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Ambivalence Over Identities in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*

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Abstract:

Indian Diasporic literature reflects the dilemma of Indian immigrants who are searching for their identity in an unknown country far away from their homeland. There have been many writers of Indian origin who have made the Indians, who are troubled by the clash of cultures and trying to establish their roots in a foreign land, the subject of their novels. Some of the most prominent names among them are V.S. Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, Rohinton Mistry, Kiran Desai, Cyril Dabydeen, Shani Muthoo, M. G. VasANJI, Ved Mehta, Kamala Markandaya, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Jhumpa Lahiri, etc.

Jhumpa Lahiri, in her novel *The Namesake*, has narrated the story of one such couple born in Kolkata who migrate to the United States but whose children, having grown up abroad, consider it their home and are completely ignorant about their culture. The novel *The Namesake*, as its name suggests, is a story of searching for the cultural identity associated with one's name. Jhumpa Lahiri has tried to show the psychology of immigrants and their struggles through her main characters. Although the novel, apart from the search for identity, also reflects problems like lack of belongingness, tradition, alienation, loneliness, etc., its main theme is the search for real existence swinging between two countries and different cultural identities. The objective of this research paper is to analyze the ongoing conflict between names related to one's real identity and culture and foreign glitter and artificial identity in *The Namesake*.

Keywords: Identity, Belongingness, Foreign, Immigrants, Culture.

Introduction:

Jhumpa Lahiri was born in London on July 11, 1967. In 1999, her short story collection *Interpreter of Maladies* was published, which was given the famous Pulitzer Prize and with this, Jhumpa Lahiri proved her literary talent. She was the first American woman of Asian origin to be honored with this award. Along with writing short stories, Jhumpa Lahiri has also displayed her talent in her novels like *The Namesake* (2003) *The Lowland* (2013), and *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008). The subjects of her stories are varied but one universal theme that is constantly seen in her stories is the search for identity as author Jaydeep Sarangi says,

“Jhumpa Lahiri’s stories are the gateway into the large submerged territory of ‘cross-culturalism’. It is a metaphor to share cultures...something that will allow them/us to share instead of dividing, what is on either side”.

The Namesake is a study of cultural diversity and its major characters suffer from the ambivalence of Identity. Being cut off from their homelands and their cultural roots, they feel alienated and lost in a foreign environment. Its major character Gogol, who belongs to a traditional Bengali family, feels stuck between the Indian native tradition and the mainstream American culture where he grows up. The novel presents The conflict of Gogol who faces the pulls of different cultures and different traditions and tries to find out his real identity and name, becomes an emotional and real tale of those who are facing the tensions of one's culture in a foreign environment. Jayawanti Dimri says:

“Expatriate experience is problematic for the second-generation immigrants of the third world..... Born and brought up on a foreign soil...popular symptoms of angst, loneliness, existential rootlessness or homelessness.... Despite their assimilation and acculturation, they cannot escape from being victimized and ostracized.”

Immigration and Collision of Cultures in *The Namesake*:

The novel *Namesake* begins in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in the year 1968. The two protagonists, Ashoke Ganguli and his wife Ashima Ganguli are from West Bengal, India, and have

settled in America since 1967. Ashoke Ganguli has graduated in Electrical Engineering from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and is now pursuing his doctorate. He has an arranged marriage with Ashima and she belongs to Kolkata. Before coming to America with her husband, Ashima was completely imbued with the colors of her West Bengali family. After coming here, she encounters a completely different American culture. After some time, Ashima starts having labor pains and is admitted to the hospital. Ashima feels alone in a foreign land at the time of her delivery. Lahiri comments:

“Being a foreigner is a sort of lifelong pregnancy, a perpetual wait, a continuous feeling out of sorts. It is an ongoing responsibility a parenthesis in what has once been ordinary life, only to discover the previous life has vanished, replaced by something more complicated and demanding.”

When a son is born here, according to a Bengali tradition, he should be named after his grandparents but here both the husband and wife feel completely alone. According to the hospital rules, he cannot take the child from the hospital until his name is mentioned. Ashoka is thinking about this in the waiting room and recalls an old incident when in 1961, he was going from Kolkata to Jamshedpur to meet his grandfather, and the train got damaged in a terrible accident. At that time Ashoke was reading the famous Russian writer Nikolai Gogol. Ashoka was badly injured in this accident and some torn pages of Nikolai Gogol’s book were left in his hand. Ashoke was in such a bad condition that he couldn’t even call anyone for help. His hand was hanging out of the window and the torn pages of the book were flying in the air perhaps due to this the rescue team’s attention was drawn towards him and he was saved. Ashoke always thanked Russian writer Nikolai Gogol for this rescue and when he had a son, he thought of naming him after Gogol, and thus his son was named Nikhil Gogol. Because there is a tradition in Bengali families that every person has two names, one which is the pet name called by the family members and the other which is the formal or good name and that is why Ashoka named his son Nikhil Gogol, Gogol to be called at home and Nikhil to be used outside as a formal good name. Ashoke settled in Cambridge with his wife Ashima where he started working as an assistant professor at a local university. When Google turned five, Ashima became pregnant again. Gogol was presented for admission in kindergarten and his parents enrolled him in school with his formal name Nikhil. This was also inspired by the Russian writer Nikolai Gogol of whom Ashoke was a fan but after a few days in school, five-year-

old Nikhil gave more priority to Gogol as his name and the result was that the school principal and his parents had to change her name to Gogol in school. Meanwhile, Ashima gave birth to a baby girl and gave her a Bengali name, Sonali, as per the Bengali tradition. Sonali was called Sonia at home. *The Namesake* deals with the problem of this second generation and their lives in the United States, like Lahiri herself, facing cultural displacement.

Gogol's Conflict: Problem of Hybrid or Dual Identity:

The novel *The Namesake* shows Gogol's struggle to separate his identity from his unusual name. Gradually the American culture and environment dominate him and he feels that his name Gogol is very awkward and strange. Gogol does not like his name so he decides to change it to Nikhil but even after that, he feels restless as he has no real identity of his own. Gogol feels a rootlessness which makes his name even more powerful in front of him. This Gogol name repeatedly makes him feel that he is not an American. When he turns 18, Gogol legally changes his name to Nikhil, but he still feels that the name is not leaving him. Even after the change he fails to establish his identity. He fails to realize that Gogol and Nikhil are part of his personality. He feels as if, "*He's cast himself in a play-acting the part of twins indistinguishable to the naked eye, yet fundamentally different.*"

He wants to run away from his roots, swinging between Nikhil and Gogol. Social upheavals and hybridity bother him. Gogol, being culturally hybrid and isolated from himself, is searching for his identity. He wants to become Nikhil, for with Nikhil or Nick, he perhaps seems more acceptable in American culture. One day Gogol meets an American girl named Maxine Ratliff. Gogol feels closer to Maxine, while he feels like a stranger in his traditional Bengali family environment. He is more affected by the American culture of her family than Maxine. After a while, he takes Maxine to meet his parents and everything goes well. Maxine likes his Indian parents, whom Gogol himself doesn't like much. Gogol is working as an architect while living in a small apartment in New York, hence he gets a chance to spend time in the big apartment of Maxine's family for which he considers himself lucky. Ashima is working as a visiting professor in Cleveland, Ohio. And Ashima is left alone in Pemberton as Sonia also moves to California.

One Sunday afternoon, Ashima gets a call from Ashoke that he is going to the hospital complaining of some pain but when his call does not come back after several hours, Ashima calls

the hospital to inquire but gets the news that Ashoke died of a heart attack. Ashima tries to call Gogol but is unable to talk to him. Sonia calls Gogol and tells him the news. Gogol goes to Cleveland the next day to collect her father's body. He returns to Pemberton a day later and spends the next ten days with his mother and sister, as happens in traditional Bengali families after a death.

Ashoke's death proves to be a turning point in Gogol's life. He follows all the traditions on his father's death and even shaves his head. When Maxine gets this information, she too goes to attend the funeral. She arrives there, but Gogol does not feel embarrassed in her presence by meeting his traditional Bengali family and practicing traditions that he previously thought were useless which made him feel less American by being associated with them. His girlfriend invites him to go on a vacation with her to escape the vaccine stress but Gogol refuses, saying that he cannot leave his family responsibilities and his mother behind. After staying with his mother for a whole month, Gogol learns about the importance of family and traditions. He remembers how on his 14th birthday, his father gifted him a book of short stories by Russian writer Nikolai Gogol, but Perhaps he found listening to The Beatles more interesting than reading a book given to him by his father. After a month with her family, Sonia decides to go back to California to attend law school and Gogol goes back to New York to work, making sure to see his mother and sister every week. Gradually, a year passes after Ashoke's death and Gogol's relationship with Maxine almost ends. Maxine also gets tired of Gogol's growing family love and gets engaged with someone else. Sonia comes to live with Ashima and takes over the entire household duties after some time, making Ashima free from daily chores.

Hyphenated Personality Crisis; Second-Generation Immigrants:

Ashima asks Gogol to settle down and eventually agrees to meet Moushumi Majumdar, the daughter of an old family friend of hers. Moushumi is pursuing a doctorate in French Literature from New York. They both feel comfortable meeting each other and gradually a relationship develops between them. Leaving their American lovers and belonging to the same traditional background, they feel comfortable with each other and after one year of dating, Moushumi and Gogol decide to get married. Gogol remembers his father with every tradition at the time of his marriage. Moushumi and Gogol's marriage does not work out because both live in their American past and both are struggling with opposite cultures. Moushumi loves French literature and art. When she goes to Paris, she presents a paper on French culture and art. She has a frank discussion

on French art with her ex-boyfriend Graham. Google feels bad for doing this. Soon they start having differences over small things, which gradually turn into fights. Living in two cultures, both Google and Moushumi are searching for their real identity, which is lost somewhere in the American culture. Neither of them is a traditional Indian. Neither could they remain Bengali nor could they become completely American. This question of identity becomes the reason for their mutual conflicts. The problem is the same for both of them. Despite living on foreign soil and growing up in a foreign culture, he could not become one who belonged to the country. This is the pain of every single immigrant which not only they but also their next generation has to feel. Second-generation children are hyphenated personalities with a sense of in-betweenness. This feeling initiates them into their journey towards transnationalism. Lahiri herself experienced this as she writes:

“When I was growing up in Rhode Island in the 1970’s I felt neither Indian nor American. Like many immigrants offsprings, I felt intense pressure to be two things, loyal to the old world and fluent in the new, approved of on either side of the hyphen. Looking back, I see that this was the case. But my perception as a young girl was that I felt short of both ends shutting between two dimensions that had nothing to do with another.”

The Things Fall Apart Between Gogol and Moushumi:

There are several incidents and situations in *The Namesake* when Gogol feels lonely. After his marriage to Moushumi, he feels isolated and ignored in the company of her Western artistic and literary mind friends. Lahiri writes:

“He is particularly mute when he and Moushumi get together for dinner with groups of her French friends. From the beginning, he feels useless as Moushumi makes all the decisions, and does all the talking. For some reason in Moushumi’s company, he feels more apologetic than excited.”

Their marriage strains. Moushumi likes spending time with her artistic Brooklyn friends whereas Gogol finds them frustrating and selfish. At the University, Moushumi comes across a man named Dimitri Desjard, whom she knows from her teenage and college years. She begins an affair with him. In reality, she was dissatisfied with her life with Gogol and rekindled her romance

with a man she knew from her teenage years. Gogol learns about her affair and they settle for a divorce. Their marriage failed because they have capitulated to their parental pressure. Again their marriage pinpoints the rejection of Indian cultural moorings by second-generation diaspora. Identity crisis and cultural context always become the reason for the confrontation. Gogol suffers from the contradictions between the two cultures because he tries to adopt the American culture by rejecting the traditional Indian values of his parents. He becomes a stranger to himself because he refuses to accept or acknowledge his roots.

The novel comes to a close at Christmas time in the year 2000. The last chapter is full of the nostalgic feelings of Ashima as she is hosting her last Christmas party in the house on Pemberton Road. She remembers her husband Ashoke and the house has been sold to a young American family. Ashima put on a thick pink robe gifted by her husband as a reminder of the life they spent together. Ashima decides to spend six months in India and six months in America for the rest of her life. She decides to live with her brother Rana and his family when in Kolkata and to live with her children and Bengali friends when in the United States. The marriage of Sonia and Ben is scheduled to be solemnized in Calcutta the following year. Ashima is happy about the marriage because of their loving relationship while she feels guilty for Moushumi and Gogol's unsuccessful and unhappy marriage who are now divorced. Ashima asks Gogol to fetch the camera and he goes upstairs to pick up his father's Nikon camera. An empty room welcomes him without the presence of his father and he is greatly distressed to see this. Gogol finds many books in a box which Ashima has told him will be donated to the library where she works. Among the books, one catches his attention and it was the copy of the short stories of Nicholai Gogol, his namesake, that his father had gifted him on his 14th birthday but still lies unread. Gogol sadly reads the inscription on the book and gloomily reflects that soon there will be no one left to call him by his pet name Gogol. He closes the door and sits down to read the book that had saved his father's life. As he opens the book to read the first story *The Overcoat*, he realizes that his mother would call him for help in the arrangements of the party but for now, Gogol settles against the headboard and begins to read.

Although the novel *The Namesake* begins with Ashima leaving home and going to America where she feels very alone, the end shows Ashima's return from America when she decides to spend time in Kolkata and sells Pemberton Roadhouse. The meaning of the name Ashima is one

who is beyond the borders and Ashima has presented this in a very beautiful way in the novel. Lahiri says :

“Ashima divides six months of her life in India, six months in States.....true to the meaning of her name, she will be without borders, without a home of her own, a resident everywhere and nowhere.”

Gogol finally succeeds in discovering his identity which he had been avoiding from the beginning. He understands that his old pet name Gogol and his Indian cultural identity will always be with him and that his name is a form of his identity. He is both Gogol and Nikhil, where their identities merge into each other and take on a new existence. In the end, reading the book given by his father to Gogol, written by the Russian writer Nikolai Gogol, actually symbolizes a new journey. It is a discovery in which he is searching for his lost past. His closing the door and sitting down to read a book symbolizes that he is realizing where his roots really belong and now this name given to him by his father becomes an inseparable part of his personality. Reading Nikolai Gogol's story *The Overcoat* brings back memories of his father and helps him understand how true his father's feelings were for him and his family.

Conclusion:

The novel *The Namesake* traces the struggle of the major characters Gogol, Ashima, Moushumi, etc. for a fixed identity in a new and alien country while continuously facing the dilemma of being foreign. Gogol's marriage with Moushumi has the trappings of the Indian diaspora. Both Gogol and Moushumi are aware of their inner distances, distractions, and veiled dissatisfaction with each other. The recurring theme of Lahiri's novel is the cultural dissonance faced by Indian immigrants in America. Her fiction voices their cultural dilemmas and displacement through the nostalgia of alienation, exile, issues of displacement, divided identities, hybrid identities, etc.,

The New York Times reports:

“This is a novel as affecting in its Chekhovian exploration of fathers and sons, parents and children as it is resonant in its exploration of what is acquired and lost by immigrants and their children and pursuit of American dreams.”

The novel addresses two cardinal issues’ firstly the difficulties faced by first-generation Indian immigrants to assimilate the cultural practices of the host culture and secondly, the endeavors of the second-generation immigrants to get recognition as natives of the host country. They hesitate and dislike to accept the lifestyle of their parents. In the novel, the first-generation immigrants are reluctant to adopt the customs of foreign countries. Ashoke was initially very hesitant and celebrating Christmas and Thanksgiving gatherings. Ashima hosts a Christmas party after Ashoke’s demise. Gogol represents the second generation of the Indian diaspora who suffers from a fractured identity because of that typical name. To avoid being a misfit in a foreign land, they must make a series of distressing choices. The first-generation immigrant begins their journey on a note of departure and appreciation but the subsequent generation experiences a sense of arrival and advantage. Thus, immigrants struggle to be loyal to their old world while assimilating into the new world. The writer chronicles the paradigm shift and drift in cultures between the two continents and how they impact and influence the strong cultural ties.

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