

## **Demographics of Cultural Hybridization and Ectopic Identity in Jhumpha Lahiri's *Namesake***

**D. Devaraj**

Ph.D Research Scholar

Department of English

Annamalai University

### **Abstract**

This paper tries to foreground major and unexplored areas in Jhumpha Lahiri's *Namesake* (2003) like cultural dilemma, fixed identity, and diasporic consciousness. It is an attempt to visualize the identity, traumas, dilemmas, sufferings and finally assimilation of immigrants. Since Lahiri's fiction relates to the women immigrants of a new age, it enables to understand their psyche. This paper is of utmost importance as her protagonists present the true picture of the issues concerned with them in routine life such as cultural conflicts, marginalization, family relations, customs, rituals, lack of belonging, transformation, and adaptation.

**Keywords:** Marginalization, Cultural, Dilemma, Identity, Diaspora, Consciousness

### **Demographics of Cultural Hybridization and Ectopic Identity in Jhumpha Lahiri's *Namesake***

Jhumpha Lahiri is a significant writer of Indian diaspora who has enriched the corpus of international writing in English. Lahiri being an Indian by ancestry, British by birth and American by immigration has imbibed the multicultural lifestyle and this lifestyle plays a central theme in many of her stories. She writes portraits of women. Though in her works the characters are not entirely developed, the women she writes about are relatable and realistic. Her characters suffer emotional complexities that most authors cannot capture, but her writing style allows for difficult topics of conversation such as miscarriages, divorce, immigration and cultural identity crises.

Lahiri's *Namesake* is a narrative about the assimilation of an Indian Bengali family from Calcutta, the Gangulis, into America, over thirty years. It recounts the cultural dilemmas experienced by them and their American born children in different ways, and the spatial, cultural and emotional dislocations suffered by them in their efforts to settle home in the new land. The story begins as Ashoke and Ashima leave Calcutta, India and settle in Central Square, in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Through a series of errors, their son's nickname, Gogol, becomes his official birth name, an event that will shape many aspects of his life in years to come. As Abha Kaushik-Shukla, in *Diaspora and Cross-Cultural Identity: A Study of Jhumpha Lahiri's Fictional Works*, correctly points out one of the important features of Lahiri's writing in the following remark;

Whether it is the stories in the collection, *Interpreter of Maladies* or at the novel *The Namesake* they are the testament of Lahiri's versatility as a writer. She has the ability to change cultural perspective ... works are written from a perspective that is between cultures. (67)

The novel deals with the second-generation immigrants and their lack of belonging. The experiences of the second-generation immigrants are in contrast to the sanctified familial traditions of the first generation. The first generation strongly disapproves of the American life style, but the second-generation immigrants discard the cultural values that they inherited, and view them as hindrances in their course of assimilation into the host culture. Thus, the family space is contaminated through cultural

hybridization. The homogeneity of Bengali culture, that the first generation is trying to preserve in the family space, concedes to a heterogeneous one. The inevitability of assimilation in the host culture in the second generation gives rise to the divergences and complexities of relationship and opinions.

Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli represent the first-generation immigrants. They manage to preserve the cultural traditions of Bengal. The first blow to the cultural traditions occurs at Gogol's birth. At the time of discharging the baby from the hospital, Ashoke is told to name the child to get the birth certificate. This puts the couple into a dilemma, as they have to wait for the letter from Ashima's grandmother. The letter contains a *bhalonam* (a good name) for their child. As the letter does not arrive, the couple is forced to name the child instantly. The Bengali custom is to giving two names to a child; the *bhalonam* (a formal name) that is used in the public spaces and *daknam* (meaning "a pet name") that is used in the family by near and dear ones. But the child is named "Gogol Ganguli." Gogol is a Russian writer whom Ashoke treats as a saviour. The peculiarity of the name, Gogol, which is neither an American name nor an Indian one, increases the child's dilemma. The name becomes a cause of exasperation for him in school. The sense of alienation continues in the following years. One day, on a school trip of some historical intent, he has to visit a cemetery. There, he experiences a delinking from the land where he was born. He realises that being 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" (69).

The cemetery is thus employed as a metaphor, suggesting Gogol's lack of roots in the country. He does not have any ancestral history in the land that would connect him to any tradition in the national space; he is so different that his social and religious rite will be incompatible with those of the new country. This discovery may not be much of a shock to the members of the first-generation Indian Americans, but it is certainly a source of anxiety for their children who passionately seek acculturation and integration.

A generation gap between father and son is visible on Gogol's fourteenth birthday. After the party is over, Gogol is listening to American music. Ashoke's entrance into Gogol's room is analogous to the first generation's intrusion into the lives of the second-generation immigrants. The music album by John, Paul, George and Ringo of whom Gogol is a devotee is in the sharp contrast to the cassette of classical Indian music that Ashoke has bought for Gogol, "still sealed in its wrapper" (78). Gogol's lukewarm response towards Indian classical music demonstrates the second generation's indifference towards Indian culture and tradition. Gogol's eagerness to return to his lyrics (75) during his confabulation with his father is equivalent to his aversion towards the interference of the older generation. By now, he is old enough to realise the peculiarity of his name that becomes an obstacle in the formation of his identity either as an Indian or as an American.

Ashoke Ganguli gave him the name that consolidated his Indian roots. Because of the peculiarity of his name, he does not court girls as other boys of his age had already done. His first encounter with a girl takes place when he hides his name and introduces himself as Nikhil. Ironically, Gogol reverts to the culture of his ancestors to initiate the process of merging into American culture. He kisses a girl during a party for the first time in his life. From now on, he casts off his peculiar name, as well as the cultural values that he has inherited from his parents.

Lahiri dichotomizes the self of the protagonist Gogol. As Gogol, the son of Indian parents he has grudgingly imbibed cultural values and traditions. His response towards the tradition and culture of his parents is distasteful. As Nikhil, he is integrated into American society. His angst towards his name, Gogol, given by his parents, reflects his indifference towards his Indian roots as he considers his cultural roots an impediment to his acculturation. His parents' adherence to their Indian roots is an instance of contra acculturation. He changes his name, and apparently, he feels relieved of the burden of bearing a ludicrous name as well as the burden of values and regulations, laid down by his parental culture.

The second generation American-Indians often demonize Indian culture. The parental indication that imbibing American values would not be appreciated by the conservative elders back

home result in negative reactions. The closer he gets to American society, the more he is detached from his parents. Their constant endeavours to make him realize his Indianness serve as irritants. His courtship of Ruth, the girl, he meets on the train represents another attempt to identify himself with American culture. His parents distrust and discourage his relationship with Ruth for they have witnessed the marital disharmony and consequent divorces in the lives of Bengali men married to American women.

The termination of this love affair leaves Gogol depressed. Next, Gogol starts dating Maxine. Eventually he moves to Maxine's home that she shares with her parents. Gogol's affair with Maxine and his subsequent shifting to her parental home is his endeavour to erase the painful memories of his affair with Ruth. He also wants to forget everything that pertains to his earlier days. He detaches himself totally from his parents. The sense of alienation from Indian culture makes him so disorientated that

He feels no nostalgia for the vacations he's spent with his family, and he realises 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. (155)

In his pursuit of identity, he shuns everything that belongs to his parents. He spends his vacations with Maxine's family. He wants to be as far as possible from the remnant of his life as Gogol. The third person narrator points out that beneath his outward Americanness that he creates during his stay at Maxine's house, there lurks an Indian sensibility. The narrator comments, "he is conscious of the fact that his immersion in Maxine's family is a betrayal of his own." The narrator proves to be true as the death of Ashoke Ganguli, his father, shakes him and he becomes conscious of his filial duties, incurred by his Indian heritage. He returns to his family in order to mourn his father's death. His attachment to his family serves as a jolt to his affair with Maxine. Gogol realises the cultural distance between himself and Maxine. He is aware that "his father's death does not affect Maxine in the least" (182). Conversely, he has a wide circle of his father's Bengali acquaintances that are deeply moved by his father's death. Gogol notices Maxine's self-centred attitude even at the mourning of his father's death when she asks about his plan for New Year's Eve. Gogol now has the strength not to succumb to Maxine's invitation of escape from his roots.

Consequently, Gogol faces another split in his affair due to the cultural differences, as Maxine could not understand his adherence to his family and cultural traditions. Eventually Maxine admits her dislike for Gogol's mother and sister that prompts Gogol to step out of Maxine's life forever. Gogol succumbs to his mother's pressure to get married. Ashima arranges his marriage with Moushumi. However, tragically this marriage also is subjected to disharmony and a consequent split owing to Moushumi's wayward attitude. She still dates Dimitri, her first love. This causes another failure in Gogol's life. Gogol tries to establish a relationship with Moushumi on the grounds of cultural similarity, but Moushumi's unruly sexual behaviour proves fatal to Gogol's marital life.

At the end of the novel, Gogol is bewildered and has no objective. The identity, he has created as Nikhil, provides no solace. He lives with a sense of failure and shame. All his endeavours to identify himself with American life end in a fiasco. 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. In short, Gogol epitomizes existential traits, searching for his identity, living with a sense of alienation; he exemplifies the predicament of human life. Tejinder Kaur in her article "Cultural Dilemma's and Displacement of Immigrants in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Namesake* analyses Gogol's predicament:

Gogol (Nikhil), though having passed through many emotional setbacks because of his 'bicultural' identity, is shown to be feeling dejected, distressed, displaced and lonely in the end not knowing what to do after thwarting of his dreams, his father's death, his

wife's desertion and his mother's impending departure to India, but his desires to settle a home, have a family and a son and rise professionally in other countries hint at his quest for the new "route" which will dawn on him after his reflections in the company of the stories by his namesake, Nikolai Gogol-gifted to him by his father. (127)

The novel represents Gogol's attempts to piece together a fractured identity. He ultimately returns to where he started from. Moushumi is another character who exemplifies existentialism. She suffers from a lack of belonging and her quest for belonging urges her to find her roots in the third language and culture of France. Gogol suffers from the same dilemma and tries to mingle with the Americans. Despite their continual efforts to imbibe the host culture, they are not identified as fully American because of the colour of their skin. The colour of their skin becomes a major impediment in the course of formation of American identity. They are called ABCD (American Born Confused Desi) because of their sense of alienation for either culture - American and Indian.

Lahiri demonstrates her experiences through the character of Gogol Ganguli. As a child, she did not understand her parents' adherence to Indian culture. As an adult, she admits that she sympathises with her parents' predicament of being immigrants. Gogol as an adolescent, even as an adult, is averse to his parental adherence to Indian culture. This realization comes to him only after the death of his father.

Gogol gets married to her in order to enculturate his Bengali identity. Moushumi shares the ethos of the second-generation Bengali immigrants. She is a research scholar, working on the French Feminist Theory. She has a peculiar sense of alienation, as she neither opts for her parental Bengali identity, nor does she fully belong to American culture. Rather, she goes to a third language and culture, in order to formulate her identity. She indulges in wayward behaviour and sexual adventures in France. During her stay in France, she had affairs with men of different nationalities. Like Gogol, she also had failed love affairs with Graham and Dimitri.

As in her other works, Lahiri delineates how the second-generation immigrants blunder in their attempts to frame an identity. Often, they are unable to get out of the in-between state. Ashima and Ashoke Ganguli representing the first-generation Indian immigrants epitomize a sense of alienation and strict adherence to native cultural values. Ashoke's dislocation from his native land and culture is due to his desire to pursue higher studies and find better future prospects with security and respect. Ashoke's migration specifies the phenomenon of brain drain. As Ashoke's migration is purely for professional progress, he has a strong sense of acculturation. He easily overcomes all the odds in the course of his adjustment into American culture. Despite his disposition to adjust in the host culture, he has an affinity with his native Bengali cultural values and traditions. His efforts to socialize with other Bengali expatriates and the gatherings of Bengalis at his home to celebrate various Bengali traditions are due to his urge to stick to his ancestral, cultural roots. He wants to instil the values that he has inherited from his parents into his children in order to preserve his Bengali identity. His act of naming his son after Nikolai Gogol can be interpreted as his efforts to revive the memories of his past. Though these reminiscences are painful, they are an essential part of his psyche.

Lahiri has projected various themes in the novel. Besides the dilemma of belongingness, sense of exile, feminism and existentialism, she has presented the problems of American insensitivity in the novel. The immigrants are not recognized as American. They are ridiculed for the peculiarity of names by the natives. Gogol realizes this marginalization and humiliation when somebody shortens the spelling of Ganguli into Gang, written on the nameplate of the mailbox. He also realizes that his father's Indian accent makes him a butt of ridicule and marginalized.

*The Namesake* deals with both the process of dislocation and relocation that is characteristic of the postcolonial diasporic subject. Lahiri uses naming as a metaphor of the effects the processes of dislocation and relocation have on the diasporic subject that has to deal with a double belonging, that is, to a place of residence as well as to an imaginary homeland that makes itself present in the heritage

and memories of its subjects. Towards the end of the novel, pondering upon his life and relationships, Gogol is different. He feels guilty about his own ways of life through the years. Family is vital for him now. And looking into the past he is frightened to see that not only it has been his own routine to abandon the family but also it is a family tradition done by his parents as well. He does not hate his name any more. He starts losing the emotional network of family one by one and he misses the name.

*The Namesake* suggests bondage and symbolized in a name. The protagonist of the novel, Gogol Ganguli, is never really relieved of his name and namesake. One can never be totally free of an overcoat and there is no such thing as a pristine and authentic identity which might then be covered by a free choice of cultural, personal attire, habits, norms.

Despite all the description of Gogol's troubles with his true identity and displacement during his life, there is a hidden desire of freedom in him. His self suffers from its cultural captivity which is caused by his parents' roots, and not finding solace in his American side is related to his instinctual desire for freedom and emancipation from the identity-related captivity. To be identified as a pure American subject does not save him from his psychological captivity, neither does his symbolic return to his supposed identity associated with his parents' life-roots in India at the end of the novel. Seeing this matter from such an angle would reveal opposite aspects to the theme of displacement which is commonly regarded as abject. Just like the desire for a fixed identity in human beings, there is a parallel opposition in their nature to escape boundaries caused by fixed identities. A fixed identity is as much restrictive as the lack of it.

Lahiri's *Namesake* is about the generational differences of diasporic community. She also talks about the problems of second-generation diaspora after their assimilation in the host culture. Very succinctly and elaborately she has discussed the dilemmas, conflicts and confusions which have cropped up in the minds of these young people about their adjustments, adaptations and assimilations in the new country. Lahiri makes an impressive exploration of the human mind in varied situations beset in an alien country. In the backdrop of India, and America, she makes her characters come alive creating a universal story of love and happiness teaching the lesson of humility, equality and motivating to preserve the good of the past to face the present challenges. The narrations suggest a positive note of a society where the traditional and the modern world meet asserting the worth of human life.

#### References

1. Biswas, Mita. "Cultural Dilemmas in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*." *Reflections*, Vol.5
2. No.1, 2006, pp. 17-25.
3. Lahiri, Jhumpa. *The Namesake*. Harper Collins, 2006.
4. Kaur, Tejinder. "Portrayal of Diaspora Experiences Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*." *The Quest*, Vol.16 No.2, 2002, pp. 36-44.
5. Mishra, Jyoti. "Merging Identities: Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*." *The Quest*, Vol.19 No.1, 2005, pp. 27-31.
6. Rathore, Madhvi. "Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*: A Study of Cross-Cultural Issues." *Poetcrit*, Vol.23 No.2, 2010, pp. 98-102.
7. Shukla-K aushik, Abha. "Diaspora, and Cross-Cultural Identity: A Study of Jhumpa Lahiri's
8. Fictional Works." *Women Writers of Indian Diaspora*. Creative Books, 2010, pp 53-67.
9. Singh, Anita. "Cultural Identity and Diaspora: Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*." *The Atlantic*
10. *Literary Review Quarterly* Vol.7 No.2, 2006, pp. 1-14.
11. Singh, Savita. "The Theme of Roots and Wings in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*." *Poetcrit*
12. Vol.18 No.2, 2005, pp. 28-34.