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## Identity Crisis and Diasporic Elements in Jhumpa Lahiri's, *The Namesake*

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### Abstract

**Aim:** In this paper, the main aim is to describe the requisite issue of the migration to present the pain and the problems that are faced by the immigrants by understanding the term 'Diaspora' in Jhumpa Lahiri's, *The Namesake*. The novel, *The Namesake*, has so many diasporic expressions such as language as a barrier, alienation, culture identity, relationship between parents and children and nostalgia. The novel tells a story about the assimilation of an Indian Bengali family from Calcutta, the Ganguly into America, over thirty years (1968-2000).

**Methodology and Approach:** The author has consulted the primary and secondary sources as part of her research. This research uses qualitative literary analysis of Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*, which focuses on the themes of the identity crisis and diasporic elements. The paper is based on textual analysis aided by secondary sources to explore the impact of migration on identity formation.

**Outcome:** Through this paper, the researcher has found that "*The Namesake*" complexly portrays the intense struggles of identity and belonging faced by migrant people. It outlines how cultural heritage and personal yearning shape as well as complicate the protagonist's and his surroundings journey.

**Conclusions and Suggestions:** The study concludes that this novel profoundly captures the complexity of identity crisis. The researcher has tried to explore comparative analysis with other diaspora literature also to get to know more about how different cultural backgrounds shapes and influence identity formation to enrich the understanding of multiculturalism more effectively.

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Jhumpa Lahiri is an award-winning author and translator. She received the Pulitzer prize in year 2000 for *Interpreter of Maladies*, which also won the New Yorker prize for the best First Book, the PEN/Hemingway award and was shortlisted for the Los Angeles Times Award. She was also awarded a National Humanities Medal in 2015. Born to Bengali parents in July 1967, in London and with her family's move to Rhode Island, Jhumpa Lahiri began life in the U.S.A. She grew up in the background of traditional Bengali culture. From childhood, she accompanied her parents back to India especially to Kolkata because of family ties. She always observes that her parents feel a sense of peacefulness and emotional exile while their stay in Kolkata.

Diaspora is a word derived from the Greek word 'Diaspeiro', literally meaning an alien land, away from their traditional homelands. Diaspora comes about through immigration and forced movements of people. Diasporic populations are often outnumbered in their new nation of residence. Diaspora was initially used to describe the migrations of Jewish people after the fall of Jerusalem in the sixth century B.C.E. It has since been used to describe other instances of mass migration or forced relocation. Diasporic populations often have strong social and cultural ties to their homeland, but may also have multiple cultural identities.

The cultural conflict experienced by them and their American born children in different ways, the cultural and emotional dislocation suffered by them in their effort to settle "home" in the new land. Like many "professional Indians" who in the waves of the early sixties went to the United States, as part of the "brain drain". Ashok Ganguly too leaves his homeland and comes to America in pursuit of higher studies in the field of "Fiber Optics", with a prospect of setting down "with security and respect".

In her novel 'The Namesake' (2003), Lahiri, a second generation Indian immigrant herself, presents the inner psyche of immigrants', their identity crisis, sense of belongingness and at the same time loneliness, alienation, the cultural differences, difficulty in adjustment and perplexing ties between the first and second generation. Jhumpa Lahiri (whose real name is Nilanjana Sudeshna) is a

shining star of diaspora sky. She has presented each and everything so perfectly in her novel. She portrays the diaspora in a positive light. She celebrates the notion of transnationalism and multi culturalism. Diasporic imagination in her writing is an ongoing process of negotiation and adaptation.

Diaspora retains elements of the culture of origin, but remakes them entirely imposes that difficulty raises whenever people of two different cultural backgrounds meet. Hiral Macwan gives her opinion that Diaspora is a large group of people with a similar heritage or homeland who, have since moved out to places all over the world. Rajeswari Sundar Rajan puts forwards that Diaspora is a multidisciplinary field, and on writings in anthropology, geography, psychoanalysis and cultural studies it will reveal the migration of one place to the other insist that the upcoming generation was about to learn adaptation and learning culture and and also discovering new things about themselves. David Chairlady states that 'Diaspora' has highly emerged favored term among scholars, whom we might associate with contemporary post – colonial studies.

Diaspora came in to under spread usage in the Jewish case when scholars in Alexanderian translated the first five books of the Hebrew by Kevin Kenny. David Chairlady state that Post – Colonial Diaspora would closely attend to specific articulations of Diasporic identity and how it registers the contemporary stigmatization of people. Hiral Macwan states that, “The Diaspora features of homelessness, dislocation and alienation which are well represented through the character of Ashima in *The Namesake*.”

It is very much appealing that Jhumpa Lahiri is the child of Indian immigrants when we think of literature on Indian Diaspora. Immigration becomes blessing in disguise as that makes her a diaspora writer. She crosses borders when she migrates from England, her birth place, to the USA. And became an American from India. Her characters are often caught in a cultural indeterminate state excited about their new home but grieving the loss of their country of origin. Lahiri belongs to the second generation of Indian Diaspora whose ongoing quest for identity never seems to end.

In the novel, *The Namesake*, Lahiri's experiences of growing up as a child of immigrants resembles that of her protagonist, Gogol Ganguly. Regarding the self in the text versus the self as text in *Asian – American Autobiographies*, 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)

The novel is a story of two generations of an Indian family and their struggle to acculturate themselves in the west. While the first generation's attempts life to adapt and acquire new things about themselves, the second-generation people find their life in conflict between the two cultures. Parents though settled in foreign land always tries to maintain tie with their homeland, India and wants their children to also do the same. But their children are enchanted by their fellow friends in the host country. Each character in the novel struggles to maintain a balance between the Western and Indian culture and redefine their identities. As far as parents are concerned they succeed in creating balance by managing cultural hybridity but for their children it was difficult to accept their native culture and roots.

In the novel Gogol, a representative of community without a name, is himself misnamed Gogol. He struggles with a name he is embarrassed by and a heritage either Indian or American, he is not sure of either. Gogol wants to redefine himself as a born and brought up of USA rather than to be identified from his parent's Bengali immigrant culture.

In order to get self-recognition, he abandons the name Gogol and tries to become someone else. The question of identity becomes crucial when a person is culturally displaced and he cannot co-relate with any of the two worlds in which he is living. While experiencing identity confusion from a change of names, Gogol is nonetheless able to define his identity. Since Gogol is born after his father survives in a horrifying train accident, his father sees the name Gogol as a pet name as a gesture of his rebirth. However, Gogol doesn't understand how meaningful his name is when he was young. Gradually, he starts knowing the

uncommon nature of his name which creates problems with his identity when he grows up. The main problem with Gogol is that he is a hyphenated character living in two totally different worlds, the stress of which he can't cope up, he is lost and drifts away from his parents and culture. 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. The name becomes problem for Gogol, because he feels uncomfortable with the Russian name. It makes him to detach himself from his family members. Later on Gogol develops resentment towards the name during the adolescence and decides to use his legal name, Nikhil, as an overcoat to escape from Indian culture. Although the name Nikhil brings him more confidence, Gogol is always present inside him. Soon he feels a sense of futility and dissatisfaction about avoiding his roots.

He is a typical second-generation immigrant who spends much of the novels attempting to eradicate his heritage. This first becomes evident when Lahiri describes how Gogol and his sister resent childhood trips to India during which they are forced to interact with family and give up the material comforts of American life. The novel depicts the cross-cultural issues of not getting assimilated with the culture of America for Ashima and Ashok, and at the same time their children could not adjust themselves during their visits to India. As Gogol grows older, his desire to escape his part, becomes more pronounced. In college, he refuses to study subjects like chemistry, engineering or biology and prefers architecture. This shows he does not only want to neglect his parents wish but was uncomfortable with his upbringing also. Unlike his parents he wants to see himself as American. After rooting himself in the American identity, Gogol once again redefines himself to root him in the Indian identity. After his father's death, "he reads Akaky Gogol's book, which his father gave him as a birthday gift years ago, Nikhil finds the Gogol inside himself. He is ready to read the book he has once forsaken, has abandoned until now." (290) Losing his father, his admiration of American life is debilitated. Therefore, he goes through redefining his native culture identity. Now, he does not want to get away from his family. Ashima, Gogol's mother and Ashok's wife is only character in the novel that

incorporates herself to a transcultural lifestyle at the end. As Alfonso-Forero said, “The uncertain young women we encounter in the novel’s opening pages attempting unsuccessfully to recreate a favorite Indian snack in her Massachusetts kitchen is transformed through her role as an immigrant mother and wife into a transnational figure” (852).

Ashima always tries to preserve his family’s Indian identity. The very feeling of displacement is felt more by her, after their migration from the university apartment to a university town outside Boston, when Ashok is ‘hired as an assistant professor of Electrical Engineering in a University. Ashima struggles for speaking English and cultural barriers and also she fears more about the survival in the new country. She delivers her first baby alone, without the help of her relatives. Ashima thinks it’s strange that her child will be born in a place where most of the people enter either to suffer or to die. There is nothing to comfort her in the off-white tiles of the floor, the off-white panels of the ceiling, the white sheets tucked tightly into the bed. In India, she thinks to herself, women go to their parents’ home to give birth, away from husbands and in-laws and household chores, retreating briefly to childhood when the baby arrives. (N-4)

She is terrified to raise a child in a country where she is related to no one where she knows so little, where life seems so tentative and spare. (6) Before moving to Boston she moves out alone in the market with her baby, goes to meet her husband on the campus, communicates with the passerby, she was feeling confident. But now, no ‘street lights, no public transportation, no stores for miles’ makes her feel ‘more drastic more distressing than the move from Calcutta to Cambridge had been.’ Feeling lonely and displaced in foreign land Ashima begins to realize that, being a foreigner...is a sort of life long pregnancy- a perpetual wait, a constant burden, a continuous feeling out of sorts. It is an ongoing responsibility, a parenthesis in what had once been ordinary life, only to discover the previous life has vanished, replaced by something more complicated and demanding. Like pregnancy, being a foreigner, Ashima believes, is something that elicits the same curiosity from strangers, the same combination of pity and respect”. (49-50)



As time goes by Ashima indulges herself more in the American way of life which gradually provides her with the sort of confidence and independence that a typical American woman is supposed to have. She got a job as a librarian, become friends with her American colleagues, a kind of relationship she had never experienced before. She realizes that her life in America exceeds her life in India. Ashima decides to stay for six months in Calcutta and six months in America.

As far as Ashok, Ashima's husband and Gogol's father is concerned, he also was a victim of loneliness, culture conflict, identity crisis and alienation. His life is a typical example of loss and longing. Ashok is a man of duty, understanding that he must work to support those he loves. But he is also a man willing to challenge the assumptions of what is "normal". For that, he chose to study PhD in America, far from his family, even after they urged him to stay in India. Ashok's life turns on the train accident that nearly kills him. After the accident, he resolves to travel, to see the world as Ghosh has urged him to do. The Gogol he is reading in the train leads to his son's pet name. And the works of Russians give to Ashok a sense of the broadness, the complexity of the world- of life beyond the confines of Calcutta, or Massachusetts, or Ohio. Although Ashok is a man of few words, he is a dreamer, a romantic. Ashima always seems to understand this about her husband, but Gogol learns it in earnest after his father's death.

Ashok wants to provide a better life for his family. In naming his son, he pays the greatest respect to western culture because Gogol is a representative of European high culture. For Ashok, memories of life in India are less peaceful. Though, he was accepted into the academic community but at home he was a traditional Indian male, punctilious about her clothing and food. The memories of that fateful night still haunts him but like his faithful wife Ashima he embraces his past in India and recognizes that it plays an important role in her life as a father and an American.

Lahiri skillfully blends events of the past into events of the present. She compels the readers to live the moments along with her characters as the past becomes present and present, past.

From the beginning *The Namesake* is a novel unconcerned with the future. The future is unpredictable. But, as Lahiri so often seems to suggest, the past could not happen any other way. She gives a range of details and she uses these differences in cultures and cuisines to keep the reader aware of the growing rift between these two worlds. In presenting and giving the record of more than three decades in the Ganguly's lives, Jhumpa Lahiri has not only given us a wonderfully intimate and knowing family portrait, she has also taken the haunting chamber of music of her first collection of stories and orchestrated its themes of exile, identity, balance between two worlds to create a symphonic work, a debut novel, '*The Namesake*', that is as eloquent as the work of a longtime master of the craft.

Question of identity has remained a source of conflicts and has led to wars in history. But it is more persistent for those who are grown up in two worlds simultaneously. Lahiri is aware of the existing problem of cultural diversity in the multicultural United State, and she argues that the struggle to grasp a transnational identity becomes an urgent issue for immigrants in this environment. The novel deals with the clashes between the two different worlds that Ganguly family simultaneously inhabits. The world of Bengali immigrants who struggle to integrate into main stream North American culture while maintaining the customs of their homeland, and the world of Ivy League America into which the Gingelly's try to integrate. Lahiri stress the fact that for diasporic people 'home' is a very fluid concept- which changes its meaning along with the prevailing mindset of the person.

The thought of Vasudhaiv Kutumbakam is ingrained in Indian philosophy, so multiculturalism should not be regarded as threat but a part and parcel of the life of all human beings living on the earth. And *The Namesake* novel deals and celebrates the cultural hybridity resulting from globalization and the interconnectedness of the modern world and rethinks conventional immigrant's



experience. Lahiri also offers a revision of the contemporary United State not as a static and insular territory but a participant in transnational relations. She territorializes the definite national and cultural identities of India suggesting that individuals cannot confine themselves within the narrow concept of nation and cultural boundaries in this globalized world characterized by hybridity, trans-culturalism and migration.



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