

Complexity of Relationships in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*

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Abstract

In the following paper, an attempt has been made to discuss complex web of relationships in Jhumpa Lahiri's second novel, *The Namesake* (2003). It explores issues of the Indian American immigrant experience and the corresponding anxieties of assimilation (conforming) and exile. From these themes of dual nationality, the question of identity arises, and this theme is further underscored by the main character's –Gogol's – dual names. The strength of familial bonds in the midst of this cultural quandary is also addressed. Certain issues such as Gogol's changing feelings toward his name, his family, his heritage and his relationship with his father and his relationships with women are assessed to gauge Lahiri's attempt to embrace problems of globalised scenario.

Key Words: Indian-American Immigrant, assimilation, identity crisis, globalisation

Until 1946, Indian and other Asian immigrants experienced greater difficulty entering the United States than their European and Latin American counterparts. This changed to some extent with the signing of the Luce-Cellar Bill by President Harry S. Truman in 1946. The bill was incorporated into the Immigration Act of 1946; it allowed Indians the ability to gain citizenship to the United States. The bill also allowed Indian immigrants to travel back and forth between India and America more freely. At the time, however, only 100 Indian citizens per year were able to immigrate legally to the United States. With the passage of the Immigration Act of 1965, however, this number was expanded to 20,000. This change led to a marked influx in the Indian population in America. Indeed, *The Namesake* begins in 1968, three years after the act was passed. The Gangulis' presence in America, as well as that of the myriad Bengali friends they make, is attributable to this act.

Jhumpa Lahiri's second book, *The Namesake*, was published in 2003. It was well received by critics and highly anticipated. This anticipation was based on Lahiri's first book, the Pulitzer prize-winning collection of short-stories entitled *Interpreter of Maladies*. Like its predecessor, *The Namesake* explores issues of the Indian American immigrant experience and the corresponding anxieties of assimilation (conforming) and exile. From these themes of dual nationality, the question of identity arises, and this theme is further underscored by the main character's dual names. The strength of familial bonds in the midst of this cultural quandary is also addressed.

To this end, *The Namesake* portrays the Ganguli family over a course of thirty-two years. It follows Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli from shortly after their emigration from Calcutta, India, to Cambridge, Massachusetts, in the late 1960s. The story then follows the couple as their children

are born and raised in the United States. It is their struggles, particularly those of the eldest son, Gogol, that comprise the bulk of the story. Notably, the novel's deft and sensitive handling of the immigrant experience has caused it to be featured in school curriculums throughout the United States.

Given the remarkable success of Jhumpa Lahiri's first book, *Interpreter of Maladies*, the author's follow-up publication was highly anticipated. For the most part, *The Namesake* did not disappoint; like its predecessor, the volume met with wide critical approval. For instance, Michiko Kakutani states in the *New York Times* that the novel "is that rare thing: an intimate, closely observed family portrait that effortlessly and discreetly unfolds to disclose a capacious social vision." Proffering further praise, Kakutani declares that "Lahiri has not only given us a wonderfully intimate and knowing family portrait, she has also taken the haunting chamber music of her first collection of stories and reorchestrated its themes of exile and identity to create a symphonic work, a debut novel that is as master of the craft."¹

On the other hand, *Commentary* reviewer Sam Munson was less impressed. In his article, he remarks that the tone features "an excess of dispassionateness: Lahiri's novel is linear to the point of monotony." He adds that the novel "does occasionally rise to the level of which Lahiri is manifestly capable," but he ultimately finds that "these moments only serve in the end to underline the flatness of the whole."² Nevertheless, Munson's opinion is decidedly in the minority. Indeed, *Kenyon Review* contributor David

H. Lynn notes that "what Lahiri aspires to is considerably grander than whether readers become emotionally engaged with her characters. Her ambition is to play in the literary big leagues."³ Mandira Sen, writing in the *Women's Review of Books*, also gives a glowing assessment in her critique. She comments that "Lahiri's beautifully crafted and elegantly written novel will speak to many. It is as different as it can be from the exotic outpourings of Indian immigrants writing in English for whom the home country provides a canvas for their magical interpretations." Furthermore, Sen observes, Lahiri "steers away from providing easy answers, offering readers a complex look into the immigrant experience."⁴

Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* opens with a pregnant Ashima attempting to recreate a favorite snack from India. This image, of a woman clearly homesick and disconnected from her roots, sets the tone for Gogol's birth shortly thereafter. When the infant Gogol is named, a further disconnection is underlined in the form of a lost letter from India, one containing the boy's intended formal name. This twist of fate leaves Gogol with no more than a pet name, albeit one with great significance. Despite this, his parents Ashoke and Ashima hope to replace the name when Gogol begins his formal education. However, the five-year-old Gogol, too young to question who he is, accepts only his pet name, rejecting his formal name, Nikhil. Here, another twist of fate, again underlying the Gangulis' foreignness, occurs. Gogol's American teachers, unfamiliar with the Indian tradition of pet and formal names, accept Gogol's birth certificate and his wishes.

As Gogol grows up, however, he becomes more and more aware of his dual heritage and of the pitfalls inherent in navigating it. To him, his name has grown to embody these pitfalls, and he resents it accordingly. He is unaware of the true meaning behind his name, and Gogol overlooks the gift of Nikolai Gogol's short stories given to him by his father on his fourteenth birthday. This willful ignorance continues throughout his life, as Gogol studiously avoids reading the Russian author's works. To do so, he feels, would be to accept a name he in no way accepts. Later, though, when Gogol legally changes his name, he only complicates matters. He does not want to be Gogol, and yet he does not "feel like Nikhil."⁵ His dual names—one at school, one at home—make him feel as if "he's cast himself in a play acting the part of twins." Trapped between his two names, Gogol "feels helpless, annoyed . . . caught in the mess he's made." Although this feeling subsides as Gogol makes his way in college, his feelings toward his dual heritage have grown no less accepting. In fact, the opposite occurs. Even when Gogol learns the truth behind the meaning of his name during his senior year at Yale, his ambivalence toward his Indian heritage remains unabated.

Gogol's two girlfriends are perfect examples of this pattern. The first, Ruth, will surely bring his parents' disapproval. Gogol is well aware of this, and he avoids mentioning her for as long as possible. Even though he and Ruth date for almost two years, Gogol never introduces her to his family. The relationship, like most college liaisons, ends when both Ruth and Gogol grow apart. Gogol again rejects his Indian heritage, to an even greater degree,

when he dates Maxine Ratliff. Both she and her family are the direct opposites of the Ganguli clan, a fact of which Gogol is acutely aware. He constantly makes comparisons between the two families, all of which cast the Gangulis in an unflattering light. Indeed, "he is conscious of the fact that his immersion in Maxine's family is a betrayal of his own."

However, the death of Gogol's father sparks a deep change in his view of himself and his family. Indeed, when Ashoke dies, Gogol insists on traveling to Cleveland without Maxine, and he does not invite her to join his family in the initial mourning period. Indeed, for the first time in his life, Gogol finds himself clinging to the Bengali rituals that follow in the wake of his father's death. According to Natalie Friedman in *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, Gogol "desires a 'return' to his Indian-inflected parental home and his Indian community in Massachusetts after the death of his father, which awakens in him a sudden need to reconnect with lost Bengali rituals."⁶ Gogol's desire to embrace his Indian heritage is, unsurprisingly, matched by his failing desire to actively reject it—especially in the form of his girlfriend. Friedman observes:

Gogol recognizes his romance with Maxine for what it was: a temporary experience, a diversion. The return to his family and to Bengali rituals serves to reinstate for Gogol the importance of his ethnic difference, and he loses interest in Maxine.⁷

Friedman adds that "his return to his parents' house in Massachusetts is a

physical and metaphoric return to his Indian roots; it is the first time in the novel that Gogol acknowledges that he is Indian and not simply another American suburban boy.”

Gogol's next girlfriend underscores his closer ties to his family and heritage. Indeed, while Gogol is surprised by his love for Moushumi Mazoomdar, it hardly comes as a surprise to the reader. Gogol's weekly visits home, an acquiescence to his mother's nagging, are in line with the changed Gogol. Moushumi, who has shared a similar distaste for her background, is motivated to return to tradition following a broken engagement to an American. Gogol and Moushumi marry as expected, and they hold a traditional Bengali ceremony only to please their families. The irony, of course, is that Moushumi remains dissatisfied with her roots in a way that Gogol no longer shares. That dissatisfaction ultimately sows the seeds of discontent that will destroy their marriage. The irony, of course, is readily apparent: while Gogol chases his perceived American ideal before growing disenchanted with it, he unwittingly marries a Bengali woman who is still actively chasing that ideal.

Despite his acceptance of his cultural identity, Gogol still struggles to accept his given name. This is evidenced in two events that occur with Moushumi. In the first, Moushumi reveals Gogol's birth name at a dinner party, and Gogol can barely conceal his anger and resentment. Indeed, his unresolved feelings toward his name are revealed again only a moment later when he tells the shocked partygoers that children should go only by pronouns until they name themselves at the age of

eighteen. In the second instance, when Gogol learns the name of Moushumi's lover, it is “the first time in his life, [when] another man's name upset him more than his own.” Nevertheless, only a year later, Gogol finally accepts his name. In doing so, he finally accepts himself, and his father (who named him) as well.

In fact, it is Gogol's discovery of his father's long-ago gift – a book of Nikolai Gogol's short stories – that triggers this epiphany. Gogol discovers an inscription from Ashoke inside the book and realizes that “the name he had so detested . . . was the first thing his father had ever given him.” He also thinks that there are only a few people left in his life who know him as Gogol, and “yet the thought of this eventual demise provides no sense of victory, no solace. It provides no solace at all.” Still, Gogol's final epiphany has been brewing for some time. Earlier that day, he thinks of the bravery required of his parents to live so far from their homes, and of how he has never lived farther than a quick train ride away from his own. This line of thought is brought on by the knowledge that Ashima will spend half the year in Calcutta and that his childhood home has been sold. Indeed, as Friedman states, “with Ashima's retirement to India, Gogol will be, effectively, without a home.”⁸ And so, in the face of that loss, he chooses no longer to be without a name.

One of the main themes in the novel is that of the immigrant experience. Ashoke and Ashima are immigrants travelling from the country they have always known to make their life in a vastly foreign land. While Ashoke is able to throw himself into his work, through Ashima readers catch a glimpse of the

anxiety and alienation of foreigners. In the first sentence of the novel, Ashima is attempting to make a snack resembling her favorite food back home. However, the attempt is an inexact copy; the original ingredients are unavailable in Cambridge, and Ashima can only effect an approximation. This first image applies to much of Ashoke and Ashima's lives. Their Bengali friends are an approximation of the extended family they left behind. Their attempts to name Gogol according to the Indian tradition of pet names and formal names are misconstrued and ultimately abandoned, another failed approximation. Indeed, even as the years go on, Ashoke and Ashima remain tied to India, visiting it every few years. No matter how long they live in America, they will always be living in a foreign land. This is an essential aspect of Ashoke and Ashima's experience.

The process of assimilation, in which immigrants take on the mannerisms and customs of their new country, is also evident in *The Namesake*. For instance, Ashoke and Ashima begin celebrating Christmas and Easter, though they do so mainly for their children. In fact, Gogol and Sonia, as first-generation Americans, also demonstrate an important aspect of the immigrant experience. As first-generation Americans, they are not living in a foreign land; they are not pulled between two countries in the way that their parents are, but they are pulled between two cultures in a way that their parents are not. Indeed, Ashoke and Ashima do not feel the need to conform to American ideals and traditions, yet their children, especially Gogol, do. As children, Gogol and Sonia urge their parents to celebrate

Christian holidays, they prefer American food to Indian food, and they resent the long family trips to India. Where their parents entered into an arranged marriage, Gogol and Sonia date Americans freely. Even when Gogol and Moushumi eventually marry, they still prefer an American wedding. Instead, they have a Bengali ceremony to please their families. Gogol, Sonia, and even Moushumi must balance two heritages, the American one they grew up with and the Indian one they inherited. Each does so with varying degrees of success.

While *The Namesake* largely explores the immigrant experience, it cannot help but touch upon the closely related theme of identity. Indeed, the dual heritages that Gogol, Sonia, and Moushumi carry are essentially two cultural identities. The unasked question that haunts their lives is whether they are Indian or American. The answer is that they are simultaneously both and neither. It would be an over simplification to say that they are Indian Americans, but this nevertheless speaks not only to the trouble that first-generation immigrants have identifying themselves but also the trouble that outsiders have in identifying bicultural individuals. This quandary is largely represented in Gogol's two names. In fact, Gogol's changing feelings regarding his name correspond to his feelings about his cultural identity. When Gogol accepts the name given him by his parents, it is as if he is accepting them. Notably, when he attempts to create himself anew as Nikhil, he feels torn between two identities, but when he fully embraces his name and his Indian heritage, he does not feel any anxiety. His two names – one at school,

one at home – make him feel as if “he’s cast himself in a play acting the part of twins.” Amidst the confusion he has caused, Gogol “feels helpless, annoyed . . . caught in the mess he’s made.”

As the novel progresses, Gogol becomes more comfortable with his Indian identity, with the rituals and customs that connect him to his family. This change enables him to marry Moushumi, to ungrudgingly do so in a ceremony contrary

to his personal tastes. By the novel’s end, Gogol realizes that “the name he had so detested...was the first thing his father had ever given him.” Indeed, by rejecting his name, Gogol had rejected his father, his parents, his roots, and his identity – all things he no longer rejects. Now, having all but succeeded in obliterating his original name, “the thought of this eventual demise provides no sense of victory, no solace. It provides no solace at all.”

Notes:

1. Michiko Kakutani, “From Calcutta to Suburbia: A Family’s Perplexing Journey,” in *New York Times* (September 2, 2003) E8.
2. Sam Munson, “Born in the U.S.A.,” in *Commentary*, Vol.116 (November 2003) 68.
3. David H. Lynn, “Virtues of Ambition,” in *Kenyon Review*, Vol. 26, No. 3 (Summer 2004)160.
4. Mandira Sen, “Names and Nicknames,” in *Women’s Review of Books*, Vol. 21, No.6 (March 2004) 9.
5. Jhumpa Lahiri, *The Namesake* (Houghton Mifflin, 2003). All the quotations from the novel have been taken from this edition.
6. Friedman Natalie, “From Hybrids to Tourists: Children of Immigrants in Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Namesake*,” in *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, Vol.50, No.1 (Fall 2008) 111.
7. Ibid.1128.
8. Ibid.114.