

In Search of an Identity: A study of the Diaspora in the novel 'The Namesake' by Jhumpa Lahiri

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Abstract

Tracing the transition of an Indian becoming a citizen of the world; primarily of the 'developed' Western world is a not an easy task. Every Indian who ventures out into the world in search of a better life faces travails of all sorts. Arguably, the most important one -- being the conflict within: Defeating the demons of his or her own mind and later reconciling with a wholly new world is indeed a challenge for every individual. The present research traces this transition of the various characters portrayed by the Indian origin author Jhumpa Lahiri, in her novel 'The Namesake.' The task is made complicated by the acute sense of layered understanding that the author brings in her writing. It is not merely a superficial or a geographical movement that takes place, but more a transposition of the self. Through the novel, the author highlights various ways, means and the nuances of Indians adjusting in a world which is totally new to them, and yet struggling, even after generations of settlement a 'place' of their own.' The immigrant's journey, no matter how ultimately rewarding, is founded on departure and deprivation, but it secures for the subsequent generation a sense of arrival and advantage. I can see a day coming when my American side, lacking the counterpoint India has until now maintained, begins to gain ascendancy and weight. It is in fiction that I will continue to interpret the term "Indian-American," calculating that shifting equation, whatever answers it may yield.'¹

Key Words: Foreigner, trauma, loneliness, sorrow, excitement, dream, thoughts, alienation, diaspora, isolation, identity crisis, compromise, et al

¹The Indian American writer Jhumpa Lahiri said in an interview, which is quoted in *Stories of Identity: Religion, Migration, and Belonging in a Changing World* by Carola Suárez-Orozco.

About the author

Jhumpa Lahiri was born in London, on July 11, 1967 to immigrant parents from West Bengal. She was born Nilanjana Sudeshna, which she says are both 'good names', but goes by her nickname Jhumpa. Her family moved to the United States when she was three; Lahiri considers

herself an American, stating, "I wasn't born here, but I might as well have been."

She grew up in Kingston, Rhode Island, where her father Amar Lahiri worked as a librarian at the University of Rhode Island. Jhumpa's mother wanted her children to grow up knowing their Bengali heritage, and her family often visited relatives in Calcutta (now Kolkata).

Lahiri's debut short story collection, *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), won the 2000 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, and her first novel, *The Namesake* (2003), was adapted into the popular film of the same name. In 2003, Lahiri published *The*

Namesake, her first novel. A film adaptation of *The Namesake* was released in March 2007, directed by Mira Nair and starring Kal Penn as Gogol and Bollywood stars Tabu and Irrfan Khan as his parents. Lahiri herself made a cameo as "Aunt Jhumpa". This research however, restricts itself only to the book.

Overview

I belong to my work, to my characters, and in order to create new ones I leave the old ones behind. My parents' refusal to let go or to belong fully to either place is at the heart of what I, in a less literal way, try to accomplish in writing. Born of my inability to belong, it is my refusal to let go.

~ Jhumpa Lahiri

Moving between events in Calcutta, Boston, and New York City, the novel examines the nuances involved with being caught between two conflicting cultures with their highly distinct religious, social, and ideological differences. The novel describes the struggles between first-generation Bengali immigrants to the United States, and their children, particularly their son, Gogol. The story begins as Ashoke and Ashima leave Calcutta, India and settle in Central Square, Massachusetts. Through a series of errors, their son's nickname, Gogol, becomes his official birth name, an event which will shape many aspects of his life.

Interesting characterisation

Nikhila k.a Gogol Ganguli is the titular character of this novel. He, therefore, takes on the mantle of the lead character after Ashima becomes old and Ashoke dies. It's his life that makes a mark on the reader as much as that of his parents. The three important characters Ashoke and Ashima

Ganguly and their son Gogol also known as Nikhil are all in search of their own identities, which they seem to have lost having decided to settle in the USA in the 1960s. The decision to migrate to the USA was that of Ashoke, who marries Ashima. She, like the stereotypical Indian wife follows him half-way across the world to cook and clean for her husband and raise a family.

For being a foreigner, Ashima is beginning to realise, is a sort of lifelong pregnancy – a perpetual wait, a constant burden, a continuous feeling out of sorts. It is an ongoing responsibility, a parenthesis in what had once been ordinary life, only to discover that that previous life has vanished, replaced by something more complicated and demanding. (Page 49)

Gogol's mother Ashima is the heart of the story. While the other characters don't show a lot of emotion, Ashima is the one who feels. So it's through her that we can really come to understand the feelings of alienation, culture shock, and homesickness that many immigrants feel. At the start of the novel, Gogol's mother Ashima is the most culturally conservative member of the family. She misses her life back in Calcutta terribly and has trouble settling into her new American life. The narrator tells us, "On more than one occasion (Ashoke) has come home from the university to find her morose, in bed, rereading her parents' letters." In Cambridge, Ashima is surrounded by strangers, and she doesn't quite feel that she fits in. There are new customs to learn, new ways of doing things. Combine that with the grief of leaving her family, home, and loved ones behind and one finds her battling the blues quite often.

Within minutes, before their eyes Ashoke and Ashima slip into bolder, less complicated versions of themselves, their voices louder, their smiles wider, revealing a confidence Gogol and Sonia never see on Pemberton Road. (Page 81)

Ashoke is the proverbial good father. One can never see him losing his temper with Gogol, or chastising or criticising him. He is portrayed as so mild-mannered and wise that it's a little hard to see why Gogol avoids his father for so many years. Maybe Gogol's relationship with Ashoke is troubled precisely because of the fact that Ashoke is so reserved. This reserved manner isn't a personality thing, either. When the family is in India, one sees a new side of Ashoke.

Back in Calcutta, Ashoke feels like he's back in his own skin. He grows confident, and it is clear that he and his wife are at ease among family members who talk a lot. This comes as a shock to Gogol, of course, because he has only seen Ashoke's American persona – the reserved graduate student, who doesn't want to ruffle any feathers.

She had told her parents she had no intentions of being a chemist and, deaf to their protests, she'd scraped together all the money she had and moved to Paris, with no specific plans...in that new city she was transformed into the girl she had once envied, had believed she would never have become. (Page 215)

The above excerpt relates to Moushumi Mazoomdat, who comes across as a bit pretentious and snobby to begin with, one is ready to write her off completely when she cheats on Gogol after only a year or so of marriage something which, possibly, would relate to her American upbringing,

rather than her Indian origin. When she is introduced to the readers first, Moushumi seems the bookish, aloof girl who ignores Gogol at his own fourteenth birthday party. She does, however, make a point of declaring, "I detest American television" (Page 73). Even at that tender age she comes across as one who has a mind of her own and is quite articulate when it comes to expressing her opinions. She is the contemporary bold and beautiful lass, who is creative, lusts after money and men and likes all things 'French.' Gogol keeps looking for a typical Bengali wife in this New Age woman and therefore meets with utter disappointment.

They've learned their lesson after Gogol. They've learned that schools in America will ignore parents' instructions and register a child under his pet name. The only way to avoid such confusion, they have concluded, is to do away with the pet name altogether, as many of their Bengali friends have done. (Page 56)

Sonia, Gogol's little sister, is born around the time that Gogol enters kindergarten. Right from the beginning, she reaps the benefits of her parents' experience with Gogol. When she's born, her parents are prepared with her first name. Perhaps it's her lack of a pet name that makes her better suited to adapting to life in America. Even as a child, she seems more at ease with her Indian-American identity than Gogol, who always feels alienated because of his unusual first name. While he just cries at his *annaprasan*, Sonia reacts with zest. As Sonia grows older, she has an easier time than Gogol had. She is popular, and she also seems to manage to remain close to her family, even as they struggle with their Bengali identity. When Ashoke dies, she moves home to be with Ashima,

leaving behind her life in San Francisco without much of a backward glance. In the end, her character provides an illuminating contrast to Gogol's. Where he is awkward and uncomfortable with his own identity, she is well adjusted.

These were the major characters apart from these, there's Dimitri Desjardins for whom Moushumi leaves Gogol; Maxine Ratliff, with whom Gogol lives but does not marry; Graham, rich investment banker to whom Moushumi is engaged to get married before she meets Gogol; Astrid and Donald, Moushumi's artsy friends who live the life she craves and in comparison to her own with Gogol and feels let down.

The American Dream

The American dream that has lured tens of millions of all nations to our shores in the past century has not been a dream of merely material plenty, though that has doubtlessly counted heavily. It has been much more than that. It has been a dream of being able to grow to fullest development as man and woman, unhampered by the barriers which had slowly been erected in the older civilizations, unrepressed by social orders which had developed for the benefit of classes rather than for the simple human being of any and every class.¹

The American Dream is a national ethos of the United States; a set of ideals in which freedom includes the opportunity for prosperity and success, and an upward social mobility achieved through hard work. In the definition of the American Dream by James Truslow Adams in 1931, "life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement"

regardless of social class or circumstances of birth.

¹Historian James Truslow Adams popularised the phrase "American Dream" in his 1931 book *Epic of America*

The idea of the American Dream is rooted in the United States Declaration of Independence which proclaims that "all men are created equal" and that they are "endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights" including "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."

It is precisely this lure of being able to realise the American Dream in personal and professional life that thousands of people from various parts of the world, more from the Third World countries rush in to the United States of America every year.

Like many immigrant 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. When I was growing up in Rhode Island in the 1970s I felt neither Indian nor American. Looking back, I see that this was generally the case. But my perception as a young girl was that I fell short at both ends, shuttling between two dimensions that had nothing to do with one another.¹

Politics of Migration

What Third World Migration does to the US: It adds value in terms of inexpensive human resource, which in turn boosts the US economy. It however, drains migrants of their cultural affiliation, causes an indefinite identity crisis and more such subtle issues, which need to be looked at squarely, because a whole new generation is being affected by it.²

The term *Third World* arose during the Cold War to define countries that remained non-aligned with either capitalism or NATO (which along with its allies represented the First World), or communism and the Soviet Union (which along with its allies represented the Second World). Over the last few decades, the term 'Third World' has been used interchangeably with the Global South and Developing Countries to describe poorer countries that have struggled to attain steady economic development. Third World countries include most of Africa, Latin America, and Asia.

¹Jhumpa Lahiri, from *Stories of Identity* by Cultural psychologist Carola Suárez-Orozco. (It is an excerpt of her interview in Newsweek World News, titled, 'My Two Lives.'

²'Immigration is perhaps the most enduring and elemental leitmotif of America' From *Dividing Lines* by Daniel Tichenor

Diaspora

As their lives in New England swell with fellow Bengali friends, the members of that other, former life, those who know Ashima and Ashoke not by their good names but as Monu and Mithu, slowly dwindle. More deaths come, more telephone calls startle them in the middle of the night, more letters arrive in the mailbox informing them of aunts and uncles no longer with them...

Once back on Pemberton Road, in the modest house that is suddenly mammoth, there is nothing to remind them; in spite of the hundred or so relatives they've just seen, they feel as if they are the only Gangulis in the world. (Page 63)

At various points throughout the novel Ashima feels isolated, lonely and the very fact that she has to live all by herself, when her husband Ashoke, leaves for work is a painful experience, to add to that phone calls in the middle of the night from India, informing them of the death of their relatives, adds to the trauma. The novel is filled with poignant moments, when Ashima longs to be back in Kolkata, India with her family. In contrast to Ashima, who holds on to her Indian identity, by wearing the bindi and silk sarees and cooking Indian food. Ashoke gives in slowly by wearing western formals to work and Indian kurta pajama at home. Their children Gogol and Sonali however merge in the American culture more easily.

Without a single grandparent or parent or uncle or aunt at her side, the baby's birth, like most everything else in America, feels somehow haphazard, only half true... she has never known of a person entering the world so alone, so deprived. (Page 25)

On various occasions in the narrative Ashoke and Ashima's sense of alienation surfaces, interestingly the writer refrains from making these instances melodramatic. There's a lot of objectivity in describing these instances and resilience, which is camouflaged in routine nonchalance.

'Where are you from?' Gogol has never heard the term ABCD. He eventually gathers it stands for American-born confused deshi. In other words, him. He learns that the C could also stand for conflicted. He knows that 'deshi' is a generic word for 'countryman' means 'Indian'... Gogol never thinks of India as

desh. He thinks of it as Americans do, as India. (Page 118)

On many occasions in the novel Gogol feels trapped in a different identity, unable to tell which one of his two selves, that he keeps encountering is real. Mostly because of his Indian origin and a constant urge to merge in the American ethos and also because of his two names: Gogol and Nikhil. He chooses to change his proper name to Nikhil, when he hears of the tragic life story of the Russian writer Nikolai Gogol, after whom his father has named him. Despite changing his name, for a long time he is unhappy.

There is only one complication: he doesn't feel like Nikhil... at times he feels as if he's cast himself in a play, acting the part of twins, indistinguishable to the naked eye yet fundamentally different. (Page 105)

This little extract clearly brings out the two fragments of Gogol's identity, which persist throughout the novel. From the very beginning he feels effortlessly incorporated into their (Maxine's) lives. It is a different brand of hospitality from what he is used to; for though the Ratliffs are generous, they are people who do not go out of their way to accommodate others, assured, in his case correctly, that their life will. On the surface the American lifestyle appears more relaxed, free and less rigid, however Nikhil eventually sees through the facade and realises how false, hollow and indulgent it can be. It may be very seductive and comfortable, but their lives are pointless; they lack purpose, direction or usefulness. Using Chaucerian irony Lahiri appears to be celebrating American generosity, openness and tolerance but there is a hint of this being undercut by subtle satire.

When Maxine meets Ashima for the first time she is surprised. She had never expected Nikhil's mother to be a typical Indian woman. From what she knew of Nikhil, she had expected a more American-looking woman.

"But you are so different. I would never have thought that." He doesn't feel insulted, but he is aware a line is drawn all the same. (Page 138)

Nikhil doesn't feel that he's making a compromise when he's living with Maxine. Yet, the death of his father brings him back to his senses. It fills him with the guilt of leaving his mother alone and enjoying his life with his girlfriend, which is so much unlike his Indian values.

In the beginning of the novel, news of the death of Ashima's grandmother signals their first acquaintance to the grief of death of loved ones. Later when, the news of Ashima's father's death reaches them over the phone, Ashima is shattered. Ashoke does his best to console her and they leave for India as soon as they can. Their trauma seems more gripping because of their loneliness, lack of their people to share it with...

Ashoke, Ashima, their son Gogol and baby Sonia in the pram on the airport, leaving for India after hearing of Ashima's father's demise.

She listens to something about a heart attack...she begins to shiver violently, the house instantly feeling twenty degrees colder. She pulls her sari tightly around her shoulders, like a shawl. She gets up and walks systematically through the rooms of the house, turning on all the light switches... (Page 169)

One of the most traumatic moments in the novel occurs when Ashima is all alone in the house and she hears of her husband's death over the phone from an unknown American nurse. As she looks at herself in the mirror, now a widow, dutifully removing tokens of marital life, her bangles. Her mind recalls the past, the life she shared with Ashoke in America, both of whom: Ashoke and America were strangers to her. It was here with him that she had spent nearly thirty years, mothered two children, who are now away from her. Both physically and culturally.

Conclusion

Towards the end of the novel one finds that all characters rediscover themselves, their identities are no longer confused or conflicted, they have found their place in the USA and in India as well.

All in all, looking at the characters of the novel one realises that the first generation Indians in the United States of America feel alienated from their country, culture and people and cling together with other Indian groups.

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