of themselves, their voices louder, and their smiles wider, revealing confidence. Gogol and Sonia never see on Pemberton Road. "I'm scared, Gogol," Sonia whispers to her brother in English, seeking his hand and refusing to let go". (*The Namesake*, 82)

In the Novel, the relationship between the life of Ganguli's and their children is very different. Here children lead an American way of life; watch American cartoons, play American games and have American friends. They also eat American food and enjoy many foods that their parents refuse to consume. Even though Gogol's parents hold Bengali ways and values in their life, Ashima, Gogol's mother, confesses that she has to give up for the children. She has accepted to prepare an American dinner for her children once a week. "In the supermarket they let Gogol and Sonia fills the cart with items that he and Sonia, not they, consume: individually wrapped slices of cheese, mayonnaise, tuna fish, and hotdogs. For Gogol's lunches they stand at the deli to buy cold cuts and in the mornings Ashima makes sandwiches with bologna or roast beef". (*The Namesake*, 65)

As the years go by children grow up, Gangulis slowly started to absorb some American customs. The children, being born in America, want to celebrate Christmas, Easter and Thanks giving just like their friends. The parents, even though at first reluctant, support the children as they want but they know that how to preserve their culture as well. When children teach their parents American way of living, parents teach them the life of their Bengali ancestors vice versa. A good example of this is when Ashoke, Gogol's father, decides to purchase a barbeque. "In the suburbs it seems to be an obligation to have a barbeque on the porch. The barbeque itself seems like a very obvious sign of American life, but the Ganguli's use the barbeque for tandoori. The parents begin to "mix and match" the two cultures and in a way create a hybrid way of life for them." (*The Namesake*, 65)

This shows that how this family takes part in American celebrations and strives to appear as just another American family amongst their neighbours. They do not want to indulge in American celebrations but they do it for the sake of their children. As the children grow up, Gangulis begin to realise their children's nationality. "For Gogol and Sonia they celebrate, with progressively increasing fanfare, the birth of Christ, an event the children look for more than the worship of Durga and Saraswati" (*The Namesake*, 64). Even though they celebrate American festivals, they still hold their important traditional celebrations and strive to convey its importance to their children. "During Pujas Gogol and Sonia are dragged off to a high school or a Knights of Columbus hall full of Bengalis, where they are required to throw marigold petals at a cardboard effigy of a goddess and eat bland vegetarian food. It can't be compared to Christmas." (*The Namesake*, 64)

The parents do everything to expose the children to Bengali culture. "They make a point of driving into Cambridge with the children when the Apu trilogy plays at the Orson Welles, or when there is a Kathakali dance performance or sitar recital at Memorial Hall. When Gogol is in the third grade, they send him to Bengali language and culture lessons every other Saturday"(*The Namesake*, 65). But despite all their efforts, their children grow up as Americans and sometimes feel very foreign even to Ashoke and Ashima. "when Ashima and Ashoke close their eyes it never fails to unsettle them, that their children sound just like Americans, expertly conversing in a language that still at times confounds them, in accents they are accustomed not to trust (*The Namesake*, 65). This clearly shows the difference between first and second generation of immigrants. It is clear that for the parents the word "home" will always have a different connotation here. For Gogol, it seems that his childhood and adolescence are a constant struggle in determining who he really is. For Gogol the main source of concern is his name. His name seems to be something that he cannot identify with. His name is not a traditional Indian or a Bengali name. It is not passed from his family, nor an American name as well. He is named after his father's favorite author Nikolai Gogol, as his work has become a symbol of life to Ashoke, his father.

When Gogol goes to kindergarten, his parents insist that he should have a "good name", a formal name, to be used at school. The parents then pick up a name 'Nikhil' for their son. Gogol's father thinks that the name, Nikhil, is artfully connected to the old. It is a perfectly respectable Bengali good name, meaning "he who is entire, encompassing all", but it also bears a satisfying resemblance to Nikolai, the first name of the Russian author. Despite of all this, Gogol refuses to go to kindergarten. "He is afraid to be Nikhil, someone he doesn't know.

Who doesn't know him." (*The Namesake*, 57)

At school Gogol does not respond to the name Nikhil and prefers to be called Gogol. Despite his parents' wishes his teacher agrees to call him Gogol. Thus Gogol's formal education begins. "At the top of sheets of scratchy pale yellow paper he writes his pet name again and again... In the front covers of textbooks which he is taught to read he leaves his legacy, writing his name in number-two pencil below a series of others. In art class, his favorite hour of the week, he carves his name with paper clips into the bottoms of clay cups and bowls... Gogol G. he signs his work in the lower right hand corner" (*The Namesake*, 60)

Ever since his early age, Gogol has difficulties in trying to be someone he is not. He does not know anyone else, apart from his parents and other Bengali people who have two different names and it puzzles him. His entire identity has been built around his name, and changing his name would mean that he would have to become someone else. As a child, he does not bother about his name. But when Gogol reaches his teens, he first realises the uniqueness and oddity of his name. "He begins to hate his name, he hates having to explain his name to people, having to sign it and he hates seeing it written down. He hates that his name is both absurd and obscure, that it has nothing to do with who he is, that it is neither Indian nor American but of all things Russian. He hates having to live with it, a pet name turned good name, day after day, second after second" (*The Namesake*, 76)

Gogol is not able to forget his foreignness and his difference because of his name. This continuous feeling of "otherness is one of the main reasons that driven him to change his name. His name does not have any literal meaning to him and this state confuses him. But for Ashoke, Gogol's name has a special meaning. For him, Nikolai Gogol's short story "The Overcoat" is something significant which spare his life from a train accident because it was the fluttering pages of "The Overcoat" that rescue Ashoke from death. Because of "The Overcoat" Ashoke is able to evolve his identity. He can create a bicultural identity for himself and is able to shuttle between his two identities, in India and in America.

When Gogol is a teenager he struggles very much with his name. As mentioned earlier, he does not understand why his parents have given him a Russian name and what it has to do with him, an American boy with an Indian heritage. Gogol's father fails to explain to Gogol the significance of his name, and it is only much later in his life that he realises the value and significance of his name. The turning point in the life of Gogol happened when his father gives him a copy of Nikolai Gogol's "The Overcoat". Gogol Ganguli does not bother to read the book, instead he "wedges the book on a high shelf between two volumes of the Hardy Boys" (*The Namesake*, 78) and tries to ignore it. This is when Gogol realizes for the first time that his name is the last name of Nikolai Gogol. He thought that he has at least one person in the world that shares his name.

Before Gogol begins college, he decides to legally change his name. He has already tried using different names at some situations and has felt that he can be someone else and do so much more with different names. A good example of this situation is when Gogol assumes a different name and feels he has a different identity. He feels confident and kissed a girl at a party. He did not want to tell the girl his embarrassing name and instead lived the night as Nikhil, the good name his parents tried to give him when he began school. "I can't believe you kissed her, Gogol," his friends exclaim as they drive home from the party. He shakes his head in a daze, astonished as they are, elation still welling inside him. "It wasn't me," he nearly says. But he doesn't tell them that it hadn't been Gogol who'd kissed Kim. That Gogol had nothing to do with it. (*The Namesake*, 96)

This incident shows how thrilled he was when he becomes someone else. He becomes more confident and believes in himself when using a different name. This is what leads him into changing his name legally as well. The interesting aspect of changing his name is the fact that he himself believes that "No one takes me seriously". In reality the only person who thinks Gogol's name is embarrassing or strange is Gogol himself. As Nikhil he starts a new life in college which is completely different. Nikhil has confidence and arrogance. He does things that he has only dreamed of before and feels free. With the new name he has finally gained a short American nickname that he has longed for ever since he was a child. "To his friends he is "Nick". In school he had a thought about his name and "wished that he could disguise it, shorten it somehow, the way the other Indian boy, Jaydev, had gotten people to call him Jay" (*The Namesake*, 76)

With the name Nikhil, Gogol has formed himself a bicultural identity, as he feels that the two sides in him, the American Nikhil and the Indian Gogol coexist within one identity. After graduation, Gogol works as an architect in a small firm and begins to date with an American woman called Maxine. With Maxine, Gogol is introduced into an entirely different way of life. He enjoys every bit of this American life that he has been led into by Maxine's family: the ease of conversation, the careless attitude to life, public display of affection and the Western meals with wine and cheese. What Gogol enjoys the most is that he is not reminded of his heritage and background. Nothing reminds him of his "Indianness" and it is something that he utterly enjoys. When briefly visiting his parents with Maxine, he finds himself irritated by the habits of his parents and is relieved "to be back in her world" (the namesake, 150). After his father's sudden death, Gogol has to take care of his family. It is only through the death of his father that he begins to understand the true essence of their life. "He remembers, back then, being bored by it, annoyed at having to observe a ritual no one else he knew followed. He remembers those meals eaten in complete silence, the television turned off. Now, sitting together at the kitchen table at six-thirty every evening... his father's chair empty, this meatless meal is the only thing that seems to make sense". (The Namesake, 180)

Suddenly many things which seemed arbitrary and meaningless to him before have a new sense of meaning. In his childhood many of the rituals and traditions that were imposed upon the children were not explained properly and the only thing that Gogol and his sister thought about was the fact that none of their friends took part in similar kinds of events. The traditions that Gogol's parents tried to teach their children simply lacked meaning and thus seemed extraneous. Now, that Gogol father has died, Gogol suddenly realizes the importance of family and many of the ways of the family. He starts spending time with his mother and sister back at home and less time with his girlfriend Maxine and her family. He starts appreciating things that he used to hate and this can be seen as a turning point in his life. This is when Gogol is forced to grow up when he feels family responsibility and wants to help his mother and sister. Maxine and Gogol end up separating as Maxine does not seem to understand Gogol's sudden interest to be close to his family. Gogol soon falls in love with a Bengali girl Moushumi. Gogol and Moushumi have a very similar background, their parents are good friends and they have known each other's families since they were children. Even though their mothers are well acquainted, they themselves do not actually know each other. They remember one another from family parties when they were children but they were never friends growing up. After their first few dates they quickly fall in love. Moushumi is very different from Maxine. Even though Moushumi is very American and not at all a traditional Indian woman like both of their mothers, in Moushumi Gogol sees something familiar which attracts him at once. Moushumi feels familiar and safe to Gogol and that is what makes Moushumi interesting to Gogol. After getting married and living-together, they soon find a rhythm in their life which makes them happy. They do not need to explain the habits of their parents to each other; they can use Bengali together whenever they want to and cook Indian food at any time. They have been able to create a life for themselves which they are happy with. They are both Americans living in America but they can be open about their past and they can feel that they are understood.

The difference between Gogol and Moushumi is mainly the fact that Moushumi's life has taken her to different countries. When she was a child her family lived in England from where they moved to America. She has also lived in France after graduating from Brown and only moved back to America because of her boyfriend at the time. Moushumi can thus be analyzed more in terms of an immigrant than Gogol. Through Moushumi, Gogol begins to realize how difficult his parent's life must have been and the struggles they must have faced when moving to a completely different country and culture. Gogol's realizations are made clear when Moushumi and Gogol take a trip to Paris. Here Moushumi had reinvented herself, without misgivings, without guilt. He admires her, even resents her a little. He realizes that this is what his parents had done in America and what he, in all likelihood, will never do.

Gogol begins to respect the efforts made by his parents when moving to a completely foreign place as well as admire their courage. He admits it is very probable that he himself will never do the same thing. Soon after their first anniversary Moushumi admits to having betrayed her husband and is in love with Dimitri, an academic globe trotter and a former crush. The story ends in the place where it all started for Gogol, on

Pemberton Road, the place of his parents' house in New Jersey, the place where he spent all his childhood and the place where his parents learned a new life. Gogol, Sonia and Ashima all spend their last Christmas together in that house, as Ashima has decided to sell the house and begin to live half of the year in India and the other half in America. For Gogol this Christmas and spending time in his old house and room are significant. He thinks back on his life and all that has happened in that house and finds a copy of "the Overcoat" in his old room. At the time he got it as a birthday gift from his father he had not so much as opened it. At this point he knows about his father's tragic train ride and the book that changed his father's life. He knows that this author and this story are significant factors in how he got his name. He is thirsty for knowledge and begins reading it. The story goes back to Gogol wondering about his name, its meaning and significance. Also, the reader is shown how Gogol openly regrets about having changed his name and the name of Gogol forever disappearing as the number of people who still call him Gogol diminish.

The whole story revolves mainly around Ganguli family. The mental trauma of migration among the characters which brought about diasporic feeling like, identity crisis, loneliness, isolation, alienation etc forms an abstract of the novel. It is this diasporic theme that Jhumpa deals with in this novel and is a sort of autobiographical note of her. Being an Indian origin Jhumpa lived in America, yet she faced the same problems and scenarios which the character in the novel faces. Indian society being a very conservative society has its own traditions regarding names. And this is shown by Jhumpa in her work *The Namesake*. The title itself reflects the problem that Gogol faces with the identity of his rare name. Gogol the protagonist is named after his father's favorite author Nikolai Gogol after the train accident as his father believed that it was this author's very book which saved him.

In *The Namesake* we can find a similar blend of relation between Jhumpa and her characters. Just as Jhumpa was occupied at a very early age with diasporic feelings, the crisis of dual identity etc., it was hard for her to distinguish the perspective that was being created between the two traditions, i.e., her inherited traditions and her newly settled traditions. This sight of diaspora has had a great influence on her life and more on her as a writer. She could narrate the depth of the character's pain with confidence. Also, in Lahiri's *The Namesake*, much of her perspective throws light on the effects of diasporic consciousness, where at the very young age she moved from India to America. She goes deep in to these matters with her own personal incidences and brings about vivid diasporic images. We can also find that in the other works of Lahiri the characters are mainly immigrants to America. It is thus partial to say that Jhumpa's influence on her writings is parallel to her own life and has immense influence on her works.

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