

EXAMINING CULTURAL CONFLICT AND IDENTITY IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S *THE NAMESAKE*

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Abstract

Jhumpa Lahiri's novel, The Namesake, depicts the challenges and difficulties faced by a Bengali couple who emigrate to the United States in order to establish a new life away from their familiar surroundings. The text delves into the notions of cultural identity, displacement, tradition, and familial obligations in a clear and refined writing style. The prevalent themes in her fiction are remembrance, nostalgia, loss, and longing. Her narratives depict individuals who have migrated to different nations in search of improved circumstances, yet their previous experiences persist as a lingering presence, serving as a constant reminder of their original origins. This novel serves as a documentary, capturing the essence of these encounters. It portrays a vivid portrayal of a small family navigating the journey between two distinct realms. This study aims to analyse the characters of the first and second generations of immigrants in the novel The Namesake and investigate identity crises and complex cultural ties from the perspective of modern culture. The research aims to analyse the contrasting allure of the American lifestyle and the pull of customs within two distinct civilizations. The individuals in this story form a connection over time while living in a foreign country, and their cultural identity is always shaped by the ideals they have inherited.

Paper Identification



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Introduction

Jhumpa Lahiri and Kiran Desai's novels enhance reader engagement. Kiran Desai, a 2006 Booker Prize winner, tells the stories and tragedies of people and families of diverse cultures and religions in rural India or in America's

seductive and promising cities. Their protagonists' changing views of Englishness, self-imposed departures, and comparisons to adopted countries show postmodern disintegration. Both reader and character leave their worlds and pursue a common goal, the reader following a narrative storyline while the character crossing a geographical one. Lahiri's parents were Indian, and she moved to the US with them two years after her birth in London in 1967. Despite her admission that she felt neither Indian nor American growing up in Rhode Island in the 1970s, her narratives combine autobiographical and fiction through a dual lens.

The Namesake by Jhumpa Lahiri portrays the anguish of exile and alienation experienced by Indian diaspora residents residing in foreign cultures in the United States. In the book, Jhumpa Lahiri skillfully captures the sentimentality, assimilation, and resistance to assimilation experienced by Indian immigrants. She represents her subjectivity regarding immigrant experiences because she is an immigrant herself, having immigrated to India in the second generation. Her characters are uprooted in many ways, either for financial reasons (to find a place to live) or because they feel compelled to forge an identity amid the strange new surroundings and customs. Jhumpa Lahiri depicts characters that are seeking their identity and addresses their conflict in choosing to adopt the culture of their new home. She is a perfect example of the issue of belonging. Her roots are in other cultures, thus she tries to forge a new identity in the Indian-American cultural setting while also attempting to establish her original Bengali identity. Lahiri explains the enduring pain of humanity, which includes identity crises and cultural upheaval. She selects immigrants from Bengal because she is familiar with and has inherited the cultural customs of the region, and she does it in a vivid manner. From a philosophical point of view, Lahiri's characters in *The Namesake* bring together the ideas of Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus about why life exists. The characters act out the life of someone who is:

who is cast into an alien universe, to conceive the universe as possessing no inherent truth, value or meaning, and to represent human life—in its fruitless search for purpose and meaning, as it moves from the nothingness whence it came towards the nothingness where it must end—as an existence which is both anguished and absurd (Abrams 1).

The characters in Ashoke, Ashima, Gogol, and Moushumi show how traumatised people are. All of the characters are constantly trying to figure out who they are.

In addition to cultural clash, Lahiri talks about the clash between the generations over how to keep immigrant cultural ideals and traditions alive. When the second generation of immigrants gets bored with the host culture, this age gap will end. If you ask Jhumpa Lahiri how her own experiences as an immigrant show up in the book, she explains:

The question of identity is always a difficult one, but especially so for those who are culturally displaced, as immigrants are, of those who grow up in two worlds simultaneously, as is the case for their children. The older I get, the more I am aware that I have somehow inherited a sense of exile from my parents, even though in many ways I am so much more American than they are [...] I never know how to answer the question. “Where are you from?” If I say I am from Rhodes Island, people are seldom satisfied. They want to know more, based on things such as my name, my appearance, etc. alternatively if I say I am from India. A place where I was not born and have never lived, this is also inaccurate. It bothers me less now. But it bothered me growing up, the feeling that there was no single place to which I fully belong (Das 117).

The novel explores the experiences of second-generation immigrants and their struggle to find a sense of belonging. Moushumi experiences a sense of not fitting in, which compels her to seek her origins in the language and culture of France. Gogol faces a similar dilemma and attempts to integrate himself into American society. Despite their ongoing efforts to embrace the local culture, they are not recognised as completely American due to their skin colour. The colour of their skin poses a significant obstacle in the development of American identity. They are commonly referred to as A B C D (American born confused Desi) due to their feeling of disconnect from both American and Indian cultures. Lahiri portrays her experiences through the character of Gogol Ganguli. As a child, she struggled to comprehend her parents' strong commitment to Indian culture. As an adult, she acknowledges that she understands and empathises with her parents' situation as immigrants. Gogol, from a young age and even into adulthood, is not fond of his parents' strong attachment to Indian culture. He only comes to this realisation after his father passes away.

The novel portrays the experiences of the second generation of immigrants in opposition to the first generation's revered familial customs. First-generation immigrants strongly disagree with the American way of life; second-generation immigrants reject the cultural values they were born with and see them as obstacles to their integration into the host society. As a result, cultural fusion contaminates the home environment. The first generation's attempt to maintain Bengali culture's homogeneity inside the family gives way to a more diverse one. Divergences and complexity in relationships and attitudes arise from the second generation's inevitable integration into the host culture. In terms of Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli, they are able to maintain Bengali cultural traditions in one way or another. Gogol's birth deals the first shock to the traditional customs. Ashoke is instructed to give the child's name in order to obtain the birth certificate while the kid is being released from the hospital. Due to their need to wait for Ashima's grandmother's letter, this puts the pair in a difficult situation. A *bhalanam* (a good name) for their child is contained in the letter. The couple is compelled to give the infant an immediate name as the letter never arrives. Lahiri talks on the Bengali tradition of giving a kid two names: a *daknam*, which means pet name, used by close relatives and *bhalanam*, which means formal name or excellent name used in public.

Gogol Ganguli is the name of the child. His situation stems from the initial encroachment of American culture. Ashoke views Russian author Gogol as his saviour. The child's quandary is exacerbated by the unusual nature of the name Gogol, which is neither an American nor an Indian one. He becomes frustrated at school because of the name. The ensuing years are spent feeling even more alienated. One day, he needs to go to a cemetery as part of a history school field trip. There, he feels as though he is being disconnected from his birthplace. He feels as a Hindu; "he himself will be burned, not buried, that his body will occupy no plot of earth, that no stone in this country will bear his name beyond life" (*The Namesake* 69). On Gogol's 14th birthday, there is also an age gap between his father and son. Going through American songs after the party is over. When Ashoke walks into Gogol's room, it's like the first generation of immigrants walking into the lives of the second generation. Gogol really likes the music of John, Paul, George, and Ringo, and Ashoke bought him a tape of classical Indian music but; "still sealed in its wrapper" (78). The two are very different.

During his talk with his father is the same as his dislike of older people getting in the way. Surely, he is old enough now to understand that his name is unique and could make it hard for him to decide whether he is Indian or American. Deshpande writes; "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. He hates having to live with it, with a pet name turned good name, day after day,

second after second" (*The Namesake* 76). On the other hand, Ashoke Ganguli bestowed upon him the name that firmly established his Indian heritage. Because of the oddity of his name, he does not pursue ladies in the same way that other boys his age had already begun to do. When he first meets a girl, he conceals his identity and identifies himself as Nikhil. This brings about his first experience with a female. In an ironic turn of events, Gogol begins the process of assimilating into American culture by returning to the beliefs and practices of his ancestors. For the very first time in his life, he gives a girl a kiss while they are at a party. From this point on, he will no longer be bound by his distinctive name, nor will he be bound by the cultural beliefs that he has had passed down from his parents. Lahiri writes:

It's the first time he's kissed anyone, the first time he's felt a girl's face and body and breath so close to his own. "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, as 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 had nothing to do with it. (*The Namesake* 96).

Gogol, the protagonist of *Jhumpa*, is dichotomized in terms of his own ego. Due to the fact that Gogol is the son of Indian parents, he has reluctantly adopted the cultural norms and customs of his parents. The manner in which he conducts himself in regard to the customs and traditions of his parents is revolting. As Nikhil, he is fully incorporated into the society of the United States. His reluctance to accept his name, Gogol, which was bestowed upon him by his parents, is a manifestation of his disinterest in his Indian heritage, since he views his cultural heritage as a barrier to his assimilation into the American culture. One example of contra-acculturation is represented by the fact that his parents have maintained their Indian heritage. He decides to change his name, and it would appear that he is relieved of the stress of wearing a ridiculous name, as well as the load of the ideals and norms that were established by his parents' society:

But now that he's Nikhil it's easier to ignore his parents, to tune out their concerns and pleas. [...] It is as Nikhil that he loses his virginity at a party at Ezra Stiles, with a girl wearing a plaid woollen skirt and combat boots and mustard tights. By the time he wakes up, hung-over, at three in the morning, she has vanished from the room, and he is unable to recall her name (*The Namesake* 105).

People who are second generation American-Indians often make fun of Indian customs. When parents warn their children that adopting American ideals will not be liked by their conservative elders back home, the children react badly. When he's around American people, he feels farther away from his parents. Their repeated attempts to make him understand that he is Indian are annoying. His relationship with Ruth, the girl he meets on the train, is another way he tries to fit in with American society. His parents don't trust him and don't want him to be with Ruth because they know that Bengali men who marry American women end up in unhappy marriages and divorce. Gogol is sad because his relationship with this woman ended. Next, Gogol starts going out with Maxine. He ends up moving in with Maxine, who lives with her parents. Going on an affair with Maxine and then moving in with her parents is Gogol's way of trying to forget about his painful affair with Ruth.

In the process of discovering who he is, he distances himself from all that is his parents' property. Maxine's family is where he chooses to spend his vacation time. His goal is to get as far away as he can from the piece of his life that is

still associated with Gogol. During his time in Maxine's house, the third-person narrator makes the observation that, despite the fact that he presents himself as an American throughout his stay, he actually harbors an Indian sensibility. As a consequence of this, Gogol is confronted with yet another breakup in his relationship as a result of the cultural differences, since Maxine was unable to comprehend his willingness to stick to the customs of his family and culture. As time goes on, Maxine eventually comes clean about her feelings towards Gogol's mother and sister, which ultimately leads to Gogol withdrawing from Maxine's life forever. Gogol gives in to the pressure that his mother puts on him to begin a marriage. A marriage between Ashima and Moushumi is arranged by Ashima. On the other hand, due to Moushumi's errant behavior, this marriage is also prone to discord, which ultimately leads to the couple's divorce. Her first love, Dimitri, is still involved with her. Gogol's life suffers yet another disaster as a result of this. Gogol makes an effort to form a romantic connection with Moushumi on the basis of their shared cultural background; however, Moushumi's sexual activity that is out of control ultimately proves to be detrimental to Gogol's marriage.

At the conclusion of the book, Gogol is confused and does not have any priorities in life. The persona that he has built for himself as Nikhil does not offer any comfort. He lives his life with a feeling of humiliation and having failed. Despite his best efforts, he is unable to successfully connect himself with the American way of life;

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).

Ashima Ganguli is the quintessential example of a Bengali immigrant woman. She remains steadfast in her adherence to Bengali cultural norms and despises the Americanized methods of doing things. At the beginning of the book, she is a representation of feelings of loneliness, isolation, and nostalgia. According to the feminist perspective, she strengthens the patriarchal position that women occupy in society. Due to the fact that the patriarchy has placed the obligation of cultural preservation on women, she is a symbol of Indian culture because of her care and efforts to preserve her home culture. One interpretation of her worry and commitment to native traditions is that she is making an effort to preserve the cultural purity of her family space by shielding it from the profane behaviours that are prevalent in the host culture where she is living. She is a representation of the customs and ceremonies that are observed. As a critic explains:

In portraying Ashima's experiences and her diasporic translocation, there is no attempt to visualize a Utopian condition where societal structures would guarantee women their rightful place in society. Ashima does not seem to realize her condition: the inequitable distribution of power within the family structure. A total acceptance of the situation makes Ashima a conformist to the core. The concept of a visionary, futurist thought for women that Einstein had envisaged does not figure in Ashima's thought process. Women's subordination is an accepted 'given' for her (Nityanandam 104).

In short, Jhumpa does a great job of describing the problems immigrants face and calling them things that are wrong with them. The ways that the female characters try to keep their cultural roots alive show the patriarchal idea that women should protect native culture. Ashima is afraid that she will lose her personality in the new country. She is

becoming more like the people around her more slowly than her husband Ashoke. Her characters go through more than just cultural displacement and identity crises; they also have philosophical traits. They are trying to figure out who they are in a universe without God. Their deeds and lives are not controlled by anyone outside of themselves. The characters act like they were thrown into a world that doesn't make sense, and the stresses and pulls of their lives are making them confused. The first generation of immigrants are in even more trouble because their second generation is rebellious and doesn't agree with their parents. They also don't give in to the first generation's requests that they follow their ancestral culture.

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