

The Study of Diasporic Identity in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*

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ABSTRACT

Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* is a heart-rending and nuanced depiction of the Indian American experience, investigating into the complication of diasporic identity, cultural heritage, and belonging. The novel enlightens the story of the Ganguli family, Indian immigrants in New York, and their struggles to navigate the tensions between cultural tradition and cultural assimilation. The protagonist, Gogol Ganguli, exemplifies the complexities of diasporic identity, grappling with his name, cultural traditions, and familial expectations. Lahiri hoists fundamental questions about the nature of identity, belonging, and cultural roots in the novel. The novel reveals the fragmented and hybridized nature of diasporic identity, marked by multiple belongings, cultural negotiations, and the quest for authenticity. Through Lahiri's rich and evocative prose, *The Namesake* bids a prevailing description of the Indian diaspora in America, illuminating the intricate and often loaded processes of identity formation, cultural transmission, and belonging in the diasporic experience. The novel also travels around the theme of belonging, which is a central concern for diasporic communities. The Gangulis' struggles to belong to their American surroundings are reflected in their experiences of cultural dislocation, racism. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of the Indian American experience, highlighting the complexities of diasporic identity and the intricate dynamics of

cultural identity and belonging. In conclusion, *The Namesake* sheds light on the intricate dynamics of cultural identity and belonging, highlighting the ways in which diasporic communities navigate the tensions between cultural tradition and cultural assimilation.

Keywords: Diaspora, Belonging, Cultural identity, Dislocation, Indian American.

Literature is as aged as the human language and fresh as tomorrow's sunrise. It epitomizes the tendencies of the age at which it was produced. And there is always a majestic literary artist, who becomes the representative of his epoch and literature. Such an artist in British American literature is Jhumpa Lahiri. This mission attempts to explore the study of diasporic identity in the selected novel of Jhumpa Lahiri.

In contemporary literature, diaspora is one of the most significant areas in research. The term "diaspora" comes from the Greek word "diaspeiro" which refers to the dispersion or scattering of people to a foreign land that is very different from their own homelands. The ancient Greeks used Diacerein to point to people of a dominant position who immigrated to a new territory with the aim of colonization, to alter the land into the empire. But in the modern time the Indian Diaspora describes the people who have emigrated from the land of India.

When we think of Diasporic literature the Pulitzer laureate Jhumpa Lahiri springs up in our mind. Diasporic literature refers to the body of writings that comes out from the experiences of diasporic communities, who have been expatriated or scattered from their motherland to other parts of the world. This literature replicates the complexities of living in multiple cultures, languages, and identities, and often explores themes of identity, belonging, exile, displacement, cultural heritage, and the search for home. These elements are found in the writings of Jhumpa Lahiri, particularly in her magnum opus novel *The Namesake*.

Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* is a heart-rending and nuanced depiction of the Indian American experience, investigating into the complication of diasporic identity, cultural heritage, and belonging. The novel enlightens the story of the Ganguli family, Indian immigrants in New York, and their struggles to navigate the tensions between cultural tradition and cultural assimilation. The protagonist, Gogol Ganguli, exemplifies the complexities of diasporic identity, grappling with his name, cultural traditions, and familial expectations. Lahiri hoists fundamental questions about the nature of identity, belonging, and cultural roots in the novel. The novel reveals the fragmented and hybridized nature of diasporic identity, marked by multiple belongings, cultural negotiations, and the quest for authenticity. Through Lahiri's rich and evocative prose, *The Namesake* bids a prevailing description of the Indian diaspora in America, illuminating the intricate and often loaded processes of identity formation, cultural transmission, and belonging in the diasporic experience.

Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* is novel that travels around the experiences of an Indian family residing in the United States. The story spins around the Ganguli family, who immigrate to New York from Calcutta. Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli, the parents, struggle to balance their Indian heritage with their new American life. Their children, Gogol and Sonia, grow up between two cultures, trying to navigate their identities. In the novel *The Namesake*, the writer throws light upon the poignant journey of the immigrants Ashoke and Ashima as well as their offspring Gogol and Sonia. Through the characters of Ashoke, Ashima and Gogol, Jhumpa Lahiri demonstrates the picture of diasporic identity.

In *The Namesake*, Ashoke is the son of an Allahabad Customs Officials, immigrants to the United States devoid of his family, friends and cultural traditions for his academic and professional pursuits. Here he experiences cultural dislocation and suffers a lot with his new life in America. Lahiri writes, "Ashoke had never been alone before, had never been separated from his family" (Lahiri 18). This quote highlights Ashoke's feelings of seclusion and detachment from his cultural roots. Further he often reminiscences his

earlier period life in Calcutta. His homesickness highlights the emotional challenges of diasporic experiences. Lahiri notes, "For the first time in his life, he felt a pang of loneliness, of being disconnected from the world" (20).

Moreover, though Ashoke is breathing in a foreign land, he tries to uphold his cultural traditions in foreign land by cooking Indian dishes, narrating old mythological stories to his children and such. He writes letters to his family. He translates and explains Indian culture to his American born children. He uses narrative to preserve his cultural heritage, sharing stories with his family to keep their cultural traditions alive. In his article "Diasporas and Multiculturalism," Victor J. Ramraj observes, "Even if diasporans may not desire to return home, they have a conscious or subconscious tie to the ancestral country's traditions, practises, values, faiths, and languages wherever they are" (215).

For this reason, he intentionally sticks on to his Indian sect during his thirty-two-year hang about in America. He shows interest in sending his son, Gogol, to learn Bengali. He gladly attends Durga Puja and other religious festivities with his children out of respect for ancestral custom. He develops taste for Indian cuisine. These diasporic rudiments afford insight into Ashoke's experiences as an Indian immigrant in the United States, highlighting his struggles and triumphs as he navigates cultural displacement, preservation, and identity formation.

Another important character in the novel is Ashoke's wife Ashima Ganguli, whose move from Calcutta to New York City represents cultural and physical displacement. She does not make any choices in her life and accepts the choices of others. Her parents arrange her marriage to Ashoke, and out of duty she follows him to cold, desolate-seeming Boston. Ashima often reminisces about her childhood in Calcutta, reflecting on the cultural traditions and family ties she left behind. As a diasporic individual, Ashima's identity becomes a blend of her Indian roots and American experiences. Lahiri observes,

"Ashima's own identity was a puzzle, a mixture of her Bengali heritage and her adopted American life" (143).

Ashima's complex life with America disappears with the birth of her first child, Gogol. Her life at Cambridge during her pregnancy is not at all customary for her and the most complicated thing for her is to be a mother in a foreign land where she is "terrified to raise a kid in a country where she is linked to no one, where she knows so little, where life appears so uncertain and sparse" (Lahiri 6). The sense of estrangement is the constant companion of the diasporan. She has felt it from the beginning of her life in America, and it is most evident when her first child, who is born, suffers from it.

In *The Namesake* Ashima suffers a lot because she is unable to mimic India. As a result, she expresses her deep frustration with her life in America and keeps urging Ashoke to return to India. "I'm saying I don't want to raise Gogol alone in the country," she informs Ashoke after Gogol's birth. This isn't right. I'd want to return" (Lahiri 33). At last, she learns that her husband, son, and daughter are used to the isolation that she fears and do not seem to mind. Her children tell her, "It's not such a big thing." "At some time, everyone should live on their own" (Lahiri 160). Ashima's character highlights the complexities of identity formation in diasporic contexts. These diasporic identity elements bring to light Ashima's experiences as an Indian immigrant in the United States, navigating cultural displacement, hybrid identity, and emotional fragmentation.

The Namesake portrays the character of Gogol Ganguli, son of Ashoke and Ashima, the novel's primary protagonist, who is born and raised in the United States. His character is deeply intertwined with the themes of cultural identity, belonging, and generational conflicts. Born in America to Indian parents, Gogol struggles to navigate his dual identity. He is torn between his loyalty to his family's cultural heritage and his wish to assimilate into American culture. Lahiri observes, "Gogol felt caught between two worlds, unsure of where he belonged" (Lahiri 183).

Gogol's existence becomes a dilemma of identification, when it comes naming either Indian or American. According to Indian tradition the elders are responsible for naming. To think of a name, Ashoke turns to the book that saved his life in a train disaster when he was a young man in India. He was reading Nikolai Gogol's short story "The Overcoat" at the time. The rescuers had given up the hope of finding any guy alive in Ashoke's compartment, and Ashoke was found under the mutilated limbs of Ghost in a horrible gruesome scene. Because the rescuers could see the shifting of the pages of Gogol's book, they were able to recognize him. So, in this sense, Gogol's work becomes a kind of metaphorical lifesaver for him, and he owes the Russian writer a lifelong debt. So, he gives his son "the perfect pet name" (Lahiri 28), Gogol. Gogol grows up in a traditional Indian household, where he struggles to balance his parents' cultural expectations with his own desire for Americanization.

As Gogol enters adulthood, he rebels against his parents' cultural traditions and expectations. He changes his name to Nikhil, symbolizing his longing to break free from his Indian heritage. Gogol's rebellion is a sign of his struggles with his dual identity. Gogol's relationships with his family, particularly his parents, are central to the novel. He struggles to navigate his relationships with his parents, who are caught between their love for their son and their desire to preserve their cultural heritage. Throughout the novel, Gogol undergoes a journey of self-discovery, navigating his dual identity and searching for a sense of belonging. He begins to appreciate his Indian heritage and understand the sacrifices his parents made for him "Gogol was slowly discovering himself, slowly finding his place in the world" (Lahiri 281).

Moreover, Gogol's romantic relationships are also an important aspect of the novel. He falls in love with an American woman, Maxine, who represents the American culture he is drawn to. However, their relationship ultimately ends due to Gogol's inability to reconcile his dual identity. Through his relationship with Maxine, Gogol begins to explore his cultural identity and the tensions between his Indian heritage and American surroundings.

Further Gogol and his sister Sonia have no feelings for India, their family, or even Indian culture. They don't have the same sentiments for their Indian relatives that their parents have. During their brief visits to India "they do not feel close to them as their parents do" (Lahiri 81). When Gogol's father, Ashoke dies suddenly, Gogol is forced to tackle his own identity and the cultural heritage he has been trying to escape. In the end, Gogol comes to terms with his dual identity and begins to understand his Indian heritage. He starts to appreciate the sacrifices of his parents made for him and the importance of preserving his cultural roots. Lahiri writes, "Gogol felt a deep connection to his family, to their cultural traditions and values" (261).

All the characters in the novel, especially Gogol, Ashima and Ashoke face cultural assimilation. They can never recognize host culture, as a result they even throw away their home culture. They even lose their own identity and heritage. They are constantly under process to adopt host culture. The first-generation characters of this novel, Ashoke and Ashima can find a balance between the two cultures, whereas the second-generation characters like Gogol and Sonia cannot locate like them, and fail to trace their identity. They suffer a lot in the hands of transnational space and culture. Thus, the parents Ashoke and Ashima struggle to maintain their cultural heritage in a new country. They cling to their Bengali traditions and customs but also adapt to American ways. On the other hand, the son, Gogol, is born in America and struggles with his own identity and he is caught between his parents' cultural expectations and his own desire to assimilate into American culture whereas the daughter, Sonia, is also born in America and struggles with her own identity. However, she is more willing to embrace her Bengali heritage and connect with her parents' culture. Thus, there is no doubt that through the characters of Ashoke, Ashima and Gogol, Jhumpa Lahiri powerfully paints the picture of diasporic life experiences and their diasporic identity in her masterpiece novel *The Namesake*.

In conclusion, Jhumpa Lahiri's novel *The Namesake* is a powerful exploration of diasporic identity, highlighting the complexities of navigating multiple cultural worlds. Through the characters of Gogol and Ashima, Lahiri illustrates the tensions that arise from diasporic identity, as well as the power of cultural tradition in shaping identity. This novel offers a nuanced and deeply human portrayal of the diasporic experience. Overall, *The Namesake* is a significant journeying of diasporic identity, cultural heritage, and the complexities of belonging in a new country.

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