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Problematic Identity in the diasporic writings of Jhumpa Lahiri

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Abstract

In this paper, Jhumpa Lahiri's novel *The Namesake*'s characters of Indian descent and immigrants in the United States are examined in relation to their name problems, sense of identity, and sense of belonging. Jhumpa Lahiri's novel *The Namesake* is a poignant portrayal of the struggles of the Bengali-American diaspora, as well as the complexities of identity and belonging that arise as a result of displacement. Through the lens of the Ganguli family, Lahiri explores how their experiences of migration and adaptation in the United States affect their sense of self and their connection to their cultural heritage.

The Namesake is the idea of a problematic identity, which arises when individuals in the diaspora are caught between two cultures and struggle to reconcile their cultural heritage with the demands and expectations of their new environment. Through her depiction of these characters and their experiences, Lahiri highlights the challenges of navigating multiple cultural identities and the tensions that can arise as a result. She also shows how these challenges can lead to a sense of alienation and dislocation, as well as a profound longing for connection and a sense of belonging.

Keywords: Identity, diasporic, alienation, cultural dislocation, isolation

Introduction

Lahiri's *The Namesake* offers a powerful exploration of the complexities of diasporic identity and the struggles that arise when individuals are caught between two cultures. These challenges, she offers insight into the experiences of immigrants and their families, and provides a nuanced portrayal of the ways in which cultural identity can be both a source of strength and a site of struggle. At the same time, Gogol's parents, Ashima and Ashoke, are also struggling to adapt to life in America while holding on to their cultural traditions and values. They feel like outsiders in their new country and find it difficult to navigate the complex social norms and expectations of American society. Their struggles are mirrored in the experiences of other members of the Bengali-American community, who also grapple with issues of identity, belonging, and cultural dislocation.

The Namesake makes it the ideal type of quick reference to categorize Diaspora since the phrase 'Diaspora' and through the plot and characters, the novel effectively conveys the life of first- and second-generation immigrants, as well as their quest for identity and a sense of belonging. Jhumpa Lahiri is a migrant writer and a member of the diaspora because she was born in England to Indian immigrants and moved to America as a young adult. She has written on the Indian Diaspora and told tales in her works that demonstrate the ambiguity of the concept of identity and cultural uniqueness in the Diaspora. The protagonist, Gogol, is named after the Russian author Nikolai Gogol, and this unusual name becomes a source of confusion and embarrassment for him as he grows up in America. He feels disconnected from his Bengali heritage and tries to distance himself from it, instead embracing American culture and values.

A state of embarrassment is caused giving rise to uncomfortable self-consciousness in a situation in which the individual is aware that negative attention and critical judgment is focus on himself as a result of inappropriate actions which label h. as either clumsy, low status or deficit in proper breeding a good manner (15).

Jhumpa Lahiri explores the themes of cultural alienation and identity loss that immigrants experience when establishing themselves in a new country.

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The characters in the book are shown to be psychologically, socially, and culturally estranged. Two generations of the Ganguli family are included in the narrative, along with their hopes and concerns about being transplanted into a strange culture and their ongoing battle to survive in a society that denies them the right to exist. Jhumpa Lahiri frequently draws parallels between the profound personal isolation of her characters and their societal isolation, implying that the personal isolation is a result of the former. I have made an effort to discuss the struggle and search for identity of first-generation people in this essay. What they experience in the strange land, and how they handle life.

The Indian diaspora in America is well-represented with Jhumpa Lahiri. She brings up the issue of how immigration and expatriation, when considered in light of various ethnic, religious, and cultural origins, affect the challenges of life. Her first novel, *The Namesake*, is on the lives of Asian and Indian immigrants to other nations. Her essay enlightens us on the difficulties that first- and second-generation Indian immigrants to the United States encounter in settling down in their new nation. Her works of art poignantly convey the struggle between upholding familial customs and cherishing individual freedom, as well as the realization that one is an outsider despite being a native of the place. Normal themes in diaspora fiction include alienation, loneliness, depression, homelessness, nostalgia, resistance, assertiveness, and the search for one's identity.

Jhumpa Lahiri focused on the immigrant population's experience of alienation, loneliness, and identity crises as well as racial and cultural disputes. Inherent in the history of immigration are estrangement and its repercussions. A tradition is sacrificed for every newfound freedom. Every time a second generation assimilates, a first generation is in some manner rejected. An identity is lost and uncertainty is found in exchange for the benefits of goods and services. The accurate portrayal of modern society in literature should continue. Therefore, diaspora writers have a moral obligation to uphold their integrity while blending fact and fiction in their compositions. In some ways, they may be viewed as the leaders of their era's history. The majority of writers from the diaspora focus on their own experiences and the challenges they encounter when relocating to a new country.

The present research investigates the degree to which immigrant writers find and fix the transnational identity in their writing. Do immigrants, in their efforts to navigate complex ethnic identities and overcome cultural obstacles, inhabit a land of no return? Modern immigrant writers no longer focus on themes of uprooting, displacement, or dislocation; instead, they are influenced by the concepts of globalization and transnationalism. In the new places, they make an effort to locate and establish their identities. I also want to look into how immigrant writers defy expectations and establish 'Third Spaces' where they can express their transnational identities.

In light of the aforesaid theoretical framework, I would analyse first- and second-generation immigrant characters in *The Namesake* and try to address identity and cultural clash through textual references. Diasporas are constantly forming and reforming, as seen in this research. In response to tumultuous events and minor shifts in religious epicentres, homelands, and host lands, their condition might change radically. In *The Namesake*, background, name, and culture are examined to show identity. The story's main

protagonists struggle to understand their lineage to find their place in society. The tale follows a Bengali couple who move to the US to start a new life. The story begins when Ashoke and Ashima move to America from Calcutta. Ashima is pregnant and due in two weeks when the novel begins. Her abdomen hurts. Ashoke, an MIT electrical engineering PhD candidate, is her husband. Instead of saying his name, she uses an interrogative, which is basically,

She'd noticed the watch among the cavalcade of matrimonial bracelets on both her arms: iron, gold, coral, conch. Now in addition, she wears a plastic bracelet with typed label identifying her as a patient of the hospital. (4)

Gogol has to complete an assignment in accordance with his school's policies. Ashima opposes Gogol's artistic endeavour because she feels that the graveyard rubbings go against fundamental Bengali principles. She is adamant about showing respect and honour to the deceased. For it, Ashima chastised him. But Gogol continues to retain those items in his chamber, abiding by his mother's requests but unwilling to fully adopt Bengali principles of life and death. He experienced the conflict between those Indian and American civilizations there. "Gogol and Sonia must remember to say, not aunt this uncle that but terms far more specific: mashi and pishi, mama and maima, kakku and jethu, to signify whether they are related on their mother's or their father's side, by marriage or by blood" (81).

Their family abruptly relocates to Calcutta for eight months. Sonia and Gogol were angry because they both missed America and their schools. They refer to their relatives as uncle and aunt since they are unable to properly address them in Bengali. Their relatives start to seem foreign to them. He is aware of the hardships to survive in a foreign environment. Finalizing the procedure of altering his name, his father informed him that "In America, anything is possible. Do as your wish" (100). Gogol struggles with his identity in this novel. His personal relationships illustrate how his identity is threatened by the clash of cultures. He is torn by conflicting emotions of love and hate for India, internal turmoil, developing perplexity, and he finds it difficult to properly adapt to western civilization.

Gogol is not entirely cut off from his roots and identity while being westernized. Gogol makes an effort to break all links with Indian values and repudiate the past. He becomes alien to himself due to his refusal to acknowledge his connections to and continuity with the past as well as the gaps and fissures in his current situation. He finds a beginning and an awareness of community and of his place in the family and in society in his father's passing. His particular moment of pain binds him to his family and teaches him to respect their practices. He can't stand the ambivalence of his in-between existence any longer. He eventually learns about and revives his Indian ancestry and family bonds by responding to the binary opposition as complimentary rather than oppositional.

Listen, I can't come home that week end, he says. The truth seeps out of him slowly. He knows it's his only defence at this point. I'm going on a vacation. I've already made plans. Though she says nothing for a while, he knows what his mother is thinking, that he is willing to go on vacation with someone else's parents but not see his own (145).

The identity problem in the book *Namesake* is the topic of this essay. The story demonstrates the process through which a Bengali family adopts a foreign culture. Diasporic

fiction is rife with the issue of identity. The significance she places on her protagonist's identity is evident in the book's title. Gogol completely forgot about his relatives after joining Maxine's family. His mother called to invite him to a birthday celebration, but he declined because he prefers to spend time with Maxine's family. Ashima reasoned that Gogol was gradually eluding their grasp. But after his father passed away, Gogol reunited with his mother and wed a Bengali woman.

The issue of identity is essential to the postcolonial discussion. The issue with Gogol's name serves as a symbol for his identity issue. He seeks a relationship with the odd names in the cemetery. His name makes it difficult for him to be identified as an American, despite his desire to identify with the American culture. When Nikhil enrolls at Yale as a freshman, Gogol is replaced. Here, no one is aware of his previous name. He experiences relief and assurance. Here is where his transformation begins. He begins engaging in a variety of things that he would never have dared to undertake as Gogol. But he now faces a fresh conundrum. However, after changing his name, "he does not feel like Nikhil" (105). He's wary about being found out. By rejecting Gogol's name, Lahiri also rejects the immigrant persona that his parents cultivated in him. "But he is not internally satisfied by this apparent change. After 18 years of Gogol, two months of Nikhil seem brief and insignificant" (105). Everything that makes him think of his past or his heritage offends him. He visits his house on alternate weekends because forgetting the former name was not so simple. "Nikhil vanishes, but Gogol reclaims him" (106).

Lahiri has made an effort to address every query with dignity by exploring the identities of her characters. Identity can vary along with locations. One must avoid being overly fixated on one's cultural heritage because it is deeply ingrained in society as a whole and has deep meaning. The Indian Diaspora has a history of alienation, and even if someone feels at home anywhere in the globe, they may still have a sense of alienation. The name that is on record cannot resolve the name conundrum. One must go through a process of introspection and negotiation to come to terms with one's own identity, which is constantly impacted by society.

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