

Quest for Identity in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*

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ABSTRACT

The focus of this paper is on the means by which the characters in Jhumpa Lahiri's Novel *The Namesake* deal with their identity crisis and how they handle the trauma and possible success, failure or resistance of subjects who in their confrontation with the culture of the other negotiate their new identities. Lahiri's literary works are concerned with the diasporic postcolonial situation of the lives of Indians and Indian-Americans, who are caught between the Indian traditions that they have left behind and a totally different western world that they have to live in, culminating in an ongoing struggle to adjust between the two worlds of the two cultures. Concerned mostly with the disappointment, failure and at-times success of Indian immigrants in America, Lahiri's works abound with male and female characters who, on being displaced, struggle to survive in the unfamiliar surroundings they are entangled in. All her works deal with the common motif of exclusion, loneliness and the search for identity and fulfilment.

KEYWORDS

Identity; *The Namesake*; Characters; Diasporic identity.

In the postcolonial world, highly marked by globalization, transnational migration is a fact of life. Thus, there are numerous groups of people who traverse across the national borders to reach their promised land. These people who share the same homeland, in order to preserve their customs and culture, endeavour to recreate a familiar sort of surroundings and communities through which they desire to hold on to their roots. The first and even the second generation of immigrants, who abound in her works generally, often have to face the problems and carry the scars and trauma to retain their national, ethnic, cultural, and gender identities. What needs to be taken into account, here, is that the notion of identity in general and diasporic identity, in particular, is not set, fixed or an essential

whole but is rather constructed and self-created.

Indian diasporic literature which has caught global attention in recent times is usually by and about educated migrants or their descendants. It deals with issues like alienation, nostalgia, identity crisis, discrimination etc. It operates in a cultural space haunted by heterogeneity and attempts to reconcile with alien realities. A literary labyrinth concerned with questions of equality and identity, it attempts assimilation with the host country and culture. All diasporic fiction, thus, is full of issues related to location, movement, crossing borders, original homelands and adopted homelands and identity.

Jhumpa Lahiri, a recent entrant into the world of Indian writers, tackles the much-

debated topic of the cultural identity of Indians in a far-off land. Lahiri took the literary world by storm when her debut book *The Interpreter of Maladies* won the prestigious Pulitzer Prize in 2000. *The Namesake* her first novel is an ambitious attempt to chart the lives of a family of immigrants through the eyes of a young boy and was adapted into a Hollywood movie directed by Mira Nair. For her third book, *Unaccustomed Earth*, the writer has returned to the short story form. Once again, she expertly comprehends the Bengali-American experience, following immigrants and their offspring while traversing borders and expectations.

The Namesake is all about a Calcutta family which has settled in America, attempting to do the best they can by not only transforming into true Americans but at the same time retaining their Bengal customs and heritages. Jhumpa Lahiri portrays the story through the main character Nikhil Gogol and the good and bad times when he himself searches far and wide to explore himself.

Addressing the themes of immigration, the collision of cultures and the importance of names in *The Namesake*, Jhumpa Lahiri demonstrates how much of struggle immigration can be. It takes a look into the second-generation immigrant's cultural dilemma, the child's struggle to realize that one's family is different from others, the teenage desire to fit into a culture so different from that of one's parents, and the adult desire to reconcile what was left behind and lost in the translation from one culture to another.

The novel does a precise job of highlighting the emotional struggle of living as a person raised in the ways of two very different lands. The frustration and anger with his parent's mother country and his reluctance to be a part of it are countered by his immense respect for the accomplishments of his parents; the sacrifice of their arranged marriage,

their courage in leaving their families for a life in the United States, and his own inability to make any commitment himself. It not only speaks of immigrants but also of the original settlers at different levels. It portrays people who need to make sense of their own destinies, on their own terms.

The novel tells the story of the Ganguli family – from the marriage of Ashima and Ashoke and their departure from India to New York to the portrayal of their son Gogol as a young adult. It's a study of traditions, growing up in different cultures, and finding a loved one to spend your life with. His father named him Gogol due to the circumstances of his survival in a train wreck during which he was reading the work of the Russian writer Nikolai Gogol.

Bengali children are given two names: one that is a pet name, used only by family and close friends, and one that is used by the rest of society. At birth, Gogol is given a pet name as his official name because his official name, sent in a letter from his grandmother in India, gets lost in the mail. Upon entering kindergarten, Gogol is told by his family that he is to be called Nikhil, a good name, by teachers and the other children at school. Gogol rejects his proper name and wants to be called Gogol by society as well as his family. This decision made on the first day of kindergarten resulted in years of distress as it was also his first attempt to reject a dual identity. The importance of a namesake and identity crops up throughout the story and becomes a concept that is central to the novel.

In spite of becoming a part of mainstream American life and its ways, the name Gogol still seems to haunt him. Gogol seems to have an invisible hold on Nikhil. Sonia, his sister insists on using his *daknam* (pet name), though she herself is already very much Americanized. Sonia adapts to the American lifestyle much more easily than Nikhil. She sees herself

as wholly American, yet remains committed to her Indian family. She acts as a catalyst which draws her mother into a more American lifestyle. As Gogol grows up in the American culture, he realizes that his identity is an imposed one. He thinks that the Russian name has nothing Indian about it, and, hence finds it very suffocating that the name is neither American nor Indian, rather merely irrelevant and absurd, lacking in dignity and gravity.

At eighteen years of age, he wants to become his own person and changes his own name to Nikhil. Gogol appears as if reinventing himself and liberating from his parents' constraints. He embarks on his white life as Nikhil and begins to have relationships with white American women, keeping his private life a secret from his parents.

Despite his parents' efforts to keep him 'Indianized', Gogol starts behaving like his American friends and doing the same things that they do. For example, his parents didn't know about him secretly smoking with his friends, or going to late-night parties. Despite all that, he manages to get good grades and gets into Yale University. There he learns about his namesake, Nikolai Gogol, and that he was a mentally unstable pariah and starts to hate his name. On account of this, he changes it to Nikhil in order to distance himself from all the bindings of his family and shun all their expectations. He gets attached to a white American girl, Ruth but they soon separate after she spends both spring and summer terms in England studying literature.

Nikhil suffers from alienation not only because he is living in a country to which he does not belong, but also because of his name which increases his ambiguity regarding his nationality and his identity. The inner conflicts of Gogol are reflected in his intimate relationships with women. He hopelessly struggles with his hyphenated identity. Even his

marriage does not last long. When his wife, Moushami, reveals the secret of his former name, it becomes one of the reasons to end their marriage.

Gogol's second affair is with Maxine, an Anglo-Saxon American ethnicity and a member of a liberal and very wealthy Manhattan family. He starts to live with her family and gets closer to her family and moves away from his own. Although they love each other, they eventually break up when Gogol returns after performing all the Bengali rituals on his father's death. They have a fight over Gogol's struggles regarding the emotional complications related to his father's death.

Gogol's final, but again unsuccessful attachment is with Moushumi Mazoomdar, a childhood friend from another Bengali family. After his breakup with Maxine, Ashima talks to Gogol about starting a relationship with Moushumi, particularly due to their shared cultural background. Although she grew up in England, Moushumi shares a great deal in common with Gogol and the two eventually marry. However, their marriage breaks up when Moushumi starts having a sexual affair with her earlier boyfriend Dimitri.

The novel deals with the theme of identity crisis and cultural alienation profoundly. Lahiri herself was born into a family of immigrants and experienced emotional conflicts in her life. The protagonist Ashima and Ashoke reflect all such emotions in depth. The whole novel represents his disturbed psyche: to set up his own identity either as American or Indian. Being an Indian by birth, Ashima couldn't easily adjust with American culture. Lahiri has very skillfully sketched her character. Ashima's rootlessness, anxiety, alienation and such psycho-sociological problems are depicted with exemplary competency.

The concept of 'home' has been dealt with subtly in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*. There is forever a desire to be

at home, to belong to home and the longing for the mystic sense of home. Middle-class Indian educated women abroad, married to upwardly mobile men, are regarded as the repository of “desi culture”. It is quite possible to feel at home in a place and, yet, experience social exclusions. Ashima’s marriage to Ashoke who works in MIT, USA compels her to leave India and settle with her husband in the USA. Ashima feels alienated in a different nation and the author very pertinently details the nation-home metaphor.

She misses her motherland, and everything associated with it and it almost becomes synonymous with missing her being at home. Life in America is both different and distant from home and in the span of over two and half decades that she stayed, her isolation was not from the fact that she was bereft of the love of her husband and children, but because she could never make her household, a ‘home’. A home symbolizes fond memories, nostalgia, a profound adherence and an abode of expectations. Mostly Ashima’s time is spent looking back to her days in the alleys and her ancestral home in Kolkata.

Diaspora is a perpetual phenomenon in a woman’s life. Diaspora embodies a subtext of ‘home’. Home is a concept that is attached to the core of oneself. After living for years in a house, making it become the ‘home’ among the loved ones, it is so difficult for a woman to leave everything behind and move to make an alien household her own. To Ashima, it was even more difficult because she had to leave her country behind. An intense feeling of ‘up-rootedness’, living in a socially marginalized condition with a completely different cultural set-up, makes her realize the significance of her nation. There’s always a longing to be back home and after her husband’s death, Ashima chose to come back to India. It was the return of the native to her own world,

her ‘home’. Very few women can start anew because years and years of alienation rinse the ‘self’ from them and it is really hard to regain the vitality over the prolonged submissiveness.

The novel deals with the story of two generations - Ashoke and Ashima on the one hand and their children Gogol and Sonia on the other and their life period of thirty years. It depicts the different attitudes, outlooks and ways of living of two generations in dealing with the problems in a foreign country. They face different problems as the meaning of culture differs for both generations – the first being directly related to his/her homeland and the second generation forming an image of culture based on the information transmitted by the first generation. But for the second generation Diaspora, Gogol and Sonia, identity problems are rather different, for they have a sense of pride and affinity with India, but it is America that is perceived as ‘home’. In America, they are born and educated. In America, they want to be accepted on their own terms. It is, here, that they face a sense of alienation in the sense of ‘insider’ ‘outsider’. On one of the field trips in school, Gogol and his classmates are assigned a project – to rub the surfaces of the gravestones and find out the name of the dead person – the feeling of alienation and aloofness was doubly intensified because Gogol was old enough to know that there is no Ganguly there.

The first generation Diaspora wants to retain their homeland culture and transfer it to the second generation. It is through the eyes of the older generation that the younger generation perceives and learns about homeland culture. Ashoke and Ashima sent Gogol to Bengali classes and culture classes every other Saturday, held in the home of one of their Bengali friends. Though they do face some conflict with their children in this endeavour, the older generation makes certain

compromises to maintain the inter-generational relationship. Ashoke and Ashima learn to celebrate some of the main festivities of the dominant culture. For the sake of Gogol and Sonia, they celebrate the birth of Christ. Ashoke and Ashima get adjusted with the food habits of Gogol and Sonia. It is Bengali food that Ashima and Ashoke relished and preferred but for Gogol and Sonia, they specially arranged an American dinner once a week as a treat- 'Shake'n Bake chicken' or 'Hamburger Helper' prepared with ground lamb. Ashoke and Ashima gave in many ways but it was only to peripheral values, i.e. food, and dress which were negotiable but not the core values such as their cultural and religious traditions. In fact, the first generation maintains a tangible link with the homeland by continuing tradition – an outward manifestation of its cultural tradition.

In the first-generation Diaspora, memory and nostalgia play an important role. They cherish and retain all the memories of their homeland and wait very anxiously for the moment of their visit to the country. Their ease and comfort with their own culture can be perceived in their behaviour. During one of the visits to India Ashoke and Ashima's changed attitude is keenly observed by Gogol and Sonia. Within minutes before their eyes, Ashoke and Ashima changed their attitude and voices, on the Pamberton Road and reveal a confidence Gogol and Sonia never see. In contrast, there are the second generations youngsters, and the memories of the Calcutta trip are wiped out from their minds very fast. In spite of their attachment to America and American ways, they could not be one of them. They are Americans, but different.

Identity for the youngsters is much more complicated, for at the two levels, private and public, there is a dichotomy – Indian values and culture define identity at home, while outside they are Americans

but different. The parents expect them to behave in an ideal manner and as most of them have migrated because of betterment in the economic or academic field, they expect their children also to perform well academically and professionally. Ashoke and Ashima wanted Gogol to pursue engineering and Moushumi's parents wanted her to be a chemist. Contrary to this, the second-generation youngsters wanted to choose and adopt a career and a profession of their own liking. Gogol becomes an architect: Moushumi pursues a double major in French. Immersing her in a third language, a third culture, Sonia becomes a Para- lawyer. They feel attracted and have an appreciation for the host culture.

Ashoke and Ashima's acceptance of Maxine in their son's life, and Ashima's consent for Sonia's marriage to Ben, a half Jewish and half Chinese boy, all indicate their changed perspective. The death of Ashoke brings a change in the life of Sonia and Gogol also who belongs to the second generation. They experience the trauma and pain their parents have undergone during the death of their parents. They share the agony and pain their parents felt for being far away from their homeland. At the end of the novel, Ashima's decision to live six months in Calcutta in India and six months in America with Gogol and Sonia makes her realize that she belongs nowhere and at the same time everywhere. "True to the meaning of her name, she is without border, without a home of her own, a resident everywhere and nowhere." and so with 'Gogol' who is an alien both in India and America.

Gogol finally learns that the answer is not to fully abandon or attempt to belittle either culture but to mesh the two together. Gogol is not fully in tune with his identity until he realizes that it is embellished by both cultures. He does not have to be one or the other; he does not have to choose. He is made up of both, and instead of weakening his pride is

strengthened by this. Though the novel wraps up with more downfalls occurring in Gogol's life, he is able to stand on his feet. He is no longer ashamed of himself or the way he has lived. He is proud of who he is and where he comes from. Most important, he is proud of his name and all that it means.

The Namesake is a personal experience which is given a mutual expression. Growing up with ties to all three countries like India, London and America created in her a sense of homelessness and an inability to feel accepted. Lahiri sensitively portrays the individual trials and tribulations of being a part of the larger ethnic group authentically. She uses a very simple, yet very impressive language. The conflict of generations is shown in a sophisticated manner. One can feel the pain of the parents who make every effort to keep children intact with their roots. However, one can also understand the misery of children who have to deal with two different worlds. What is right in one culture is unacceptable in another.

Lahiri does not write from the position of an observer, rather her

writings reflect the perspective of someone between the past and a tormenting present. Life is viewed as a nostalgic recollection through the eyes of sensitive, vulnerable and observant characters. The meeting point of the past and the present has been intensified by the nostalgic representation of characterization. Lahiri doesn't present a set point of view that is entirely personal, instead, she just observes things and tries to digest them from different perspectives so that she can keep herself in the background and let her characters speak for themselves. Her characters face the tide of a normal routine of affairs. That makes her characters more real and true to life which the readers may feel associated with. She presents the themes in an unstated plain style and weaves together numerous narrative threads in her works. She steers away from proving easy answers, offering readers a complex look into the immigrant experience. Her handling of the complexities of the immigrant experience is a simple but very mature manner of a mature fiction writer.

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