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A CRITICAL ANALYSIS ON IDENTITY CRISIS IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S 'THE NAMESAKE'

ANJU CHAUDHRY

PhD Scholar, Department of English
M.D. University, Haryana
gur.anju@gmail.com



ABSTRACT

Jhumpa Lahiri faithfully depicted identity crisis of the first and second generation expatriates in her first novel *The Namesake*. This crisis is dealt through immigrant's families and their internal and socio-cultural relations with the people of the foreign country. It deals with the cultural identity crisis which is faced by both the generation of the immigrants. In the case of the first generation, the immigrants face dilemma, consciousness of being an outsider and cultural identity crisis due to the language, dressing essence and food habits. But the second generation immigrants they mainly face the crisis in relation to the personality, identity and adjustment in an alien land. This paper is a modest attempt to analyse the identity crisis, faced by the immigrants as portrayed in Lahiri's novel, *The Namesake*. The paper also attempted to highlight double displacement faced by various characters like Gogol as his naming aggravates his identity crisis in alien land.

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INTRODUCTION

Writers who are cultural hybrids like Jhumpa Lahiri, Alice Walker and many more writers are taking up issues like identity crisis, hegemonic power discourses in the fiction that they are writing today. Notably a range of writers of Indian origin have made their homes world over. They explore in every direction of world but remain culturally attached to their origin. They carry India, wherever they go; Jhumpa Lahiri is one of such writers, whose works shape India with an *outsiders-insider's* perspective. Jhumpa Lahiri expands her Pulitzer Prize-winning short stories of Indian acquisition into her lovely first novel, *The Namesake* (2003). This novel reflects the problem of search for identity and sense of belonging. The aimless wandering, search for identity and alienation is a common-place theme

in modern fiction, but for the most Indian novelists in English this quest has peculiar Indian immediacy. The Question of identity is always a difficult one, and especially for those who are culturally displaced. The present paper explores to what extent do the immigrant writer locate and stabilize the identity in their work. Her quest for identity is a consciousness towards exile, the dynamic force working to bring about this quest is a point of active engagement between two cultures – Indian and Western. In many ways *The Namesake* lives up to the expectations that were built around the success of her brilliant short stories. It is an evocative and deeply felt portrayal of family life and the complexity of relationships, the difficult process of trying to assimilate into a new culture and maintain their own cultural connections, identity and

belonging [1]. The paper also explores where the immigrant writer goes beyond the conventional wisdom and creates the 'third space' where they create their identity as transnational. Jhumpa Lahiri emphasises not only the immigrants who leave somewhere called home to make a new home in the United States but also the endless process of coming and goings that create familial, cultural, linguistic and economic ties across national borders. Her characters live in between, straddling two worlds, making their identity transnational.

The issue of identity crisis is another remarkable theme in Lahiri's narrative. Lahiri finds her identity through her protagonist Gogol who looks back choose the best of both cultures; of their homeland and of their host country. She provides an authentic picture of diasporic culture by shedding lights on the lives of characters Ashoke, Ashima and their son Gogol; their longings for their origins and customs, traditions and views. The novel is a fine discussion on "names, relations ,families, inheritance and cultural assimilation. The novel exposes the eternal quest for identity submerged under black waters of uprootedness and from this black water a new culture reveals the possibility of blending of two cultures through introspection and self-analysis [10].

About identity Jhumpa Lahiri stated in an interview:

The question of identity is always difficult one, but especially so far for those who are culturally displaced, as immigrants are, or those who grow up in two worlds simultaneously, as is the case for their children. The older I get, the more aware am I that I have somehow inherited a sense of exile from my parents, even though in many ways I am more American than they are. In fact it is still very hard for myself to think as American. For immigrants the challenges of exile, the loneliness, the constant sense of alienation, the knowledge and longing for a lost world, are more explicit and distressing for their children. On the other hand the problem for children of immigrants, those with strong ties to their country of origin, is that

they feel neither one thing nor the other. The feeling that there was no single place where I fully belong bothered me growing up. ("A Reader's Guide for Jhumpa Lahiri's Interpreter of Maladies": Houghton Mifflin Company Web Pages) [8].

Jhumpa Lahiri characters also bespeak the glory of common life,

"I know that my achievement is quite ordinary. I am not the only man to seek his fortune far from home, and certainly I am not the first. . . . As ordinary as it all appears, there are times when it is beyond my imagination." (Lahiri, IOM 198).

Jhumpa Lahiri first novel *The Namesake* explores the theme of transnational identity and trauma of cultural dislocation. Being "an Indian by ancestry, British by birth, American by immigration [2] and her parents having the experience of "the perplexing bicultural universe" of Calcutta in India and the United States, Lahiri mines the immigrants experience in a way superior to Bharti Mukherjee and others" observes Aditya Sinha [3].

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 [11].

The issue of identity crisis in novel *The Namesake* occurs to the main character, Gogol, as he refuses to be called Gogol and identifies himself with the name Nikhil (his childhood name) and, later, Nicky (the Americanized version of his childhood name). The identity crisis in this novel is indeed emphasized in the title, the Namesake. Changing name here is quite important for Gogol in seeking his true identity, since name symbolizes how he sees himself and how he wants to be seen by

others. Later, Gogol changes his name to Nikhil, since he feels it reflects his dual identity, both being Indian and also American, better. Nikhil is indeed a Bengali name but it can also be shortened to an American nickname, Nick. Therefore, it is a hybrid name in which it will be easier for him to deal better with his dual identity.

The novel chosen for the study, *The Namesake* reflects the dilemmas that Indians face when confronted with a foreign culture. In this light the novel addresses the issues of culture shock, displacement, rootlessness, sense of unsettling and inbetweenness, conflict in the notion of 'home', nostalgia and identity crisis of the immigrants. Jhumpa locates her characters in a settled country to reflect the changes they undergo, the cross cultural interactions, the discrimination they face, and the difficulty in settling in the new land, in this case America. The novel analyses the mindset of the first generation and second generation immigrants and the conflicts that arise out of these. While the themes of nostalgia, culture shock and unsettling are addressed through the characters Ashima and Ashoke, the themes of identity crisis and culture stereotyping are addressed through the experiences of Gogol and Moushumi.[4].

Jhumpa Lahiri has carried forward her Pulitzer Prize winning short stories of Indian acquisition into her first novel. The conditions of immigrants in the host country are usually due to cultural misunderstanding and loneliness. The cultural identity crisis is faced by generations of immigrants due to language, food habits, dress code and personal identity. In Gogol's case it is due to his name. The feeling of nostalgia, loneliness and homelessness is also divided systematically. In Ashima's case it is due to migration. Gogol and Moushumi face it due to cultural hybridity. Ashoke and Ghosh are permanently dislocated from the world. They leave all homes behind and reach the other world [5].

The Namesake is a novel about the search for an identity set in the backdrop of Kolkata and the US. In a lifetime, we come across several identities: an identity we are born into, by default, at birth; identities forged from a scratch in foreign lands and identity that we want for ourselves. And when so

many choices are offered to us, defining who we really are becomes a crisis in itself. Caught in such a web of identity crisis is Ashoke Ganguli's son, Gogol, named in haste after Ashoke's favourite author Nikolai Gogol.

In *The Namesake*, for Gogol, family is not a loss to be mourned, but rather a burden, an inescapable and often unwanted presence. As a second-generation immigrant, Gogol indirectly inherits his immigrant parents' sense of loss as well as the weight of their fumbling attempts to survive in a foreign culture. This simultaneous loss and burden is manifested in an extended identity crisis as he experiences life through the role of a translator trying to negotiate between two cultures and sets of expectations.

Gogol continues to struggle with his name and identity as he ages, and ironically he ends up longing for the very dual identity that he rejected as a child. Although "the peculiarity of his name becomes apparent" (Lahiri 68) to Gogol when he is eleven years old, he does not mind the distinctiveness of his name. Not surprisingly, it is during the onset of adolescence that Gogol consciously acknowledges feelings of alienation, shame, and self-loathing, feelings that suggest another identity crisis. When his father gives him a copy of *The Short Stories of Nikolai Gogol* for his fourteenth birthday, he acts politely indifferent. Inside, however, feelings of resentment come boiling to the surface[6]:

For by now, he's come to hate questions pertaining to his name, hates having constantly to explain. He hates having to tell people that it doesn't mean anything "in Indian" . . . 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. (*The Name sake* 76, emphasis added)

The importance of namesake and identity is brought up throughout the story and becomes a concept that is central to the novel. Through his life Gogol suffers from the uniqueness of his name. In Bengali families

“.....individual names are sacred, inviolable. They are not meant for inheritance and shared” (*The Namesake*,28).

Gogol is traumatized because he takes his Russian name for his identity. Gogol, the protagonist of the novel *The Namesake* is given a name which he finds misfit on his personality, somehow disgusting, meaningless and shapeless. In the course of changing his name he loses his identity. As Gogol grows up in an American culture he realized that his identity is an imposed one. He thinks that Russian name has nothing India about it, he finds it very suffocating that his name is neither American nor Indian, mere irrelevant, ludicrous, lacking, dignity and gravity. When he turns fourteen, this identity crisis becomes apparent. His situation becomes pathetic because he knows that it was he, who let his pet name turned out to be his good name in the Kindergarten, otherwise his parents have registered him under the name “Nikhil”, but he did not respond to that name because at that time his ear was not habituated to that name. Now, he feels very helpless that,

He could have been Gogol only 50 percent of time...

He could have had alternative identity, a B-side to the Self (*The Namesake*,76).

The identity crisis also occurs to Ashoke and Ashima. Tracing back the tradition in Indian immigrant like Ashoke and Ashima, accordingly, feel displaced and lose their identity as well India, the people are divided into different castes. The system of caste, which previously only occurs to India-Hindu society, later happens to the whole India since the era of British colonialization. Though it seems to limit their way of life, the system of caste mostly tells people what to do and how to behave according to in what caste they belong to. When they become immigrant and live outside their homeland, they surely have no idea about themselves[9].

Through Gogol, Lahiri presents identity crisis which she herself has faced acutely. She is obsessed with everything that matters in a name. Name signifies the first identity. But this identity gets a setback when it comes to the second generation of Indian Diaspora.

Moushmi as a character is also caught up in a cross-cultural web. She takes pride in being considered French or half French. In an attempt to resolve her identity crisis, she finds herself getting into numerous sexual escapades with many men in Paris. She finds herself shunning the ‘forced’ Indian identity and the ‘given’ American identity and adopting a totally new identity of being French. Sonali on the other hand portrays a more balanced approach to life. She exhibits a composite identity which is both Bengali and American by wanting to marry a white American according to Bengali customs and traditions. Sonali has an inclusive approach in taking care of both the traditions.

Conclusion

To sum up, identity is indeed a matter of choice, though choosing the right one will be quite difficult for those who are at total lost. *The Namesake* by Jhumpa Lahiri, which hopefully will help the understanding the case of identity crisis occurs to diaspora people. Gogol feels identity crisis at the beginning of the novel and reaches at the conclusion that there is no escape from action and identity and action is better than inaction. He tries to find his roots, his identity and finally learns the lesson of action preached by existential philosophy. He realizes that the only way for an immigrant to get rid of identity clashes is to accept that dual, fragile and hyphenated identity. Much of the part of the novel centers on the Gogol’s name that is the most basic part of an individual’s identity. This name itself becomes the main cause of identity crisis faced by Gogol. This identity crisis also affects Gogol’s family relationship and his social relation with his peers. The identity of the individual, which is consistently affected by society, is something one has to discover through a process of reflections and negotiations. Her works are overtly about immigrants, cultural clashes, assimilation and adaptation and so forth. They disclose how the socio-cultural forces, ethnicity, and genders have influenced the expatriate characters and bring out anxieties, uneasiness, nostalgia, rootlessness and alienation, disconnection in relationship and identity crisis that they have to come to terms with. Finally this paper concludes ‘identity’ is an important factor of post-

colonial expatriate literature and Lahiri's stories deal with identity crisis and identity losses.

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