



## UNDERSTANDING DIASPORA AS PERCEIVED IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S 'THE NAMESAKE'

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### Abstract

This paper enunciates the quest for identity and belongingness in the characters that appear in the novel "The Namesake" by Jhumpa Lahiri. The characters who are of Indian origin but immigrants from the U.S. encounter a constant pull between the two different cultures. As a second-generation diasporic writer, Jhumpa Lahiri clearly depicts the struggle of first and second-generation immigrants to establish their identity in an alien culture. She firmly believes that the immigrants' quest for identity and belongingness is apparent and stressful.

Keywords: quest, belongingness, diasporic writer, immigrants

### Introduction

Literary trends and post-colonial theories have come to light and have paved a path for Indian immigrant writers to express diasporic feelings in their literary work. Diaspora refers to people scattered across various geographic regions other than their birth country. The word "diaspora" originates from the Greek meaning "to scatter". Initially, the word was connected to the dispersion of Jews living outside of Israel. Consequently, the diaspora is a dispersed group of people with a common origin within a limited geographic area. It refers to the movement of a particular population across cultural boundaries when the uprooted individuals have home-country nostalgia. It does not mean that

they do not have a home; rather, it indicates that living in a foreign country causes them pain. They can, therefore, perceive and feel the distinction between living at home and elsewhere. According to Laxmiprasad, the diaspora field is shifting its paradigms in response to the evolving technological landscape of the digital age, making a straightforward definition of the term unfeasible (99). Writers who are immigrants or foreigners create works of fiction that tackle hot-button issues like nationalism, sexuality, and families, and which are evaluated according to Western standards of truthfulness and falsity. Numerous Indian women writers are based in the United States, Canada, Britain, and other countries. While some immigrants, like Jhumpa

Lahiri, are first generation, others are second generation. These foreign authors write on how they manage to navigate cultural differences.

Literary works that expose the experience of migrant writers being dispersed from homeland to alien land is referred to as diasporic literature. The literary works of immigrant writers who basically belong to the South Asian countries and who have established themselves outside their native country come under the group Literature of South Asian Diaspora which is further categorized into Literature of Indian diaspora, etc. based on the nativity of the immigrant writers. Alienation, sense of identity, conflict between the two cultures, sense of being dislocated and nostalgia are some of the most common elements that appear in the Diaspora Literature. The following are the two groups of diasporic writers: first generation writers and second generation writers. The first generation writers are those who are born and raised in their native land but settle in an alien land for survival. The second generation writers are those who are born and raised in an alien land.

Jhumpa Lahiri, is a second generation writer of Indian diaspora. She was born to Bengali parents who settled in England. When she was three years old her parents moved to the United States for the sake of her education. She first wrote *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) which encompasses nine short stories about Indians and Indian Americans. Her debut novel *The Namesake* (2003) is a story of turmoil of Bengali parents who migrate to the United States with aspirations. It echoes the excruciating condition of the immigrants, the rigidity between the east and the west and the sense of freedom. Lahiri's second novel *The Lowland* (2013) is a multiplex novel that exhibits the experiences of the immigrants. The second collection of short stories *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008) explores the belief of immigrants' experience as an outsider. Jhumpa Lahiri in her works presents a view that the issue of character is basic for individuals who are socially displaced. The outsiders

themselves and their youngsters experience childhood in two totally contradictory universes simultaneously. The feeling of outcast starts among the first generation and some way or another, it further proceeds among the second generation, as a kind of legacy.

### Discussion

Lahiri's portrayal of her experiences as an immigrant child growing up in "The Namesake" is similar to those of the protagonist, Gogol Ganguly. In Asian-American autobiographies there is a difference between the self as text and the self in text. According to Rocio G. Davis, Asian American autobiographies typically focus on the protagonist's developing understanding of the significance or value that society accords to inquiries and attitudes regarding ethnic distinctions, historical reconstruction, and the status of their communities in American civilizations (41). They fight to preserve the connections between these two nations' ideas. They discover that they are really foreigners in both nations—they are regarded as Indians in America and Americans in India. However, they get caught throughout this process between a severe identity crisis and nowhere to escape. This dilemma in Lahiri's mind is clearly portrayed through the character, Gogol in the novel.

Lahiri's "The Namesake" enunciates the cultural conflicts and the turmoil of the Indian immigrants amid the two different cultures. The first generation had to deal with "adaptation and learning acculturing and also discovering new things about themselves". Whereas the second generation had to deal 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). The first generation immigrant Ashima encounters a severe issue pertaining to cultural conflict whereas the second generation immigrant, Gogol encounters not only an acute

issue pertaining to dual identity but also a constant pull between the following two cultures: the host culture and the native culture.

The *Namesake* revolves around the character Ashima Bhaduri who is later called as Ashima Ganguli after her nuptials with Ashoke Ganguly of Alpire. The novel opens with the first generation character, Ashima Ganguly who tries her best to reconstruct her past and makes herself comfortable by reading Bengali poems, articles and stories. Not long after Ashima and Ashoke relocate to the United States and Ashima gives birth to Gogol, she finds it difficult to fit in this new nation. Ashima resists to succumb to "the allure to integrate" and tries in every possible way to preserve her cultural heritage (Forero, 854). Ashima compares living abroad to being ever pregnant, and other Bengalis in her neighbourhood whom she finally befriends also feel the same way. Being a foreigner means you're always on the lookout for the next awkward moment or miscommunication with an American. Ashima struggles to interact with her American neighbors because of her Indian heritage, which she feels is a burden that would eventually fall on her children, thus: "For being a foreigner Ashima is beginning to realize, is a sort of lifelong pregnancy-a perpetual wait, a constant burden, a continuous feeling out of sorts" (Lahiri, 49)

She finds it challenging to adapt to the host culture during the following two periods: pregnancy and motherhood. Labour being the most challenging period for any woman turns out to be a nightmare when she realizes that she is the only one Indian woman amidst the other three admitted in the hospital. Motherhood, which again is the most awaited period for any woman turns out to be terrific when she thinks of raising her child without a helping hand. After the birth of the child, she expresses to Ashoke her difficulty in raising her son without any help and also shares her willingness to return to her native land which makes Ashoke feel guilty. Finally, Ashima who has imbibed the

native traits agrees to stay back in the alien land and decides to raise her child without anyone's help.

Ashima values the Indian culture and heritage and gives priority to family and friends unlike the host culture. She desperately awaits her grandmother to assign a name for the new born but the culture of the alien land prevents her from doing so. She exerts herself so much to perform her domestic chores and constantly struggles to adhere to the traditional values against the unconventional values prevailing in the United States. She suffers from phobia about losing her culture and is constantly being tormented by the child's neglect about the native culture. The conventional aspect of Bengali culture made the Ganguly family realize that their native culture was not important to the alien culture.

The second-generation immigrant, Gogol, experiences the same agony as Jhumpa Lahiri. Lahiri was named Nilanjana Sudeshna by birth, and her pet name was Jhumpa. When she was first sent to school, her instructor noticed that she was at ease pronouncing her name. She thus took the name Jhumpa Lahiri. Every time she was referred to as Jhumpa, she felt ashamed. She tried very hard to feel like an American, but she was only able to go halfway. Lahiri's thirst for identity is quite prominent in her character Gogol who is initially happy with his name as a child but later on, this happiness turns out to be an anguish, as experienced and shared by Lahiri in many occasions. Thus, she gives Gogol the same sentiment, since he adores his name while he's young and dislikes it as an adult. As names are often seen as markers of identity, Gogol's name is mostly responsible for his lack of distinctiveness from other people. In life, names serve as emblems of identity. The names take on great significance when identification becomes the central concern.

Though Gogol is born in America, none of the Americans recognize him as a member of their culture. His desire to blend with the

American culture ends up in vain. Initially Gogol is reluctant to accept his new name, 'Nikhil' and at times he never even responds to, when addressed as Nikhil. Gogol is in a constant turmoil pertaining to his acceptance in terms of being addressed as either Nikhil or Gogol. He feels that the new name sounds like an American name, yet his old name and his past torments him and he finds it difficult to forget the old name, and on the weekends when he returns home, "Nikhil evaporates and Gogol reenters again." (Lahiri, 106)

Gogol is unaware of the name's emotive connotations. He gets determined to remove his name after learning about the Russian author who shares his name. His name Gogol "sounds ludicrous to his ears, lacking dignity of gravity." (Lahiri,76) He does not want to read Nikolai Gogol because he thinks it "would mean paying tribute to his namesake, accepting it somehow" (Lahiri, 92)

He experiences an insecure feel and starts carving for an identity. His sense of loneliness begins the moment he is born. His mother Ashima, who feels isolated from the outside world, muses to herself, "She has never known a person entering the world so alone". (Lahiri, 24)

Gogol's younger sister Sonia during her childhood feeding ritual behaves in a manner that is in direct contrast to that of Gogol during his own ceremony. This incident demonstrates how identity can be forced upon a person at a young age and how particular characteristics are associated with particular identities. One guest saw Sonia's independence and disobedience as characteristics of an American. Sonia is by nature non-compliant. Gogol, on the other hand, is believed to have a stronger bond with his Indian heritage as he is an obedient child.

Gogol feels confident, secure and happy when he enters Yale as a freshman. This is when his metamorphosis begins. He can now relate to the American way of life. He begins engaging in

a number of actions that Gogol would never have dared to previously. However, a fresh dilemma confronts him. Although he adopts a new name, "he does not feel like Nikhil" (Lahiri, 105). He worries about being found out. Lahiri rejects his parents' cultivated immigrant status by rejecting Gogol's name. He continues to date and be in committed relationships, but he is not content on the inside. He works to support himself while leading an American-style life, far from his parents. He doesn't let his parents know about this aspect of his life and maintains it a secret. "After eighteen years of Gogol, two months of Nikhil feels scant, inconsequential." (Lahiri,106)

The theme of Foreignness is shown in Gogol's romantic relationships. Gogol believes that the Ratliff family is essentially different from his own and that he does not comprehend their "city" existence because of Maxine. This makes Gogol appreciate everything about it, especially their time together in the New Hampshire woods. This is not the case with Moushumi, with whom Gogol has a close cultural relationship. However, Moushumi yearns for a foreign life that, in the end, is devoid of Gogol. Despite having Bengali-American ancestry, Moushumi grows apart and stops being the same because they want different experiences and various kinds of relationships.

His interaction with women reflects his inability to assert his identity, despite his best efforts to forget his history. He doesn't feel good about Maxine getting to know his parents. Such attempts are undertaken to break off from his previous identity and background. He feels as though he is in between things. He soon comes to feel useless and unsatisfied with staying away from his roots: 'No matter how long he lives, Gogol Ganguli will eventually disappear from the lips of loved ones and so cease to exist if there are no one in the world to name him Gogol. Nevertheless, there is no comfort or sense of victory while considering this ultimate demise. It offers absolutely no comfort.'(Lahiri,

289). When Gogol sees his American girlfriend Maxine at home with her parents, he briefly becomes envious of Maxine's effortless transition through life. Being a white American, Maxine has never had to fight to fit in or be given serious consideration. According to Gogol, the majority of foreigners have experienced feelings of alienation and had longing to be someone else. This is particularly true for him, as he went to considerable measures to create a new identity through name change. Gogol wants to distance himself from his Indian heritage, and he believes that dating a white lady is a step in that direction. Therefore, even his pursuit of Maxine can be viewed as an act of identity-seeking.

On their first meeting, Gogol and Moushumi bond over their identities and the misconceptions that have been held about them. This context highlights several realities. The first is that people—in this case, Americans—often make grossly inaccurate judgments about someone's identity based only on their external look. Secondly, it implies that Gogol and Moushumi's shared experiences and characteristics are what make them who they are, even though these "misrenderings" aren't. They are able to recognize each one in the other and this majorly connects them. However, this only exacerbates his identity crisis as he struggles to come to terms with his dual identity and the conflicting expectations of his two cultures.

His father's demise causes him to undergo significant adjustments. He discovers that he must learn to integrate the two cultures rather than reject or minimize the significance of either. He learns and understands that both cultures have accentuated his identity. He attempts to adjust to the circumstances in order to forge a new identity that is distinct from the previous one and does not require a specific nationality. Fernandes (117) says that the quest that starts is "to recover his roots, his self, his hyphenated identity, and to revive the alternate

culture, the in-betweenness of cultures, the alternate culture."

Throughout the novel, Gogol searches for a sense of belonging and tries to define himself on his own terms. He begins to explore his Indian heritage and develops a closer relationship with his family, particularly his mother. He also begins to embrace his name and learns more about Nikolai Gogol, who becomes a source of inspiration for him.

Ultimately, Gogol's journey towards self-discovery and his eventual acceptance of his dual identity is a reflection of the universal human experience of searching for one's place in the world. Through Gogol's experiences, Lahiri highlights the complexities of cultural identity and the challenges faced by immigrants in assimilating into a new culture while preserving their own traditions and customs.

Gogol muses about the commonness of a name, not long after changing it to Nikhil. Gogol has written his name in a particular style for his entire life. But Gogol now finds himself having to start afresh. Something that was formerly consistently the same is now novel and distinct. It is new today, but it will return to its former mundanity in due course. This particular time is a perfect example of the stable transition cycle. Stability is disturbed by change, but it eventually returns.

Towards the end of the novel we find that Gogol picks up *The Stories of Nikolai Gogol* They provide a fitting conclusion to a book that explores themes of family, personal development, and relationships to the past, present, and future. By this time, Gogol is aware of his duties to his sister and mother. Previously, he would only visit his relatives in the Boston region out of obligation, but he has always done so religiously. But this journey isn't like the others. Gogol seemed sincere in his excitement to spend one last Christmas at Pemberton Road with his mother. As for Ashima, she's prepared to move on to a new chapter in her life, even as she acknowledges the significance the

Pemberton Road home has had for the family over the years. Gogol understands that his mother needs this particular form of "distraction," which is the presence of friends and family. Gogol, too, finds a form of diversion for himself. The past year has been challenging for him because he is still in shock from his divorce. Throughout his life, he has been attempting to figure out who he is and what he wants. His relationship has ended even though his career is rather stable. There is no longer a father for him to speak to. As a result, Gogol uses the only means available to him to "talk" to his father: reading the book that his father gave him years ago that Gogol hardly ever looked at. Though Gogol did not use Ashoke's remarks in his stories, they had a great personal significance for him. And Gogol discovered more about his father—the love he had for Gogol and the Ganguli family—by reading them by himself after the celebration. Nevertheless, he had been unable to completely remake himself and escape that mismatched nickname. He had also made a mistake in his marriage. And the worst accident of all had been the manner his father had escaped from them. Nevertheless, Gogol has been molded, fashioned, and defined by these experiences.

Gogol muses about the events that have built up his life to date near the book's conclusion. In hindsight, it demonstrates how Gogol has consistently sought to separate himself from his Indian heritage. Examples of this ambition include his repeated relationships with women who are not Indian and his change of name. Gogol has not been able to completely recreate himself as an American despite this endeavor. It also shows the reader how Gogol evolved as a person. Gogol shows some recognition of his inability to distance himself from his old name and identity completely—or at the absolute least, a respect for it. For the most part of the book, the reader had witnessed Gogol flee from his family and his heritage, but at that point, he had come to appreciate them for the ways in which they shape his identity. A

person's cultural identity is defined not only by kinship; it also encompasses "critical points of deep and significant difference which constitute what we really are; or rather – since history has intervened – what we have become." (Hall, 112)

### Conclusion

In conclusion, Jhumpa Lahiri's "The Namesake" is a powerful exploration of the quest for identity through the experiences of the protagonist, Gogol Ganguli and his mother Ashima. The novel highlights the challenges faced by immigrants in reconciling their cultural heritage with their new environment and the universal human desire to find a sense of belonging and purpose in life.

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