



"Cultural Identity and Diaspora." Jhumpa Lahiri's The Namesake

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Abstract :

When Lahiri was two years old, her parents decided to go to the United States, thus she was born in London to Indian parents. As an immigrant child, I felt enormous pressure to be two things: loyal to the old world and fluent in the new, accepted on both sides of the hyphen. Like many other immigrant kids, I felt this strong strain to be loyal to the old world and fluent in the new. Looking back, this seems to be the norm. It seemed to me at the time that "I couldn't connect the dots between two worlds that had nothing to do with each other" (My Two Lives, 2006). Reading Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* through the lens of Stuart Hall's article on "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" is the goal of this study. In the first paragraph of his article, Hall argues that identity is not as simple and straightforward as we believe it is. Instead of seeing identity as a finished object, we should see it as a work in progress, one that is constantly shaped by, and never separate from, representation. The term "cultural identity" is defined by Hall as a process of "becoming" and "being" (Hall, qtd in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory*, 1993: 394). It is as much a part of the future as it is the past that defines our cultural identity. Not anything that already exists, regardless of time, location or history.

Introduction :

Authors Jhumpa Lahiri and Kiran Desai are two of the most well-known in this group. Author Jhumpa Lahiri, who won the Pulitzer Prize in 2000, is revered for her groundbreaking explorations of the problems and hopes faced by diasporic people. Booker Prize-winning author and Indian-born American-born writer Kiran Desai also has a unique ability to tell the stories of people from diverse cultures and faiths, either in the background of rural India or the enticing and hopeful metropolis of the United States. Through their characters' shifting views about Englishness and self-imposed exile from their nation, the postmodern fragmentation is depicted. These two authors' books extend rather than restrict the reader's experience with the material. Each of these authors' works has a protagonist and a reader who both leave their familiar worlds to pursue a common objective; the reader is involved in a narrative storyline, while the protagonist is traversing a



geographical one. That's why the portrayal of Orient and Occident in their works is so important to analyse. A look at these two South Asian women authors is both timely and intriguing given the increased attention paid to post-colonial and peripheral writers throughout the world. Current theoretical issues include multiculturalism, alienation, hybridity/cross-culturalism/globalization/economic in equitability, fundamentalism/terrorist violence, and how a synergy of immigrant woes, wedlock's loss and longing, alienation and belonging, homelessness and motherland, real and imaginary, social and psychological, sense and sensibilities, local and global, and utopian tone of diaspora and new era and season

To understand about his namesake, Gogol must rely on what he learns in high school: the Russian author "was famed to be a hypochondriac and severely neurotic, dissatisfied guy" who was "reputed to be an eccentric genius" (Lahiri, 91). An teenage male would not be drawn to this picture. That "his name is both ludicrous and obscure, that it has nothing to do with who he is, that it is neither Indian nor American but of all things Russian" is what drives Gogol crazy (Lahiri, 76). Despite learning about the Ashoke train catastrophe, Gogol's views regarding his name remain unchanged; rather, it is the name that bears too much of the load of the family's aspirations and desires, and it contributes to the exhausting process of assimilation.

As an outsider, it is tough to grow up. Furthermore, having a name that stands out from everyone else's might make it much more difficult. Just getting away from his surname is all Gogol desires at fourteen. "In the last several years, he's become resentful of having to answer queries about his name. At Model United Nations Day at school, he despises having to wear a nametag on his sweater. It's so bad that he doesn't even want to write his name at the bottom of his painting projects in art class " (Lahiri, 76). His surname is a weight on his shoulders.

His deformity is an unsightly reminder of the numerous distinctions he has with his classmates. As he matures, Gogol has an ambivalent connection with his name, loathing it, denying it, and desperately trying to flee it. "At times, his name, an entity shapeless and weightless, managed nonetheless to torment him bodily like the scratchy tag of a clothing he has been compelled



constantly to wear," writes Gogol in a letter to his son (Lahiri, 76). His first feeling of freedom comes when he introduces himself to a college lady as Nikhil, which "cannot image saying... Hi! Gogol, it's Gogol" (Lahiri 76) under potentially amorous conditions. Jhumpa Lahiri seems to be aware of the high price that immigrants who want nothing more than to fit in must pay for giving up their cultural identity. It is her Bengali protagonist, who is painfully conscious of his difference yet unable to reconcile his conflicting identities, who becomes a symbol of the agonising choices all young immigrants must make as they carve their routes towards becoming an American. To all immigrants, Gogol Ganguli becomes the epitome of identity struggle, cultural ambiguity, and the humiliation of exclusion. There is a glimmer of hope at the novel's conclusion that Gogol would choose one character over the other, but he is still a prisoner of his confused identity. If one is a second generation Indian American and refuses to pick one identity over the other, which can require completely renouncing either Indian-ness or American-ness, then one's ability to negotiate one's identity is hampered. First generation Indian-American Ashima can negotiate hyphenated subjectivity because she has a beginning point from which to begin, while Gogol, born on 'foreign' land and raised in the United States, is perpetually in crisis because he was born on "foreign" territory.

Gogol's name, both literally and symbolically, symbolises Lahiri's cultural history, which separates him from his American acquaintances and serves as a continual reminder of the chasm between the two. From an early age, he is aware that his Indian origin separates him from the rest of the students at school, and that his inner conflict is also obvious. He's doing all he can to hide his ethnicity. He would want not to be compelled to attend Bengali community meetings on a weekly basis, and he would also prefer not to go to India to see his family. The Beatles' music is more appealing to him than his father's traditional Indian classical music, and he would much prefer take art courses than learn Bengali. Gogol's life starts in a strange location since he is an immigrant's kid. His allegiance to the United States is undeniable, yet he isn't quite an American, in part because of how others see him. Gogol has struggled for much of his life with figuring out who he is and where he comes from. Often, he is depressed because of the difficulty he has reconciling the many cultures, places, and individuals that make up his identity.



As the son of first-generation immigrants, Gogol has additional challenges throughout adolescence. He comes to detest his Bengali origin as he approaches adulthood. English is the language of choice for him when he addresses his parents, who are still speaking in Bengali. American living principles and morals are strongly resented by Gogol's family. The fact that his parents disapprove of his sexual connections with American women baffles him; he can't understand why his parents don't accept his American girlfriends as their parents accept him; he hates his parents when he compares them to the parents of his American girlfriends. Parents refuse to pay Gogol's flight to England, where he is seeing Ruth after she has been there for a semester because of their son's interest in her. Maxine's parents Gerald and Lydia contrast starkly with his parents when he becomes connected with Maxine. Gogol separates himself from his parents and moves to New York, where he is no longer in contact with them. He avoids coming back to his parents' house on the weekends, pretending to be at work, and instead spends time with Maxine and her family, with whom he has a strong emotional connection "There's none of the annoyance he feels around his own family. Absence of any feeling of duty " (Lahiri, 138). His parents' planned marriage is "something at once unfathomable and amazing," he says of the circumstances surrounding it. Because of this, he has no desire to return to his parents' home in order to see them on vacation. Maxine and her family are a prime example of Gogol's frantic attempts to imitate and adapt.

He comes to like the polenta and risotto, the bouillabaisse and the osso buco, the meat cooked in parchment paper, that she and her parents prepare for him. To maintain the half folded linen napkin on his lap, he becomes used to holding their flatware in his hands. Parmesan cheese should not be grated over pasta recipes containing fish, according to what he's learned from his research. Every night, he looks forward to the popping of a cork on a brand new bottle of wine (Lahiri, 137).

Assimilation occurs in Gogol's appreciation of and participation in meals with the Maxine family. When Gogol, for example, adopts American food as his own, he loses his ability to distinguish himself from the culture. As Gogol consumes these high-end, pricey meals, he merges with them and they with him. Acquiring assimilation, as well as being absorbed As he attempts to adopt their culinary preferences and habits as his own via the use of mimicry¹, the strange becomes familiar. He is elevated to a position of privilege because of his ability to imitate these behaviours. Gogol's



integration, on the other hand, isn't exactly easy for him. In *The Namesake*, Jhumpa Lahiri shows how difficult it can be to move between cultures, as she explores the issue of immigration, cultural clash, and the significance of names. Immigrating to a new country feels impossible, despite the fact that immigrants have done it for millennia. When individuals embark on a journey to another nation, it's not uncommon for them to encounter difficulties along the road. Readers are taken into the Gangulis' experience as immigrants: their confusion and isolation in an alien culture, their loss of connection with families in India, where births and deaths occur apart from them, and their search for old ties among other Bengali immigrants, many who become substitute aunts and uncles to Gogol and Sonia. In the words of Dubey, "the immigrant experience is complex because a sensitive immigrant finds himself or herself continually at a transit station laden with memories of the original home that are contending with the reality of the new environment" (Dubey, qtd in "Jhumpa Lahiri. b.1967: Biography-Criticism"). In *The Namesake*, first-generation immigrants and their children strive to establish their place in society, which is shown as a perpetual battle. Gogol and Sonia's children, the Gangulis, are also adjusting to a new culture, seeking to maintain their cultural origins while also assimilating into American society. Whether it's the new world or the old, the characters in *The Namesake* struggle to find a place for themselves. There are first-generation immigrants who find themselves on both sides of the divide between the worlds they were born into and the one they want to claim as a part of their own.

It is Jhumpa Lahiri's own experiences and her profound observation of diasporic culture that provide validity and poignancy to the dilemma of the Gangulis in this new place. This is a work developed by a lady who is aware of the difficulties that might occur as a result of a cultural exchange. In a way that doesn't imply that one way of life is better than the other, Lahiri does a good job of comparing the independent and integrated American lifestyles. This novel, *The Namesake*², lets the reader to understand, if not entirely appreciate, the intricacy of navigating a life when one has a foot in American society and the other in Bengali tradition. It does not advocate either totally accepting or fully assimilation into American culture.

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