

Identity Crisis in 'The Namesake'

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Abstract

The present paper is an attempt to understand the conflicts before the second generation of Indian Diaspora with special reference to *The Namesake* by Jhumpa Lahiri. Lahiri born in an educated middle-class family in London and grew up in Rhode Island. Lahiri portrays her Diasporic experiences in her first novel *The Namesake*. In this novel Lahiri's experiences of growing up as a child of immigrants resemble that of the protagonist, Gogol Ganguly. Lahiri belongs to the second generation of Indian Diaspora whose ongoing quest for identity never seems to end. They feel sandwiched between the country of their parents and the country of their birth. They maintain ties between the ideologies of these two countries which are poles apart. But in this process, they are caught between acute identity crisis from where there is nowhere to go. Lahiri finds herself quite a stranger to both of the countries- in India she is an American and in America she is an Indian.

Keywords: identity crisis, The Namesake, Jhumpa Lahiri

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The Question of Identity

In the postmodern discourse, the question of identity plays a vital role. The problem of Gogol's name symbolizes the problem of identity. Nikhil replaces Gogol when he enters Yale as a freshman. He starts doing many activities which he could not dare to do as Gogol. He changes his name but- "He does not feel like Nikhil" (105).

He fears to be discovered with the rejection of Gogol's name. But his outward change fails to give him inner satisfaction.

“After eighteen years of Gogol, two months of Nikhil feels scant inconsequential” (105)

He hates everything that reminds his past and heritage. The loss of the old name was not so easy to forget and when alternate weekends, he visits his home. “Nikhil evaporates and Gogol claims him again” (106). He tries to put a wall between his past and present, but it is not an easy task.

Gogol’s Identity Crisis

Through Gogol, Lahiri presents identity crisis which she herself has faced acutely. She contradicts the idiom “what is in a name?” Rather she obsessed with it and everything that matters in a name. The name is significant factor that gives the first identity.

Gogol’s name is one of the chief causes which make him feel alienated. His loneliness starts from the moment he enters in the world. His mother thinks to herself- “She has never known a person entering the world so alone.” (p. 24)

After his birth, selecting a name becomes a problem for them. The differences between the naming process in the Indian and American cultures pushes him into chaos.

Gogol himself hears this story as a college student, reacts in a very different manner. At this point of time he also feels estranged from his family. But this realization of the background his name is perhaps most important in the book and contributes to the building of fragile bridge between the generation. “... And suddenly the sound of his pet name, uttered by his father as he has been accustomed to hearing it all his life, means something completely

new, bound up with a catastrophe he has unwillingly embodied for years. “Is that what you think of when you think of me?” Gogol asks him. “Do I remind you of that night?”

“Not at all.” His father says eventually, one hand going to his ribs, a habitual gesture that has baffled Gogol until now. “You remind me everything that followed.”

The father has named his son Gogol in honor of the Russian writer. The book of this author helps him to save his life. Ashok has great reverences for this author and his name. The name fills him with joy and indicates the new life. But this very name, the first identity of his son, is the very first factor which contributes to the problem of identity crisis.

Gogol does not understand the emotional significance of the name. He does not like to be known by the name which is neither Indian nor American, nor even the first name. When he comes to know about his namesake, the Russian author, he becomes desperate to get rid of his name. He does not feel like an American with this name. His name Gogol-“Sound ludicrous to his ears, lacking dignity of gravity.” (p.76)

He does not want to read Nikolai Gogol because he thinks it “would mean paying tribute to his namesake, accepting it somehow.” (p. 92)

Gogol struggles to carry the burden of two names. Nikhil resembles an American name, yet ‘Gogol’ and his past follow him everywhere. He experiences a feeling of being in between. He is considered an ‘ABCD’ that is “American born confused Desi.” But he considers himself an American.

The American society says, “But you are Indian.” (157)

The death of his father brings a change in him. He learns that he cannot abandon or dismiss the importance of either culture but must learn to mesh the two together. He realizes that his identity is embellished by both the cultures and comes to know –

“Identity has a production, which is never complete always in process, and always constitute within, not outside representation.” (Hall p.10)

He does not have to be one or other; he does not have to choose. He feels no shame. He has assimilated himself in American culture and values. He tries to cope up with the situation to gain a new identity which does not need a particular nationality and hence different from the old one.

The Namesake follows the lives of Ashoke and Gogol are living two different times. Though they are both of Indian ancestors and both live under the strict status of the Indian culture, Gogol’s cultural identity is bombarded by intense consumerism, materialism and the open mindedness that was characteristics of the American society during the 1970s.

Though, *The Namesake* focuses primarily on name, culture and inheritance as way of establishing one’s identity. It also shades light on the ways in which gender helps to define person’s life. In the novel Ashima’s entire life revolves around her children and she feels, emptiness within her whenever a major stage of their lives has come and gone. Her primary purpose of life is to care for children and husband. Such observation molds her identity as the primary care taker, and dictates that deviating from this way of life is no advantage. In the novel, the author states that while Ashima is in labor with her first child, “In spite of her growing discomfort, she’d been astonished by her body’s ability to make life, exactly as her mother and grandmother had done.” (p.06). she finds her identity in life: motherhood.

“Fanon argued that first step for colonized people in finding a voice and an identity is to reclaim their own past.” (Barry 193) Identity is not just who I am. It is not all about certain sex, race, age, job and family. This word just provides a framework within which one exists. Identity is not stable and unitary rather it is multiple and ever widening. It is the past only, which the present prepares to a way to the future.

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