

Redefining Identity in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*

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ABSTRACT

Jhumpa Lahiri, born in London in 1967 is a Pulitzer Prize-winning author. Lahiri's characters are often immigrants from India or children of immigrants who deal with issues of cultural displacement, marital troubles and issues of identity. Lahiri was born to Bengali parents from Calcutta. Her father a university librarian and her mother a schoolteacher who moved to London and then to the United States, settling in South Kingstown, Rhode Island, when she was young. Her diasporic experience is reflected in her novels. This paper analyses how the immigrant characters in her novel *The Namesake* redefine their identity being caught between two cultures.

Keywords: Culture, heritage, assimilation, identity.

Redefining Identity in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*

Pulitzer Prize-winning author Jhumpa Lahiri is celebrated for her depiction of immigrant and Indian-American life. She was born in London in 1967 and raised in Rhode Island. Lahiri's characters are often immigrants from India or children of immigrants who deal with issues of cultural displacement, marital troubles and issues of identity. While many of these stories are set in the United States, Lahiri's time in Calcutta is evident in her occasional use of Indian locales. *The Namesake*, Lahiri's first novel, was published in 2003.

The Namesake is a diasporic novel that tells the story about the assimilation of an Indian Bengali family from Calcutta, the Ganguli, into America, over thirty years. The cultural conflict experienced by them and their American born children which creates a very big cultural gap even though they are from the same land. They suffer from the spatial, cultural and emotional dislocation in their effort to settle 'home' in the new land. Like many

Indians they also went to the United States as professionals “as part of the brain drain” (Spivak 61).

While the first generation’s attempts life to adapt and acquire new things about themselves, the second-generation people find their life in conflict between the two cultures. The parents though settled in a foreign land always try to maintain ties with their homeland, India. They also try to instill in the life of their children their own cultures and heritage, which they have inherited from their native land. Their children are enthralled by their fellow friends in the host country, which is no longer their own country at all.

Each character in the novel *The Namesake* struggles to balance between the Western and Indian cultures and values and redefine their identities. As the parents succeed in creating such balance by managing cultural hybridity, it seems more difficult for their children to appreciate their native culture and roots. In the novel, Gogol, the protagonist, is a typical second-generation immigrant, having been named after a Russian realist that has strong connections with his family and his grandfather in India.

Ashoke Ganguli and his wife Ashima compromises with their past, but their son Gogol attempts to eradicate his heritage. This becomes evident in Lahiri’s description of Gogol’s resentment in his childhood trips to India. During his visit he is forced to interact with family and give up materials comforts of American life. But Gogol’s mentality is as Lahiri writes:

He always takes India not as his homeland but as a country the way other Americans view it to be, he wants to be seen as American, free of expectations of a foreign land, Gogol grows up to find such loyalty to a homeland they have never known or lived in absolutely ridiculous, for Gogol India is a primitive setting. (*The Namesake* 12)

Gogol’s trips to Calcutta as a teenager with his family are disappointing. While Gogol meet his relatives he does not feel close to them as his parents do, “Soon, American meals and fast food which Gogol desires badly are replaced by plates of syrupy, spongy rossogollas” (82). Gogol has no appetite for those Indian foods. No other way, he has to eat them but with great difficulty. He feels that the Ganguli house is a less civilized accommodation in India, but soon he realises that he must adjust to it. The lack of privacy in his father’s home in India is terrifying for Gogol. He has no sympathy or concern for the place where his roots lie and he never feels that he belongs to it. Gogol feels as a foreigner in India in which he is physically and psychologically alienated.

He complains about the Hindu rituals that his parents keep practising and always feel comfortable in welcoming the symbols of the dominant foreign culture. He also refuses to be called ABCD (American born confused Desh) because the term suggests marginality, which Gogol never feels in America. He refuses to be called so, because his American identity will be problematic. Here Lahiri raises the question of what is one's homeland: "is it the place where one is born, brought up and lives! or is it the place where his roots lie!" (125). Though, this question is to the core of the characters' personal and cultural conflicts, the novel leaves the question unanswered. Gogol, the protagonist rejects his native roots and intentionally suppresses his own cultural identity and in order to redefine his-self, imitates the language, the dress and cultural attitudes of Western society where he was born and raised.

Gogol in his process of redefining identity becomes obsessed with particular codes associated with Western values such as independence and personal freedom. He simply falls for the American lifestyle. He lives in a separate apartment after his graduation and develops relationships with different women. Fascinated with the pleasurable lifestyle of Maxine, his American Girlfriend, he spends his Christmas holidays with Maxine. When Maxine's parents warmly welcome him, Gogol feels a difference between the lifestyle of his parents and Maxine's parents. Her parents are not formal with him. They serve him small dishes, "and Lydia, Maxine's mother, pays no attention to Gogol's plate" (150). But, When Ashima receives Maxine for the first time, she offers her:

flavored pink lassi, samosas, and then a big heavy lunch. Gogol's parents remain silent during the meal because, in India, one should not talk while eating. On the other hand, Gogol enjoys dinner parties with the Ratliff's because they are loud and lively. The tables are candlelit, and wine is served. He likes their intelligent talks and the elegance of the whole atmosphere. Maxine's parents are the center of attraction in these dinner parties while Ashima and Ashoke behaved like caterers in their own home. (35)

In order to fit into the American culture and society, he not only adopted their culture but also started hating his own name. He finalised that his name Gogol was the root of all problems. At home he was forced to follow the Bengali traditional name, which in the outside of his home and among the American he was not accepted with his name. At the same time Gogol had also no intense and lovable feelings about India and its culture, "what he did

show the love for India was only to satisfy his parents at high school, choosing to become “Nikhil”, nevertheless, the new Indian name “Nikhil” (32) which he rejected as a child, does not deepen the admiration of his native identity. It does not make him more attached to his Indian roots. Ironically, Nikhil is his passport to enter a more liberal world, the name Gogol is the real obstacle to a free life far away from the restrictions of his parents’ conservative world. After that he deliberately distances himself from his parents, seeking an American lifestyle:

As a mature man, no one in Nikhil’s world is called Gogol. Thus, he never tells Maxine the story of becoming Nikhil after long years of being Gogol. He fears being rejected by American society, which he is eager to join and blend with Nikhil ignores the Indian identity of the name as he behaves as pure American. On the other hand, this renaming process does not help him to reinvent himself fully, to break from that mismatched name. (287)

He thought it would correct the “randomness” and the “error” (287) of his earlier name, but it does not.

After rooting himself in the American identity, Gogol once again redefines himself to root him in the Indian identity. After his father’s death, “he reads Akaky Gogol’s book, which his father gave him as a birthday gift years ago, Nikhil finds the Gogol inside himself. He is ready to read the book he [has] once forsaken, has abandoned until now” (290). Not only he reads the book as his “father was pulled from a crushed train forty years ago” (291) he takes one more step towards recognition of an authentic identity after years of assimilation into Western culture and denial of his Indian roots. Losing his father, his admiration of American life is enfeebled. The bond between him and Maxine becomes weak. Therefore, he goes through a resistance of the relationship, rejection, and finally, redefinition of his native cultural identity. Now, he does not want to get away from his family, “Immediately after the funeral, he tells Maxine in a decisive tone, I do not want to get away” (186). Maxine realises the real change in Gogol and moves away from his life.

Gogol’s father’s death and the events that followed shows how Gogol redefined himself as an Indian. He voluntarily embraces Indian culture and rituals; “He shaved his head in the wake of his father’s death, because it was the duty of Bengali’s son. . . . eating a

mourner's diet, in which Gogol, along with his mother and sister, should only eat plain rice, dal, and vegetables" (179-180).

The fact is that immigrants are always immersed in expectations and uncertainty often which makes them shift between identities. This is reflected in the novel through Gogol. Although he was in a mourning state, Gogol still aware with the fact that he lived in America, therefore, he quickly returned to his previous life and continued maintaining his India as well as American sides. He kept shifting between two identities, depending on whom or where he was. As stated by Mishra, "that men might learn of a future than the past" ("The Literature," 59), Gogol becomes more considerate with his mother's perspectives. He started to be the obedient child as to how Indian kids supposed to be. Gogol redefines his identity outside Maxine's shadow. When he identifies with his native heritage, Gogol identifies with a Bengali wife. He becomes aware of himself as an Indian, his father's son. The closing scene of the novel emphasises on Gogol's admirable epiphany, "He is ready to join his parents friends in the crowded party, to take photographs of the people in his parents' life, in this house to eat as well, seated cross-legged on the floor, and speak to his parents friends, about his new job, about New York, about his mother" (291).

Finally, Gogol manages to resolve the tension between his conflicting identities and creates a deeper understanding of Indian-American identity. By recognising his Indianness, Gogol does not denounce his Western culture fully. Though he eventually embraces his native culture, he realises he is not a Bengali only. He has been affected mentally and subconsciously by his Western world, "his schoolmates, university colleagues, and work associates" (293). As he redefines what it means to be a descendent of a Bengali family within a white- dominant society, Gogol incorporates his native culture into the American culture. Now he realises that the values of the two cultures have enriched his life. He is genuinely a symbolic embodiment of the new hybrid generation. Robin Cohen suggests that "Gogol, an Indian-American, lives like a pendulum till he finally attains maturity to self-realization" (4). He allows the two cultures to overlap in one cultural contact Zone, "After spent years maintaining distance from his origins, yet all his detachment toward his family would eventually draw him back to them; to the quiet, stubbornly exotic family" (281).

Furthermore, "Gogol considered Ashima, his mother, as his "home" after his marriage failure, where he previously claimed that home was his apartment" (284). From these lines

of the novel it is understood that, his mother symbolised India, whereas his apartment symbolised America. Additionally, there was another episode that strengthened Gogol's Indianness, besides the death of his father. It was the time when Ashima decided to leave the States and return to India to spend the rest of her life, that Gogol could comprehend how important his mother was to support his living in America, "He realized, by all means, he was the one to introduce Indian tradition to new generations, and yet it was for him that his parents had undergo to learn American customs; Thanksgiving and Christmas, even if the celebration was not really meant to be" (286).

Finally, Gogol allows the two cultural spaces to create a hybrid subject. He accepts the new signs of his hybrid identity because such identity is, as Homi Bhabha suggests in *The Location of Culture*, "is productive and innovative" (1). Robin Cohen suggest that "the search for one's roots can be positive or may lead to narrow nationalism, which results in prejudices, hideous biases, leading to implacable animism" ("Global," 188). Lahiri shows how Gogol finds his third space and realises that his search for his Indian roots is a positive force. To this end, Gogol could not escape his name, that he would forever be remained as "Gogol" instead of "Nikhil". His name, Gogol, had been defining and distressing him for years; unable to reinvent himself and break from the mismatched name "Gogol". Nonetheless, those events had formed" Gogol, shaped and determined who he was, in which he should prevail and endure in the end" (*The Namesake* 287).

To conclude from the above arguments Gogol refuses to invest in a single American identity and becomes a part of two cultural horizons as he brings the two different spaces of American culture and Indian heritage in one-third space. Finally, Gogol realises the real identity of him is being an Indian born in America.

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