

The Conflict OF Culture AND Self-Identity AND THE Indian Diaspora IN Jhumpa Lahiri's The Namesake

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ABSTRACT:

Today's era has become the era of technology and due to the development of this technology, the distances between cities and country boundaries have also been reduced, due to which today we do not hesitate at all to leave our country for a better life and go to another country in search of work and to be successful. Due to this rapidly developing technology, cooperation in cultural relations has increased. Although it is often seen that leaving one's own country is a very difficult time. But in today's time, the distance that comes in mutual relationships is to a great extent overcome by getting closeness through Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram and other similar means. But still issues like leaving one's home and going to another country and creating a new identity, living within the limits of the ideals of one's descendants, adopting the lifestyle of that country, etc. still remain. In this research paper, an attempt has been made to understand the struggles of the second generation of Indian immigrants with special reference to Jhumpa Lahiri's novel *The Namesake*. Jhumpa Lahiri has portrayed well through the characters in 'The Namesake' the term diaspora and its role, the lives of first and second generation immigrants and their struggle for identity and belonging. Jhumpa Lahiri herself is also the child of Indian immigrants whose parents were middle class Bengalis. She was born in London and grew up in America's Rhode Island. Therefore, *The Namesake* is in a way the autobiography of Jhumpa Lahiri because in this novel Lahiri has prominently portrayed the experiences of the second generation of Indian immigrants.

Key words: Technology, Identity, Immigrant, Culture, Diaspora.

Introduction

Jhumpa Lahiri in her novel *The Namesake* has beautifully portrayed her own experiences as a growing child of immigrant parents living in America through the character of Gogol. As a

child, Gogol is a second generation Indian diaspora who is faced with a search for identity to which he may not have any answers. On one hand, his parents have tried to raise him according to Bengali culture and on the other hand, he grows up seeing and experiencing a different culture where he actually lives. This is exactly what the second generation growing up in America would have experienced. They find themselves torn between the country of their parents and the country of their birth. They try to reconcile the ideologies of these two countries. But still they find themselves quite alien to both countries as in India they are considered Americans and in America they are Indians. But in the process they get caught in an acute identity crisis from which there is no escape. The dilemma Lahiri feels is well reflected through the character of Gogol in the novel. Rocio G. Davis says, "Asian American autobiographies generally highlight the protagonist's growing comprehension of the meaning or value that society places on questions and attitudes about ethnic differences, historical reconstruction, and the place of their communities in American societies" (Davis, 2005). This paper explores the conflicts faced by Indian parents due to their children's different cultural practices.

The Namesake depicts the arduous journey from childhood to adulthood of Gogol Ganguly, an American of Indian descent who has to deal with his name. Gogol's desperate attempts to come to terms with his name reflect his struggle to come to terms with a confused sense of identity in the United States and a multifaceted heritage. Through Gogol's quest for himself, Lahiri attempts to depict the generational divide between first and second generation members of immigrant communities. For American-born descendants of Indian immigrants, cultural heritage is in fact mixed; thereby illustrating the danger of lineage and genealogical ruptures and culture conflict. Broken ties are partly replaced by compensatory affiliative ties, in which the ancestral culture creates a deep sense of guilt and self-fragmentation in American-born children, and an inability to connect with their ancestral culture.

Gogol and other characters in *The Namesake* face many dilemmas, as do immigrants setting up their lives in a new country. They struggle to maintain their identity, while simultaneously trying to overcome these dilemmas. Terry Eagleton writes in his book *The Idea of Culture* (2000) that the word culture hides a tension that is explored by most immigrant writers who focus on generational differences and try to explore how new and old immigrants relate to their country of origin and the host culture. Often the main concern in their works is the divided and fluid nature of personal identity. This along with the indifferent attitude of the host culture enhances the feeling of rootlessness and alienation. The story of the first generation was about adaptation and

learning the culture and discovering new things about oneself while the second generation finds itself presented with two conflicting realities and cultures and expectations – one through the socio-cultural environment of the host country and the other about the home country through their parents. (Batra 50) On coming between two cultures, the first impression for the migrant is homelessness. The second generation also finds it very difficult to mix with the culture there because the Indian diaspora is traditionally strongly attached to the Indian culture. The second generation mixes its roots in two different countries, one of the motherland and the other where they migrate. But in recent times it has been seen that this concept has diminished and has diminished to some extent due to their connection through social networking. Earlier immigrants suffered from intense homelessness due to lack of means of communication. They had to either write letters or get information through letters to connect with family in the motherland. Letters too were received at long intervals. In the 1980s, landline telephones were a luxury in India. In today's time, with the advent of Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, etc., distances have been reduced to some extent.

The Namesake focuses mainly on Gogol, who is troubled and embarrassed by his name and struggles with a heritage that he is not sure is Indian or American. Gogol seeks to redefine himself as American-born and raised, rather than being identified with his parents' Bengali immigrant culture. To find self-definition, he discards the name Gogol and tries to become something else. The question of identity becomes important when a person is culturally displaced and cannot co-exist with either of the two worlds he lives in. While experiencing identity confusion from the name change, Gogol is nevertheless able to define his identity. Since Gogol is born after his father survives a terrible train accident, his father sees the name Gogol as a pet name as a sign of his rebirth. However, Gogol does not understand how meaningful his name was when he was young. Gradually, he starts realizing the unusual nature of his name which creates problems for his identity as he grows up. The main problem with Gogol is that he is a character living in two completely different cultures, the stress of which he cannot bear, he gets lost and gets distanced from his parents and culture. He does not understand the emotional significance of the name Gogol. He does not like to be known by a name that is neither Indian nor American. He feels very uncomfortable with his name Gogol. It alienates him from his family members. Later, during adolescence, Gogol also develops resentment towards this name and he decides to use his legal name Nikhil as an overcoat to escape the Indian culture. Although the name Nikhil gives him more confidence, Gogol is always present inside him. Soon he also starts realizing the futility and dissatisfaction of living away from his roots. (Lahiri 289) He sees himself as Nikhil and attempts to become truly American,

yet he fails to erase the Gogol identity. In the end, he chooses to stick with Gogol, which is an Indian identity, because he realizes that everything he has experienced, from the failed attempt at naming him at birth (Gogol) to the realization of the hope behind Gogol, is a meaningful part of what defines him.

Similarly, when Gogol's mother Ashima comes to America with her husband Ashok, she initially has no idea or dream of going to a place called Boston in America, which is so far away from where her parents live. But she still agrees to the marriage because it is enough for her that her husband will be there with her. Once there, Ashima is often upset and misses home. She lives alone in her three-room apartment, which is too hot in summer and too cold in winter. She feels displaced spatially and emotionally from her father's comfortable home, which is filled with so many loving people and always yearns to go back. Ashima goes through the same phase and feels that living in a foreign land is like a lifelong pregnancy. But she holds on to her moral and cultural ideology of a Bengali Indian. Ashima and Ashok Ganguly try to keep their roots and culture alive in America, creating a little Bengal even while living far from their birthplace and struggle for their identity abroad. At home and with friends they speak in Bengali and cook and eat Bengali food with their own hands. They make many Bengali friends and try to build their own community there. Often they would organize parties for their friends to meet them. They eagerly wait for such gatherings. They try to restore their traditions by preparing Indian food, inviting Brahmins for rituals. As Wieviorka says, when a migrant community is "constantly rejected or internalized in the quest for social or cultural inclusion, or when this group or this person is racially discriminated against, and demonized under the logic of perceived cultural difference," the person or group is shamed and this ultimately "leads to a self-definition and behavior based on this culture and ultimately racial discrimination." An attempt is made to create a home for children away from their real home. This sense of alienation from Western culture and the land they live in creates a sense of rootlessness in children who are unable to connect with either the place where they were born and raised or the place where their parents are from and about which they are always told. The parents try their best to create a Bengali atmosphere for Gogol and Sonia, organizing all Bengali get-togethers, but both have grown up in a mixed culture, partly Bengali, partly American, so they react very cautiously to their parents' attempts to create a homeland in America, fully integrated with Bengali culture. Ashima tells Gogol about Durga Puja, she also makes him memorize Tagore's four-line children's poem. But at the same time she is also conscious of her child being an American student and asks him to watch Sesame Street and Electric Company to match the English used in school. So Gogol is always sailing in two boats

simultaneously, one at home with his parents speaking Bengali and living in Bengali style and the other, American Indian.

The title *The Namesake* reflects the struggle faced by Gogol Ganguly to identify with his unusual name. The problem with Gogol's name realises him with his identity problem. When he enters Yale as a new student, Nikhil name takes the place of Gogol. Here no one knows his old name. He feels relieved and confident. From here his transformation begins. He can now relate himself to the American environment. He starts doing many activities that he could not dare to do as Gogol. But a new dilemma surrounds him. He changes his name but he does not feel like Nikhil. He is afraid of being found out every moment. With the rejection of the name Gogol, he rejects the immigrant identity nurtured by his parents. He keeps girlfriends, lives in live-in relationships but he is not satisfied from within. He lives his life in the American style, away from his parents, working to maintain himself. He keeps this life a secret and does not tell his parents about it. Yet the two months of being named Nikhil seem less insignificant than the eighteen years of Gogol. He hates everything that reminds him of his past and heritage. But the loss of the old name was not so easy to forget and when he visits his home every other weekend, Nikhil disappears and Gogol appears again.

Therefore, unlike what happens in books written by Indian immigrants like Bharati Mukherjee or Salman Rushdie *The Namesake* depicts the cultural mix that is a reality in the United States. This requires a new understanding of the twisted nature of identity conflict. In this context, the important concept of the relationship between relation and connection developed by Edward Said in "Secular Criticism", his introduction to *The World, the Text, and the Critique*, will be crucial to analyse. By approaching *The Namesake* along the general axis of relation and connection, the aim of this research paper is to show how Lahiri examines the main theme of cultural hybridity, while using Gogol's derailed relationship to discuss the twisted logic of inheritance and the skewed nature of identity.

Conclusion:

Jhumpa Lahiri has depicted the cultural dilemmas faced by immigrants on foreign soil in *The Namesake*. Lahiri has tried to answer all the questions in her own way through the identity search of her characters. As places change, so can identities. The point here is that one should not be overly obsessed with their cultural heritage, as it is not something meaningless; rather, it is deeply rooted in one's collective psyche. Isolation is a part of the experience of Indian immigrants and even if people are in any part of the world, it does not mean that they will not fall prey to a sense of alienation. The dilemma of name cannot be solved by the name on record. The identity of the

individual, which is constantly influenced by society, is something that one has to discover through a process of reflection and negotiation. The Namesake vividly portrays the lives of first-generation and second-generation Indian immigrants in the US. The Namesake also shows how immigrants face cultural dilemmas in a different culture on foreign soil. Diaspora is about new identities, space for growth, resolution of conflicts and the creation of a new culture. Lahiri shows that in their zeal to stick to their own cultural beliefs and customs, immigrants gradually absorb the cultural ways of the host country as well. Their own children who are raised bilingual and bicultural face more cultural dilemmas and displacement. But in the end, Lahiri also shows that all immigrants make their own path over time.

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