

## CULTURAL CONFLICTS IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S NOVEL THE NAMESAKE

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### Abstract

This paper deals with the diasporic elements in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*. It depicts the struggle between the homeland and the host land. This thesis focuses on the psychological conflicts of diasporas. It discusses an immigrant's experience in a new land and the problem of assimilation. It talks about the unconscious thoughts and repressed desires. This paper highlights the identity crisis and the quest for identity. It firmly explores the notion of immigrants about the host land and its culture. The true meaning of the title is revealed through the character of Gogol. It reflects the similarities and the differences between the first generation and the second generation. It shows the thrust for identity, quest for luxurious life and nostalgia. It exemplifies the instability of an immigrant in a new land.

Diasporic Literature is a vast concept and an umbrella term that includes the literary works of authors outside their homeland but still deeply connected to their native culture and background. It depicts the sense of loss, alienation, displacement, existential crisis, rootlessness, nostalgia and quest for identity. Diasporas may not be the same.

First is one's nostalgia for their homeland left behind mingled with fear in a strangeland. The second is a phase in which one is busy adjusting to the new Environment that there is little creative output. The third phase is the shaping of diasporic existence by involving themselves in ethno culture issues. The Fourth is when they have arrived and start participating in the larger world of politics and national issues. (Parameswaran, 165)

The immigrants are struggling to adopt and adjust in the new country in order to continue their original culture and identity. The first-generation immigrants are following their tradition and ceremonies in the new land but the second generation will easily adopt the new culture as well as the host land. The second-generation people are maintaining their original culture meanwhile start to assimilate the new one. This dual culture and identity are also known as "sandwich culture" because they are torn between two places and two cultures which often results in conflicts and mental dilemma.

There are so many diasporic elements in this novel. The diasporic elements are Alienation, Rootlessness, Displacement, Nostalgia, Identity crisis, Sense of loss, Existential crisis and Assimilation.

Indian diasporic Literature focuses on different issues and many aspects of immigrant's lives. Such works are Bharathi Mukherjee's *Jasmine*(1990), Meera Syal's *AnitaandMe*(1996), Chitra Baneerjee's and *TheMistressofSpices*(1996).

Jhumpa Lahiri is an Indian American writer. She is one of the most prominent diasporic writers whose real name was Nilanjana Sudeshna Lahiri. She was born to Bengali parents on 11th July 1967 in London. She is the second-generation immigrant. She studied English literature at Barnard college in 1989 and she got her master's degree from Boston University. She got her doctorate in the field of renaissance studies. She begins her writing career as a short story writer and the name of the work is '*Theinterpreter of Maladies*' in 1999 and sold more than half a million copies which brought her a popularity in the world. Her first novel was '*TheNamesake*' which was published in 2003 and it was made into film. Her notable works are 'Unaccustomed Earth' (2008), 'The Low Land' (2013), '*TeachYourselfItalian*' (2015). She also got numerous awards such as Pulitzer Prize for fiction as well as short stories in 2000, won the O. Henry Award in 1999 and The New York Best Debut in 2000. She has dual cultures, identity and experiences which is also called 'Sandwich Culture' that is why her novels and characters also depict the dual culture and identities.

The title *The Namesake* is a narrative concept of identity crisis and the character named Gogol, who is struggling to get his own identity by his name. There is a family living in a small apartment in Cambridge, Massachusetts, whose name is Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli. They were eagerly waiting for their first child to enter into the world. Once, Ashoke met with an accident when he was travelling in the train. By the time, the rescue party helped him seeing the book in his hand which was written by Nikolai Gogol. On the other side, Ashima felt being isolated in America and often receives letters from herfamily.

Soon Ashima gave birth to a baby boy in the new atmosphere at the American hospital. Ashoke thinks that, his baby is too lucky to live in America, because they migrate from India. But Ashima feels for the baby as the baby is going to live without any support. Both Ashima and Ashoke are waiting to give their son a name from Ashima's grandmother who lives in India. Meanwhile they named him temporarily as 'Gogol'.

Then the novel moves on focusing the growth of Gogol. Their family moves to a small town, where Ashoke got a job as an assistant professor. Gogol occupies a major part in Ashima's life, often she feels for India. Gogol enters school life and there he was called by everyone as 'Nikhil'. After that Ashima gave birth to a baby girl named Sonali. Both Gogol and Sonali were brought up in America. Sometimes Ashoke and Ashima took them to India to attend their family functions. By this time Gogol and Sonali struggles very hard to adapt themselves to their family and to the Indianculture.

Gogol does not have his own identity and he does not know why his father named him 'Gogol'. When he was at the age of eighteen, he wishes to change his name to Nikhil which happens to be his pet name. He leaves his home and went to Yale. There he meets a

girl named Ruth and he lived with her for more than two years. Finally they break up their relationship and Ruth spends her summer in England. Nikhil was not able to come out of his former name 'Gogol' and he visits his hometown every weekend.

After completing his architecture degree at Columbia, Gogol met a girl named Maxine Ratliff who lives with her wealthy parents Gerard and Lydia. Gogol feels comfortable in their house. He is attracted towards Ratliff who spends her whole vacation in New Hampshire and with her family graveyard. He does not feel much difference between the cultures. When he moves out with Maxine's family, his father dies of heart attack. For the first time Ashoke has been living in Ohio, leaving his wife and children. Hearing this Gogol joined his family, and adopts to the Bengali tradition which he rebelled against once. He left Maxine and they do not meet each other.

Later he met a Bengali girl Moushumi Mazoomdar, whom he met in one of the childhood parties. Both of them were surprised to see each other and they got married in the Bengali custom in New Jersey. The couple was very happy at first, but soon Moushumi remembered her ex-fiance Graham. In the end of the novel, she has an affair with her old crush, Dimitri, so Gogol and Moushumi get a divorce. Once again the family gets united, Sonia and her new fiance Ben celebrate Bengali Christmas Eve in their home. Ashima plans to live six months of every year in Calcutta. Gogol finds the book presented by his father on his fourteenth birthday. Finally he sat on his childhood bed and began to read his father's favorite story.

The first diasporic element of the story is nostalgia which means reminiscing over the past. For instances, at the beginning of the novel Ashima Ganguli is preparing an Indian snack which results in lacking the original taste and then she compares the food in Massachusetts and India. This notion reflects the element of nostalgia. Another incident is that Ashima having a watch which is gifted by her family at her wedding she often looks at it and calculates the time in India and then she fully immerses herself in her homeland. This incident shows the term of nostalgia. During Ashima's labor, Ashoke walks around the hospital and often limps, habit he has carried from his childhood. At that time he remembers about his childhood event when his grandfather called him and read Russian English translated books. This is also an example of nostalgia. Ashoke is thinking about his past in which he was once injured during a train accident but was saved by the rescue team. This is also the example for nostalgia. Gogol feels nostalgic when his mother and Sonia have come to receive him at the railway station, he remembers that the whole family would see him whenever he returns from Yale as a college student. Another example for nostalgia is that Astrid and Donald invited Gogol to attend the dinner party. When he goes there, he was thinking about his first date with Moushumi during which both are designing their ideal house. As Sonia, Ben, Gogol and Ashima assemble on a get together during which Gogol remembers decorating the first plastic tree his parents had brought at his insinences.

Next diasporic element of the story is identity crisis. For instance, The importance of identity is brought up throughout the story and it becomes a central concept in the novel.

On Gogol's fourteenth birthday his father gifted him Nikolai Gogol's short stories. His distaste for his name becomes very prominent that day. He becomes oppressive because his name is neither Indian nor American. Later in the novel he understands the importance of his name and Bengali heritage.

Gogol wishes to change his name. He changes his name from Gogol to Nikhil. After changing his name he felt a sense of alienation and he is more confused with his dual identity. Because he should behave as Gogol in his family and surroundings where he is known by that name and Nikhil for the outer world who doesn't know about his past.

Ashoke named him Gogol because when he was saved from the train wreck, while he was reading the work of a Russian author Nikolai Gogol. But Gogol fails to understand the emotional significance of his name. It is easy for him to live as Nikhil in American tradition as he is away from his home. Though he has to face dilemmas and conflicts with the new name he lived happily for many years being separated from his family.

There is only one complication; he does not feel like Nikhil yet. Part of the problem is that the people who know him as Nikhil have no idea that he used to be Gogol. They know him only in the present, not at all in the past. But after eighteen years of Gogol, two months of Nikhil feel scant, inconsequential. At times he feels as if he is cast himself in a play, acting the part of twins, indistinguishable to the naked eye yet fundamentally different. At times he still feels his old name, painfully and without warning, the way his front tooth had unbearably throbbed in recent weeks after a filling, threatening for an instant to sever from his gums when he drank coffee or iced water and once when he was riding in an elevator. (Lahiri,105)

Gogol's life was complicated due to his dual personality. He tries to erase incidents in his past life and stayed away from his family and home. His relationship with everyone was affected because he was not steady about his identity. It affected his life a lot. As he was not sure of his identity his marriage does not last long. At last Gogol accepts the fact that he can't change the destiny. So, he tries to adapt the cultures of the host land but he was haunted by the past memories and there begins the clash of identity and culture.

The next diasporic element of the story is cultural conflicts. For example, during Ashima's labor, the nurse changes Ashima's traditional sari with a hospital gown which she feels is too short. This shows the love upon the native culture as well as the hatred towards the new culture. After the birth of Gogol many were smoking cigars and drinking champagne to celebrate but Ashoke didn't have anything. This shows the love for his native culture as well as the hatred towards the new culture. Ashima was maintaining her native culture and tradition even in the new land. She wants to call her husband when she was in the bathroom but she didn't call his name because, according to Indian culture, women are not supposed to call their husband's name. So she didn't call him. It's not a big issue when it comes to western culture. Ashima couldn't assimilate herself with the new culture. She was torn between two cultures. For example, When Ashima is in hospital, she rereads a Bengali Magazine but was interrupted by Patty who comes to taking Ashima out for a walk. The

way she wants to reread the magazine shows her emotional attachment towards her native country. On the other hand, she was interrupted by Patty which reflects the reality. It is the perfect example of Ashima's mental state which is torn between the home land and the host land. The relationship between parents and children also show the effect of cultural conflict. The second-generation children such as Gogol and Moushumi do not respect their parent's feelings and emotions instead they are enjoying their life. Moushumi is being care free towards her parents and Gogol is always impatient towards his father. Ashoke was comparing his childhood in Calcutta with his son's childhood in Boston. He was comparing the Indian culture and the American culture.

“Finish it, Gogol. At your age I ate tin.”(Lahiri,55)

They adjust the food and other habits of their children because they don't want to disturb the cultural environment of Gogol and Sonia.

Alienation is another important diasporic element. Ashima is the perfect example for alienation.

“I'm saying I don't want to raise Gogol alone in this country.

It's not right. I want to go back.”(Lahiri,33)

This mirrors the pain of alienation in Ashima. She didn't want to raise Gogol in a new land alone. She believes that her family will only bring him up perfectly. Another incident is that when the nurse removes her sari and gives her a gown, she feels alienated surrounded by Americans in the hospital. At the hospital, Ashima wonders if she is the only Indian woman in this hospital filled with Americans until a kick from the baby inside her, incidents that she is not alone after all. Another example is that whenever Ashoke returns from the work, she tells him about her daily adventures in the new land. She thought that she is alienated in the new land. The next incident is that When Gogol and Sonia went to India, he felt that they are alienated in India. Though it's their homeland and they are alienated in the native country.

Language is another diasporic element used in this novel. Ashima gets into struggle when she migrate to America. She couldn't assimilate herself with America though she knows the language. For instance, at the hospital, she says that her baby will have ten fingers and ten toes. Patty gets shock because, Ashima studied literature in Calcutta. Longing is also a diasporic element in this story. Ashima longs for her homeland and Ashoke longs for the books of his grandfather. Diasporic people face alienation, nostalgia, cultural conflict and identity crisis throughout their lives.

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