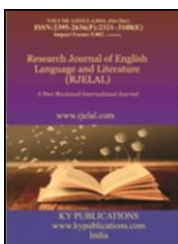




## DIASPORIC PULSE: A STUDY OF JHUMPA LAHIRI'S *THE NAMESAKE*

R. BAKYARAJ

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Chalapathi Institute of Engineering & Technology,  
Guntur, Andhra Pradesh



### ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the predicament of name, sense of identity and belongingness of the characters who belong to the Indian origin and become immigrants in USA. The novel, *The Namesake*, by Jhumpa Lahiri unfolds the lives of Indians and Indian Americans who struggle for adoption and assimilation of culture. It also displays the sole of the characters experiencing assimilation, displacement, fear and guilt, who are perplexed to balance their own culture with a new culture. The novel makes it the best kind of ready reckoner to explain Diaspora as the term 'Diaspora' and its role in the present scenario. The plot and the characters in the novel portrays the life of first and second generation immigrants, their sufferings and the struggle for their own identity and belongingness. The fact of Jhumpa Lahiri being a daughter of an immigrant couple makes her both a migrant and a Diasporic writer. She has written on the Indian Diaspora and narrative story that opens up the inconsistency of the concept of identity and cultural difference in the space of Diaspora in her works.

**Key Words:** Immigrants, Assimilation, Adoption, Displacement, Diaspora.

©KY PUBLICATIONS

### INTRODUCTION

The word 'Diaspora' is derived from the Greek word 'Diasperio' which means to scatter or to distribute. The term originally associated with the Jewish historical experience but today the term has got a more expanded meaning it refers to common ancestral homeland, voluntary or involuntary migration and a sense of marginality in the country of residence. This term cuts of various disciplines such as Political Science, Cultural Studies and Sociology, etc. On the history of globalization, the term 'Diaspora' raises the question of acculturation, assimilation, the loss of identity, etc. Diaspora has been a favorite topic in the transnational world of literature for innovative literary outputs in recent years. People who have flown and tried to settle over the distant territories of the world for various reasons have always settled assurance of home and they cannot allow their roots being blown over into

fragments of uncertain insecurities on a foreign land. The intellectuals and authors have tried to represent these feelings in diverse ways in diverse writings all over the world. Having been born of educated middle class Bengali parents in London and grown up in Rhodes Island, Lahiri truly portrays her diasporic experiences in her first novel *The Namesake*.

### DISCUSSION

*The Namesake* opens with the scene in which Ashima, a pregnant woman from Calcutta-India, tries to cook an Indian meal that dissatisfies her. This very first scene reflects the total physical and psychological mood of migrants. Although she has the same ingredients to cook an Indian dish, she does not manage to prepare as she did in India. The feeling of displacement and alienation exist in all activities that the characters carry out. She lives in a small and cold apartment and she is alone despite

her pregnancy, which is an abnormal situation for the Indians. She is married to Ashoke Ganguli, who is an engineering student at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Their families arranged their marriage and she moved to the USA to live with her husband. She successfully bore a boy. The baby is named after Nikolai Gogol, famous Russian Author. Ashoke chooses Gogol as the pet name for the newborn baby. Because Bengali culture requires a baby to have two names; a pet name to be called by parents and a good name to be called in the society. While Ganguli couples are about to leave the hospital, they are asked to write a legal name for the baby. They just write 'Gogol' on the birth certificate as an official name for their boy with a hope that they will change later with a good name. The reason for Ashoke's choosing Gogol as a pet name for this baby is that he is thankful to *The Overcoat*- a short story by Gogol- because in a train accident the book saved his life. Gogol has no problem with his name until he enrolls a kindergarten. Unaware of the fact that Gogol saved his father's life, he changes his name into Nikhil before he starts the college life. An Indian Gogol shifts into an American Nikhil. The change in his name affects all his life style. Nikhil gives him an American way of life freedom that does not exist and is not accepted in Bengali culture. In the end of the novel, we see that Gogol is alone again. Two different conclusions can be drawn from his life situation in the end of the novel: Either he manages to embrace both his past and present life in a more mature way and he comes a total or he is different from both Gogol and Nikhil.

The great concern of the novel is that Gogol the representative of community without a name, is himself misnamed Gogol. He struggles with a name he is embarrassed by and a heritage either Indian or American he is not sure of either. Gogol wants to redefine himself as a born and brought up of USA rather than to be identified from his parent's Bengali immigrant culture. In order to get self definition, he abandons the name Gogol and tries to become someone else. The question of identity becomes crucial when a person is culturally displaced and he cannot co-relate with any of the two worlds in which he is living. While experiencing identity confusion from a change of names, Gogol is nonetheless able

to define his identity. Since Gogol is born after his father survives in a horrifying train accident, his father sees the name Gogol as a pet name as a gesture of his rebirth. However, Gogol does not understand how meaningful his name is when he is young. Gradually, he starts knowing the uncommon nature of his name which creates problems with his identity when he grows up. The main problem with Gogol is that he is a hyphenated character living in two totally different worlds, the stress of which he can't cope up, he is lost and drifts away from his parents and culture. 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. The name becomes a problem for Gogol, because he feels uncomfortable with the Russian name. It makes him to detach himself from his family members. Later on, Gogol develops dissatisfaction towards this name during adolescent, and decides to use his legal name, Nikhil, as an overcoat to escape from Indian culture. Although the name Nikhil brings him more confidence, Gogol is always present inside him. Soon he feels a sense of futility and dissatisfaction about avoiding his roots:

Without people in the world to call him Gogol, no matter how long he himself lives, Gogol Ganguli will, once and for all, vanish from the lips of loved ones, and so, cease to exist. Yet the thought of this eventual demise provides no sense of victory, no solace. It provides no solace at all. (*The Namesake* 289)

All his efforts pay him back with confusion about who he truly is. He sees himself as Nikhil, striving to be truly American, yet he fails to eradicate Gogol. By the end, he chooses to stick with "Gogol", is Indian identity, since he realizes that everything that he has gone through, from the botched naming attempt of his birth (Gogol) to his realization of the hope behind Gogol, is the meaningful fragment to define who he is.

The writers of Indian Diaspora practice a variety of literary forms and represent an extraordinary diversity of ethnicities, languages, and religious traditions. Emmanuel S.Nelson writes in the "Writers of the Indian Diaspora: A Bio-

Bibliographical Critical Sourcebook” that writers on the Indian Diaspora share a Diaspora consciousness generated by a complex network of historical connections, spiritual affinities, and unifying racial memories, and that this shared sensibility is manifested in the cultural productions of the Indian Diaspora communities around the world. The element of longing, homesickness and a ‘Quest for Identity’ or ‘Roots’ mark the Diaspora fiction.

As Terry Eagleton writes in, *The Idea of Culture* (2000) that the very word ‘culture’ contains a tension between makings and being made most Diaspora writers concentrate on generational differences in exploring how new and old Diasporas relate to their land of origin and the host culture. Often their major concerns in works are split and flowing nature of individual identities. The rootlessness, coupled with the indifferent attitude of host culture adds to sense of otherness and alienation. Indians of almost all Diasporas have sought to record the manner in which they have adapted to their environment. They have tried to demonstrate how they have experienced both identification with the new world and alienation from their old homeland. Jhumpa Lahiri has said, “The question of identity is always a difficult one, but especially for those who are culturally displaced, as immigrants are who grow up in two worlds simultaneously” (Eagleton 93). Due to the displacement, Diaspora’s quest for identity, a sense of inability to belong becomes all the more difficult and desperate. Diaspora’s sense of loss becomes tragic when they think of returning to their homeland. The homes to which they want to return undergoes complete transformation and turns out to be a romantic illusion. An immigrant longs for the world left behind in his native land but does not manage to belong to neither world. When he sees a new place, he sees some connection to the old place, forever searching for his old home in his new home. His loyalty, affection, culture are all a mix bag of old and new and always in an indeterminate state. His lives a double life-his life outside his house; he tries, without quiet succeeding, to belong to the new world, while his life inside his new home, he strives to replicate his old home, without much success either.

Likewise, Ashima, Gogol’s mother arrives in the USA with her husband Ashoke has no idea or dream to go into a place called Bosten so far off from her parents. But she agrees for the marriage since he (her husband) would be there. Ashima often feels upset and homesick and slept alone in their three room apartment which is too hot in summer and too cold in the winter, for removed from the description of house in the English novels she has read, she feels emotionally dislocated from the comfortable ‘home’ of her father full of so many loving ones and wants to go back. Ashima undergoes same phase and she feels that living in a foreign land is like a lifelong pregnancy. She clutches to her moral and cultures ideology of Bengali Indian. Ashima and Ashoke Ganguly try to create a small Bengal clutching to their roots and culture in America far from the land of their birth and struggling for an identity in the land of opportunities and riches. At home and with friends they speak in Bengali and eat only Bengali dishes. They find many Bengali friends and try to create their own community there. Often they used to throw parties to their friends in order to meet them. They wait eagerly for such gatherings. They try to restore their traditions by preparing Indian food, inviting Brahmin for rituals and so on. As Wieviorka states, when a Diaspora community is:

Constantly rejected or interiorized while only wanting to be included, either socially or culturally or when this group or this individual is racially discriminated, and demonized under the argument of a supposed cultural different then the individual or group is embarrassed and this eventually leads to a self definition and behaviors based on this culture and, eventually, racial distinction. (*Racism and Diasporas* 52)

An atmosphere of home is tried to be built up for children and themselves for from their real home. This sense of alienation from the western culture and the land where they live creates a feeling of rootlessness among the children who can neither co-relate with the place where they are born and bred nor to the place to which their parents belong to and about which they are always being told

about. Parents do their utmost to create Bengali ambience for Gogol and Sonia by arranging all Bengali get-togethers, but the two as they grew in hybrid culture, part Bengali, part American, Gingerly respond to their parents efforts to create a homeland in America, an oasis of Bengali culture, Ashima tells Gogol about Durga Puja, she also makes him memorize four line children's poem by Tagore. But at the same time she is conscious of her child being American student and makes him watch Sesame Street and the Electric Company in order to match with English he uses at school. So Gogol is always sailing in two boats simultaneously, one with his parents at home speaking Bengali and living in Bengali style and the other of American Indian.

Gogol had never seen his father expressing his thoughts, desires, and moods on any of the occasions. On one windy night, the revelation of the truth about his name comes as a shock to Gogol. He is stunned to know about his father's past that has survived a tragedy and had suffered in an inconceivable way:

He imagines his father, in his twenties as Gogol is now, sitting on a train as Gogol had just been, reading a story, and then suddenly merely killed. He struggles to picture the West Bengal countryside he has seen on only a few occasions, his father's mangled body, among hundreds of dead one, being carried on a stretcher, past a twisted length of maroon compartments. (*The Namesake* 123)

Like Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli; Gogol and Sonia struggle to respect their culture, while adapting to American society. Gogol has changed with the new culture in New York, and isolation had come into his life. Though he got support of his parents, he had become detached from them. It seemed that now he had no sentiments for them:

---after four years in New Haven he didn't want to move back to Massachusetts, to the one city in America his parents know. He didn't want to attend his father's alma mater, and live in an apartment in Central square as his parents once had, and revisit the streets about which his parents speak nostalgically. He didn't want to go

home on the weekends, to go with them to pujos and Bengali parties, to remain unquestionably in their world. (126)

Gogol finds quiet comfortable to get incorporated into the lives of Ratliffs family. He is enraptured by Maxine's pale green-gray eyes, and finds interest in talking to her parents Gerald and Lydia. He is too much influenced by their brand of hospitality, so much that he loses his own identity. He forgets his own country, his own culture, and his own parents:

Quickly, simultaneously, he falls in love with Maxine, the house, and Gerald and Lydia's manner of living, for to know her lover is to know and love all of these things. He loves the mess that surrounds Maxine. He learns to love the food she and her parents eat. He learns that one does not grate Parmesan cheese over pasta dishes containing seafood. He learns not to put wooden spoons in the dishwasher. The nights he spends there, he learns to wakeup earlier than he is used to. He learns to anticipate, every evening the sound of a cork emerging from a fresh bottle of wine. (*The Namesake* 137)

In contrast to Maxine, who shows all respect to her parents' tastes and a way of life, Gogol feels no exasperation for his own parents, no sense of obligation. He could imagine the differences in Maxine's parent's way of living, and his own. He could find only a dozen of guests invited to dinner at Maxine's house. Whereas at his parents' parties, he could see no fewer than thirty people invited, where his parents behaved more like caterers in their own home, watchful and waiting until most of the guests' plates were stacked by the sink. Though he knew that there was a wide difference in culture of his parents and Maxine's parents, he could not remain uninfluenced by the foreign culture:

He cannot imagine his parents sitting at Lydia and Gerald's table, enjoying Lydia's cooking, appreciating Gerald's selection of wine. He cannot imagine them contributing to one of the dinner party conversations. And yet here he is, night after night, a welcome addition to the Ratliff's universe, doing just that. (*The Namesake* 141)

Gogol becomes insensitive to his parents' desires. In spite of his mothers' request to visit Massachusetts to see off his father to the airport who was going for a research work to Ohio for nine months; Gogol prefers going to New Hampshire with Maxine for two weeks. Though Gogol takes Maxine to his parents' house, he is unable to appreciate their noble gestures. His mother had prepared meals, which had taken more than a day, yet he feels embarrassed by the effort she had put in for it. Gogol feels relieved in the world of Maxine, in contrast to the world of his parents, where he felt uneasy and uncomfortable:

He feels no nostalgia for the vacations he's spent with his family, and he realizes now that they were never really true vacations at all. Instead they were overwhelming, disorienting expeditions, either going to Calcutta, or sightseeing in places they did not belong to and intended never to see again. (*The Namesake* 155)

Moushumi is another character that experiences existentialist themes of freedom/freewill, denial of conventional values and a quest for authenticity. She is especially addicted to her freedom that gained in Paris. France is the country of two representatives of existentialist philosophy, Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, where self-determination was gained via the French revolution. Having been educated in Paris, Moushumi is a mixture of both revolution and existentialism on freedom. Although she is a member of the immigrant Bengali people, Her life style and behaviors are not confined to a specific culture. She is the symbol of existentialist thoughts. In addition to her free life style and her addiction to her freedom, she, meanwhile, is struggling to disconnect herself from whatever constitutes her Bengali identity. Bengali values hinder her from achieving whatever she believes to be her essence. Her regular visits to Dimitri's apartment and thus her betrayal to Gogol or the results of the struggle keeping her freedom and does not lose the connect between her identity and the term freedom. The reasons behind her betrayal is not just a quest for adventure or lust but "It reminds [Moushumi] of living in Paris- for a few hours at Dimitri's she is

inaccessible, anonymous". Dimitri's apartment is a shelter for her to escape from conventional rules of marriage and Bengali tradition. She relieves for a while when she is with Dimitri.

Another turning point comes in the life of Gogol, when his father expires. He feels the guilt and realizes the sentiments for him, looking at the left out things in his flat at Cleveland. A significant change comes in Gogol's life after the permanent absence of his father. He becomes indifferent to Maxine which leads to their breakup:

At first she'd been patient with him, and for a while he'd allowed himself to fall back into her life, going home after work to her parents' house, to their world in which nothing had changed. Initially she'd tolerated his silences at the dinner table, his indifference in bed, his need to speak to his mother and Sonia every evening, and to visit them, on weekends, without her. (*The Namesake* 188)

Lahiri depicts the desolation in the lives of Indians who settle abroad. She has depicted the lives of those who dwell abroad, leaving their respective family behind, and remains in a perpetual state of expectation and longing. Gogol realizes how his parents had lived their lives in American, in spite of what was missing. And making few trips to Calcutta would not have been enough for them to stay out of those perpetual fears, same way, Gogol had spent years maintaining distance from his parents. Just like a bird who returns to one's nest, Lahiri feels that finally one returns to one's own country. Ashima, now a widow, wanted to go back to India for few months.

Gogol wanted to correct his name—the first thing given by his father name but he could not correct his life, his life was a failure and his marriage was a misstep. The name had distressed him for years, which he could change, but he could not change the things which happened in his life, which prevailed, and which he endured till the end. And now when he realizes the significant of the name given by his father, and longs to be called 'Gogol', there is no one to call him by this name. His father is no more alive, and his mother-a-widow who is shifting to India would call him 'Gogol' only once a

week. The name which Gogol always despised, the name which he always hated, now would vanish. Nikhil had won over Gogol, but it did not give happiness to him. He realizes quite late that more than a name, a man's identity is important:

Without people in the world to call him Gogol, no matter how long he himself lives, Gogol Ganguli will, once and for all, vanish from the lips of loved ones and so, cease to exist. Yet the thought of this eventual demise provides no sense of victory, no solace. It provides no solace at all. (*The Namesake* 289)

Thus, alienated human beings become more estranged from themselves when they cannot control the occurrence of death but as it is stated by Filiz Peach, the belief in immortality is worse than the dread against mortality. Because, immortality ends existentialist inquiries and the quest for authenticity. By the same token, Moushumi's dread against death is conformation of her existential inclination. After a short time, she meets Dimitri's name and she forgets everything about Alice. Afterwards, she thinks that marriage is a convention on her ideal life and her freedom.

And yet the familiarity that had once drawn her to him has begun to keep her at bay. Though she knows it's not his fault, she can't help but associate him, at times, with a sense of resignation, with the very life she has resisted, has struggled so mightily to leave behind. In addition, she tries to live a free life that does not contain any conventional values especially from Bengali culture.

#### CONCLUSION

*The Namesake* convincingly illustrates the lives of both first generation and second generation Indian migrants in the USA. Alienation is a part of the experience of the Indian Diaspora and even if people are at home in any part of the world it does not mean that they will not become victims of the sense of alienation. Lahiri emphasizes the psychological displacement of the alienated Diaspora to create awareness about their efforts for psychological and physical survival. She illustrates also how the immigrants face cultural dilemmas in the foreign system. She has tried to answer all these questions in her own poise through the quest of

identity of her characters. The second generation Diaspora finds their roots only after undergoing cultural imbalance. Diaspora is all about the creation of new identities, spaces for growth, resolution of conflict and a new culture. Lahiri shows the immigrants in their enthusiasm to stick to their own cultural belief and customs gradually imbibe the cultural ways of the host country too. Their own children groomed to be 'bilingual' and 'bicultural' face cultural dilemmas and displacement more. But at last Lahiri also shows that all immigrants carve their own 'routes' in the course of time and it's not necessary that they should settle in the country of their own origin.

#### WORKS CITED

##### Primary Source

Lahiri, Jhumpa. *The Namesake*. New Delhi: Harper Collins, 2003. Print.

##### Secondary Sources

Aditya, Sinha. "Review of '*The Namesake the Malady of Naming*'", Hindustan Times: September 28, 2003. Print.

Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1994. Print.

Eagleton, Terry. *The Idea of Culture*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2000. Print.

Emmanuel Nelson, S. "*Writers of the Indian Diaspora: A Bio-Bibliographical Critical Sourcebook*". Delhi: Ravi Dayal and Permanent Books, 1998. Print.

Hall, Stuart. "*Cultural Identity and Diaspora*" *Contemporary Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. Wieviorka. Racism and Diasporas. Sage publications: 1998. Print.

Jawaid, Rifat. "*A home-coming for Jhumpa Lahiri*", rediff.com. Web.10 Jun. 2013. Print.

Rushdie, Salman. "*Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism*". London: Granta Books, 1991. Print.