

## Cultural Pluralism in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Name Sake*

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### Abstract

JhumpaLahiri is a well-known second generation Indian diasporic writer. Although the main theme of her writings is diasporic sensibility, specifically expatriate sensibility, the man-woman relationship in a familial space is a recurrent motif in almost all her writings. The novel *The Namesake* focuses on the lives of Indians and Asians who have migrated abroad. Her writings tell us about the adjustments and related problems of the Indians who have now settled in America. The apprehension between adhering to Indian culture and imbibing to American culture between upholding family tradition and subscribing to the individual freedom and realisation that one is an outsider even though one is born there is beautifully highlighted her works. Thus Lahiri has brought forth the crisis faced by both first and second generation immigrants. JhumpaLahiri's *The Namesake* demonstrates the transnational identity structure which serves as a sensitizing image for the upcoming people.

**KEYWORDS:** expatriate sensibility, hybridity, hybrid culture, identity, immigrant identity

Jhumpa Lahiri is a well-known second generation Indian diasporic writer who speaks of the aesthetics of identity formation and the gradual process of negotiating two cultures. Though her fictional characters represent the first and second generation of Indian Americans, they don't lose sight of the subtleties of generational difference in the cross-cultural trans-national space. Although the main theme of her writings is diasporic sensibility, specifically expatriate sensibility, the man-woman relationship in a familial space is a recurrent motif in almost all her writings.

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*The Namesake* is really the story of Gogol. The plot opens with the birth of the protagonist Gogol. Ashima gives birth to her first child, Gogol away from her home. While waiting for the child to be born she relives the past until the point of her departure for Boston. The thought of bringing up the baby in an alien land terrifies her which Jhumpa suggests in her novel as, "to raise a child in a country where is related to no one, where she knows so little, where life seems so tentative and spare."(6)

With compassion, Ashoke gives the 'bhalnam' Gogol to his son. Ashoke prompted the name as a result of his extreme adoration for his favourite Russian author Nikolai Gogol. As Gogol grows up, he does not respond to the 'dhaknam' name Nikhil. So he is given the name Gogol. Soon after the completion of his schooling he finds itching to cast off his awkward name and rechristens himself as Nikhil. He completes his graduation in architecture with the name Nikhil and moves to New York. There he indulges in a relationship with

Maxine Ratliff. The death of his father, Ashoke breaks him. Despite his multiple long-term relationships with her he marries Moushmi Mazumdar as per his mother Ashima's preference. When the arranged relationship with Moushmi fails, as she indulges with Dimitri an American, he goes through an extreme hollowness in his life. Only then he turns back to search the self, departing himself from the bi-cultural tress.

As Nikhil, he becomes a part of the mainstream, and not at all a hyphenated American. On the surface, he lives a life which is not that much different from those of his fellow American students, yet the name Gogol still has a hold over him. He dreads his visit home and his return to a life where he is known as Gogol. Gogol is not just a name to him; it signifies all his discomfort to fit into two different cultures as he grew up. Being away from home at college makes it easy for Gogol to live as Nikhil in American society. He does so happily for many years, detaching himself from his roots and his family as much as possible.

Being a diasporic novel, *The Namesake* is built around the uneasy status of the immigrants, rediscovery of his roots and finding an identity in a country that will treat you as an alien even if were born there. The terrain Lahiri trespasses here is one she knows like the back of hand-the limited spaces of Bengali immigrants in Boston area, their peculiarly lonely lives with extended families made up of fellow expatriates. A cross-cultural multigenerational saga of Hindu Bengali family's journey to self acceptance in Boston, *The Namesake* is a novel that offers a Chekovian exploration of what is acquired and lost by immigrants and their children in pursuit of American dream. The question of identity is raised as the immigrant stands in the bicultural strand.

In India, there is no single culture exists. Too many cultures have crossed and blended here, produced hybridity in us that cannot now unmix. Indian cultural identity has acquired a heterogenous composition with today's youth who are on the move in search of better livelihood. Hence the bonding between the people and the settlement is fast disappearing. The familiarity and uniformity of basic cultures across communities in the states of India makes for easier assimilation and preservation of one's own culture. But when one leaves India and goes abroad, one realises that even though one may try and assimilate with that culture, yet it is a baffling world.

The protagonist goes through the perplexed state of finding himself somewhere amidst of home culture and alien ways of living. In America, Gogol pretends to make himself and American. By switching to the name Nikhil, which would be shortly addressed as 'Nick' by his American friends, he tries to show off himself as an American origin. 'Gogol' is never meant to be Gogol's official or 'good' name. The process of switching to a new official name could be known from the following lines:

He read that tens of thousands of Americans had their names changed each. All it took was a legal petition, the article had said. And suddenly he envisioned "Gogol" added to the list of names, "Nikhil" printed in tiny letters upside down (103-104)

It is given as a temporary solution, intended to serve only as a transitory solution, intended to serve only as a nickname or pet name, until his real arrives. But Gogol becomes complicit in the burden of this name. On his first day at school, despite his father's advice, that his 'good' or official name is now Nikhil, he opts truculently for Gogol. He very shortly regrets this and throughout his school years conceives of his name as a kind of loathsome mantle:

At times his name, an entity shapeless and weightless, manages  
nevertheless to distress him physically like the scratchy tag of a shirt  
he has been forced permanently to wear. (107)

AshokeGanguli often tells Gogol about the importance of his name and the story behind the name. At the age of twenty-two, while travelling from Calcutta to Jamshedpur, by train, Ashoke was reading a book named The short-stories of Nikolai Gogol. Suddenly the train derailed and Ashoke was severely injured that he could not raise the voice to save his life, at the arrival of the rescue team. The flapping pages of the book spoke for him and gave a clue that he was alive. After the incident, his love for the book made him to give the name Gogol to his son. This sort of sentimentalism felt by Ashoke could not be felt by Gogol. Being a second generation immigrant, he struggles to accept himself as an Indian origin. To Gogol, his name is an obscure identity to survive in America.

It is significant to note that every other Saturday Ashoke and Ashima and Gogol for Bengali language and culture classes in the home of one of their Bengali friends. But they conceded to Sonia and Gogol's demand of celebrating Christmas, and hang American dinner once in a week. The two second generation immigrant children Gogol and Sonia prefer more Christmas to the Durga puja. Gogol doesn't find any interest in Bengali lesson where his parents send him to learn native Bengali language, culture and other cultural ethos. When Gogol is at eleven in the sixth grade, he is assigned a field work at a place of some historical intent and he does it from an old graveyard. Ashima is horrified at this incident.

During Ganguli's visit of Kolkata, Gogol finds the Bengali customs and culture 'taxing and repressed', and resents the lack of liberty to drink openly and express his love for Moushumi before her family members. He realises his inability to adjust and so jilts her just before marriage. After the death of his father he shaves his head and observes all the customs. The very manner in which the Gangulis settled down in America is an excellent example of how slowly these immigrants are able to develop a hybrid culture. They develop hybrid identities by striking a wonderful compromise between their home culture and host culture.

Ashima is dissatisfied when Gogol gets involved with white American women like Ruth and Maxine, and is upset when her teenage daughter Sonia wants an Americanized look by colouring her hair or additional ear piercings. When her children try to assimilate into the main stream American culture, she warns Gogol with the following words:

You're too young to get involve this ways, Ashoke and Ashima tell  
him. They've even gone so far as to point out example of Bengali men  
they know who have married American's marriages that have ended in  
divoce. (117)

These bicultural Indian immigrants, having adopted the culture of the country they have come to are not totally accepted into the folds of the host country. Time and again they have to bear the brunt of the Indian lineage of their parents and grandparents. There are a number of incidents in Lahiri's novel that point to the arrogant attitude of the Americans. Mrs.Merton scoffs at a picture drawn by Gogol of his mother with a 'bindi' on her forehead and calls it a 'spitting image'. When they go to an American department store, the salesman does not attend to Gogol's parents respectfully and prefers to direct his conversation to Gogol who

speaks American English, thereby neglecting his parents who speak Indian English. The American children too tend to humiliate Indians unhesitatingly. Some naughty American children shorten their name Ganguli to GANG on their mailbox. Even though Gogol has been born and brought up in America, often in social gatherings he is made aware of his Indian heritage in a derisive manner. When Gogol reaches at his adolescence, he desires to blend in the American society and to live unnoticed and without his family's interferences. But other Americans never consider him an American, though he is a native born American citizen. This posits him in a struggle between two cultures.

Though he is born and nurtured in the US, he feels the frustration of being different from most of the kids he knows. After transforming himself into Nikhil, Gogol attempts to become an immigrant in new-American ethos. In spite of his parents' efforts to keep him 'Indianized', Gogol starts behaving like his American friends and following the same things that they do. Thus, secretly, he starts smoking and drinking with his friends and going to late night club parties which are totally unknown to his parents. With this new immigrant identity, he gets attached to Ruth, a white American girl and involves in an objectionable pre-marital sex with her.

It is through eyes of the first generation settlers that the second generation learns about the homeland. The idea about the home is central to all the human beings. Though there is no active way of expression by the second generation immigrants, the internal yearning for the home is passively employed. While eating dinner with Maxine and her parents, he recalls the hospitable nature and how his mother prepares so many dishes for her guests. He feels the diversity in parenting in comparing his parents with Maxine's parents. The clash between East and West is clearly felt by him between inquisitive, loving and caring Indian parents and open minded, fun loving, magnanimous Western parents.

All his complications and troubles are due to his dual personality, eventually, he tries to erase the former and becomes detached with his family and home. In the course of story he confronts three unfulfilling, unsuccessful affairs. His love life becomes disastrous because he is not confident about the assertion about his identity. His relationship with everybody muddles because he could not get hold of any one fraction of his identity.

The Namesake is about the perpetual dilemma faced by immigrants as they struggle to maintain their identities while trying to shake them off at the same time. This poignant treatment of the immigrant experiences is a rich stimulating fusion of authentic emotion, ironic observation and revealing details. Thus the novel is an evocative and deeply felt portrayal of family life and complexity of relationship, the process of trying to assimilate into a new culture and maintain their own cultural connections. Consequently, Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* demonstrates the transnational identity structure which serves as a sensitizing image for the upcoming people.

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