



## Identity in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*: A Deconstructive Perspective

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### Abstract

**Aim:** *The paper is a modest attempt to showcase the anti-essentialist and indeterminate nature of human identity; it is split into three distinct parts. The first part deliberates on the anti-essentialist constructivist approach of identity specifically focusing on its fluidity and mutability. The second part is meant to highlight the place of Jhumpa Lahiri in the literary world. Finally, the last part is focused on articulating the themes of self- construction, identity formation and the role of society and culture in the making of identities.*

**Methodology and Approach:** *The paper is based on the novel *The Namesake* by Jhumpa Lahiri. It employs a deconstructive approach to meditate on the concept of identity as portrayed in the novel.*

**Conclusion and Suggestion:** *The paper concludes with the idea that identity is an ever- evolving entity, which is influenced and transformed by various social, cultural and religious overtones. When individuals migrate from one location to*

*another, they inevitably suffer the loss of identity and belongingness in host countries. Many diaspora writers have depicted these experiences of migration, displacement, alienation, distortion of identity in their works. Jhumpa Lahiri is also one of them who appears to be dealing with the subjects concerning the fluidity of identity, migration, dislocation and displacement in her works.*

**Keywords:** Dislocation, Displacement, Diaspora, Multiculturalism

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In sociology as well as in humanities, the concept of identity is extensively debated and discussed by social theorists. There has been plenty of discussion on the nature of identity, whether it is intrinsic or non – intrinsic. Essentialists believe in fixity and stability of human identity, while constructivists are of the view that human identity is neither fixed, nor intrinsic. Rather, it is a socially constructed dynamic product of the social and political contexts of an individual which is an anti-essentialist view of identity. As per the constructivist school of thoughts, our identities are defined by our engagement in various cultural values, norms, beliefs and attitudes and constructed or shaped by social, political, religious discourses. Our identities are always changing, constantly invented and reinvented, produced and reproduced based on gender, class, caste, age, religion, ethnicity, nationality and race. It means, identity, an abstract concept, is an ever-evolving entity which is influenced and transformed by various social, cultural and religious norms and values. When individuals migrate from one location to another, they inevitably suffer the loss of identity and belongingness in host countries. Many diaspora writers have depicted these experiences of migration,

displacement, alienation and identity formation in their works. Jhumpa Lahiri is also one of them who appear to be dealing with the subjects concerning migration, displacement and multiculturalism and its impact on human identity in her works. She depicts how the diaspora undergoes various social, cultural and economic challenges while blending into new cultural systems and the difficulties they face in protecting their original identity against the complex intangible forces of the host culture; their identities are deeply affected by cultural and ethnic differences of dialect, dispositions, conventions or cultural legacies, which finally result in the loss of 'the original' and formulation of a 'new identity'.

Jhumpa Lahiri is one of the most prominent Indo- American novelists. She was born in London to Indian parents in 1967. She later migrated to the United States to accomplish her advanced studies and lived there for a period of time. As a writer, her first book was *Interpreter of Maladies*, a collection of short stories, the themes of which are deeply associated with the themes of Indian-American identities and experiences of Diaspora. All of these stories deal with the lives of Indian immigrants in the United States, rendering the difficulties of making personal connections across cultural boundaries. Her significant works include *The Namesake* (2003) *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008), *The Lowland* (2013).

*The Namesake*, Lahiri's first novel, which made its appearance in 2003, deals with the themes of ties and ideological conflicts between two different generations. It also reflects on the sense of alienation, loss of communication and formation of identity focusing on difficulties in relationships between first and second generations of Indian immigrants experiencing in the United States.

Jhumpa Lahiri's novel *The Namesake* her significant work deals with the story of the Ganguli family. She describes the cultural difficulties of the life of Ganguli in the United States, around thirty years and alterations and vicissitudes experienced by them. Lahiri unequivocally presents their activities, parties,

meals, and social events through Ashima, Ashoke, and Gogol's life. The Calcutta-born parents moved, as young adults, to the United States, where their children Gogol and Sonia grew up experiencing the foreign generation which creates a cultural gap with their parents. Ashoke and his better half, Ashima, have profound feelings for the costumes, and cultural practices of the country. Ashima, for example, tries to relive Bengali culture cherishing Bengali stories, sonnets and articles which she has carried with her. Lahiri convincingly describes the lives of both first- and second-generation Indian immigrants in the United States. Ashoke and Ashima strive to stick to their native cultural belongings with the goal to save their cultural identity that is being affected quickly in the presence of an outsider land. Ashoke and Ashima attempt to develop a deep bond with Bengali colleagues in Pemberton for the main reason that they all originate from Calcutta. With the objective to protect their original identity in the remote land, the original immigrants train their youngsters in the Bengali dialect, language, writing and history and familiarize them with their religious practices, traditions, customs, convictions, and cultural orientations. Lahiri thereby endeavors to show that shared identities unite individuals to cherish their culture. They are deeply involved in Bengali traditions, wearing their best customary clothing types, in this manner attempting to protect their indigenous identity in another land. For instance, Ashima encourages Gogol to memories a youngsters' ballad by Tagore and the names of gods and its different incarnations. Despite making all these attempts, their originality is threatened by new cultural engagements.

The second-generation immigrants are seen to be influenced by materialistic western culture. For instance, Gogol's quest in searching for his true individuality plays a vital role in his life. He is caught into the direction of two conflicting cultures. He strives to discover his individuality and cultural identity. He travels through various geographic designations, for example, those of Boston, Paris and Calcutta. He goes through different stages of his life with different girls

such as Ruth, Maxine, and Moushumi influencing his individuality and identity. He transformed his identity from Gogol to Nikhil which clearly indicates the instability of human identity.

The characters presented in *The Namesake* live in the complex multicultural society of the United States which leads to change and development in their sensibilities, increasing their psychological resilience toward uncertainties. Ashima, for example, starts as an Indian yet her long visit in the host country propels her to consider her own cultural and religious convictions into inquiry and to change them trying to create a harmony between two conflicting cultures. In the beginning, Ashima yearns to return to Calcutta and brings up her youngsters there primarily as she feels that she would get the help of her relatives in bringing them up. It is only when Ashoke dies suddenly that Ashima begins to learn to live with a new identity, that of a widow. She begins to blend into the culture of the outsider land, striving to make herself agreeable in the host country. She endeavours a lot to feel as an American and tries to dissolve into new cultural dynamics which deeply affects her native identity and makes her survival more difficult.

Furthermore, Lahiri dismisses the pre-established notion, that western culture is universally acceptable and applicable, showing the incompatibility of the family with the norms and practices of western culture. Jhumpa Lahiri portrays male and female characters and the impact of the diaspora on these individuals and their relationships. She represents both men and women as having different concerns about their roles in the new cultural space, which brings existential crisis and triggers the reconstruction of an identity. In the novel, feminine identity is affected more than masculine identity by culture because of women's strong cultural ties to the land of their ancestors. The first-generation immigrants become isolated and feel alienated in new land and culture. These

women find themselves entangled into an incongruous cultural world and are in constant search of their identity.

Lahiri presents the psychological disintegration of women caught between two conflicting cultures. The first-generation immigrant women in the work are often subjected to hegemonic patriarchal power- politics. This generation experiences a sense of nostalgia for the Indian culture and sensibilities, experiencing alienation, displacement and suffering tensions over moral and emotional issues. At the same time, the second generation is infatuated by a different social and cultural landscape. The female immigrants of this generation do not consider India as their home. Their vision of America is contrary to the views of the first generation. This generation is able to acculturate in the new cultural environment, embracing its socio-cultural values and norms, which leads to a dramatic change constructing their new identities.

To conclude, it can be affirmed that Jhumpa Lahiri depicts her problems through fictional characters of the Ganguli family thereby challenging all the pre-established hegemonic barriers of the social and cultural systems. She explicitly exposes the vicissitudes of an immigrant family residing in an alien culture and discusses the distortion and formulation of identities in the face of multicultural scenario. Thus, the novel *The Namesake* is a succinct portrayal of Indian and American culture where an Indian generation as outsider strives to embrace new culture and society and, thus, their identities are distorted, reshaped and reconstructed- a similar case occurs for Indians in other nations. The novel showcases the idea of indeterminacy of culture and identity focusing on cultural and psychological problems of diaspora in a completely different culture and also puts forward the role of society and culture in the construction of an identity.

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