

Struggle for Identity in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake***Manoj Kumar**

Research Scholar,
Department of English &
Modern European Languages,
The University of Allahabad,
Prayagraj U.P. India

DOI: 10.53032/tcl.2020.4.6.09**Abstract**

In the fast globalizing world in which the boundaries are becoming redundant, it is expected to be cultural bonhomie and co-operation. But in the case of migrants and their descendents such talks still remain in the realm of ideals. Different problems are encountered whenever people belonging to different cultural backgrounds meet at a point. Now, when the migration is voluntary and the rapid means of transportation are accessible and affordable, the homesickness is not as acute as it is in the case of indentured laborers. But still the issue of equation with the people of the host country remains problematic. There are several expectations and reservations at both sides, due to which biases develop. Body colour, creed, lifestyle, profession etc. are unexpectedly different, for which lack of knowledge is to blame. As for reservation, an amount of conservation is integral to all societies. One does not want to change oneself, but expects the other to change all the same. The immigrants have to suffer in this process. To some extent they accept this discriminatory discourse about themselves and try to compromise.

Keywords- Diaspora, Identity, Transnational, Multiculturalism

The present paper is an effort to understand the conflicts before the second generation of Indian Diaspora with special reference to *The Namesake* by Jhumpa Lahiri. Having been born of educated middle class Bengali parents in London and grown up in Rhodes Island, Lahiri authentically 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 her 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 are to 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.

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The *Namesake* is about this perpetual dilemma faced by immigrants as they struggle to maintain their identities while trying to shake them off at the same time. “The first generation’s story was about adaptation and learning a culturing and also discovering new things about themselves. The second generation finds itself presented with two conflicting realities and cultures and sets of expectations - one of the host countries through the socio-cultural surroundings and the other of the home country through their parents.” (Batra 50)

The novel constantly plays with pairs (two countries and continents, two major cities - Calcutta and New York, two cultures, two names, and two identities) in order to project a recognizable narrative of the Indian-American experience. Its explicit inter-textual reference to Nikolai Gogol’s story *The Overcoat* (1842) provides another link which literally sets the scene for Gogol Ganguli’s absurd troubles with his name. At first glance the two writers seem to have little in common, however, it is interesting to note how Lahiri has woven the classic Russian author and his text into her novel. Jhumpa Lahiri fuses her American literary ancestry (she mentions Hemingway and Raymond Carver) with her love for the Russians (Chekhov, Nabokov and, obviously, Nikolai Gogol), and with elements from Bengali culture. In *The Namesake*, she specifically identifies her characters as Bengali. In this way she places her work in a more ethnic context, and as such, Indian national identity is much newer than regional ones. However, the varied above mentioned influences give Lahiri’s oeuvre a global dimension, and contribute to her unique mode of expression.

Whereas the parents maintain ties with their home country and try hard to inculcate in their children reverence for the values of the home country, the children are fascinated more by their peer groups and the society at large of the host country, which, of course was no longer a host country for them, but the country of their birth. But the country of their birth also does not accept them entirely and they keep struggling for cultural identity which sways between two countries. Parents talk of shared history which stresses oneness. In fact, all the main characters in the novel straddle multiple nation- spaces and cultures, blending elements from past and present in their efforts to forge a sense of identity. But cultural identity lies not only in oneness but in “critical points of deep and significant difference which constitute what we really are; or rather – since history has intervened – what we have become.” (Hall 112)

Through Gogol, Lahiri presents identity crisis which she herself has faced acutely. Lahiri examines the social and the psychological stages, he passes through while dealing with his hyphenated status and eventually developing a transnational identity. She contradicts the idiom “What’s in a name?” Rather she is obsessed with ‘it’s everything that matters in a name.’ Name signifies the first identity. But this identity gets a blow when it comes to the second generation of Indian Diaspora. The paper intends to explore the conflicts which arise due to different cultural practices before the children of Indian parentage.

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Jumpa Lahiri was born as Nilanjana Sudeshna, but had one pet name, Jumpha which was found easy to pronounce by her teacher and she became Jhumpa Lahiri. She felt embarrassed whenever she was called as Jhumpa. She struggled a lot to make herself feel an American but she found just a half-way feeling. The same feeling, she puts into Gogol who never likes to be called by this name. The agony felt by Gogol is the agony of Jhumpa Lahiri. Lahiri's parents, like the whole first generation of Diaspora, were always isolated from mainstream American Culture. Despite the fact that they spoke English, they were betrayed by their accent. They feel alone and aloof there. Lahiri has shown all this through various conflicts presented in *The Namesake*.

Gogol's name is one of the chief causes which make him feel alienated. His loneliness starts from the moment he enters the world. His mother thinks to herself - "She has never known a person entering the world so alone" (*The Namesake*24). After his birth, selecting a name becomes a problem for them. The difference between the naming process in Indian and American cultures pushes him into a chaos. Ashima wants her grandmother to suggest a name but the name is not received, the letter having been lost in transit. The hospital authorities do not allow them to leave the hospital without naming the new born, in keeping with the rules. Ashok names him Gogol after the name of his beloved Russian author, Nikolai Gogol, thinking of it as a pet name only, which is a common practice in India. The book of this author helps him save his life. So Ashok has great reverence for this author and his name. For him, Gogol signifies a beginning and a survival. The name fills him with joy and indicates a new life. But this very name, the first identity of their son, is the very first factor which contributes to the problem of identity crisis. When his parents take him to school to start his schooling, they have a new name 'Nikhil' for him. But this time it was Gogol himself who does not respond to 'Nikhil'. It was his first attempt to reject a dual identity. This rejection left him alone with his old name Gogol. Gradually, he starts knowing the uncommon nature of his name which problematizes his identity when he grows up. Gogol does not understand the emotional significance of the name. He does not like to be known by a name which is neither Indian, nor American, nor even first name. When he comes to know about his namesake, the Russian Author, he becomes desperate to get rid of his name. Living with a Russian name, particularly during the Cold War, must indeed have been distressing for an adolescent. He would obviously have preferred a first name like Leo (Tolstoy), Anton (Chekhov), or Alexander (Pushkin), and is dismayed that his parents chose the strangest of namesakes. He does not feel like an American with this name. His name Gogol "sounds ludicrous to his ears, lacking dignity of gravity." (*The Namesake*76) He does not want to read Nikolai Gogol because he thinks it "would mean paying tribute to his namesake, accepting it somehow" (*The Namesake*92).

In the postcolonial discourse, the question of identity plays a vital role. The problem of Gogol's name symbolizes the problem of his identity. He wants to be connected to the

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strange names in the graveyard. He wants to relate himself with American milieu but his name hinders his way to be recognized as an American. Nikhil replaces Gogol when he enters Yale as a freshman. Here nobody knows his earlier name. It is an Indian name he has had since childhood, but because he has never used it until now, it is not connected to a cultural and personal past, which gives him the freedom to create any future. He feels relief and confident. Here starts his transformation. He starts doing many activities which he could not dare to do as Gogol. But a new dilemma encircles him. He changes his name but “he does not feel like Nikhil” (*The Namesake* 105). He fears to be discovered.

With the rejection of Gogol’s name, Lahiri rejects the immigrant identity nurtured by his parents. But this outward change fails to give him inner satisfaction. “After eighteen years of Gogol, two months of Nikhil feels scant, inconsequential” (*The Namesake* 105). He hates everything that reminds him of 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” (*The Namesake* 106). He tries to put a wall between his past and his present, but it is not easy. Gogol desires to blend in the American society. He wants to live unnoticed. But he is not viewed as an American by other Americans, even though he is a native born citizen. The adoption of ‘Nikhil’ is a part to live only in the present, but the ghost of Gogol clings to him that he signs his old name unconsciously, he does not respond immediately when he is addressed as Nikhil. He tries to become an entirely different person from what really he is.

Gogol struggles to carry the burden of two names. Nikhil resembles American names, yet ‘Gogol’ and his past follow him everywhere. He experiences a feeling of being in-between. He is considered an ‘ABCD’ “America–Born Confused Desi” But he considers himself an American. American society says, “But you’re Indian” (*The Namesake* 157). Gogol is an outsider in American society whereas he does not feel intimacy with Indianness. He learns that C could also stand for ‘conflicted’, and understands that he fits right in this category. He knows that ‘deshi’ means ‘countryman’ or ‘Indian’ and that his parents and all their friends always refer to India simply as ‘desh’. However, there is a ‘little India’ recreated in their house, and Gogol constantly moves between this private sphere and the public American space. So ‘who he is’ becomes a great problem. What determines identity? Is it the name, which can be the very first factor in the formation? Even after making all efforts to erase his past, his failure to assert his identity is seen in his relationship with women. He does not want Ruth or Maxine to meet his parents. Such efforts are made to escape his past identity and heritage. This is what diasporic personalities tend to feel. They yearn for the home yet slightly dissatisfied there and back to the host country they seem to be in ease, however, only for the transit as they are again bound to be nostalgic.

The death of his father brings great change in him. He learns that he cannot abandon or diminish the importance of either culture but must learn to mesh the two together. He

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realizes that his identity is embellished by both cultures and comes to know “identity as a production, which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside representation” (Hall 10). He does not have to be one or the other; he does not have to choose. He is made up of both and it should strengthen his pride instead of weakening it. He feels no shame. He has assimilated himself in American culture and values, at the same time retaining his parents’ Indian heritage and now proud of his name ‘Nikhil Gogol Ganguly’ and all it means. His journey is not so much a physical one, but more a metaphorical inner search for his self.

Gogol 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. So there starts a journey “to rediscover his roots, his self, his hyphenated identity and to revitalize the in between’s of cultures, the alternate culture” (Fernandes 117). He actively participates in the formation of his new and ever-widening identification. Thus it is not the name only which determines identity. Cultural hybridism is the other aspect which has a telling effect on his identity. He belongs to many cultures at once and identity may not be determined by national boundaries only. As locations change, identity can also change. One must not be excessively obsessed with one’s cultural legacy, because it is not something meaningless; rather, it is deep rooted in one’s collective psyche. “Fanon argued that the 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’s not all about certain sex, race, age, job and family. These words just provide 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 with the present prepares a way to the future.

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