

**PROBLEMATIZING IDENTITY: A STUDY OF GOGOL'S CHARACTER
IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S *THE NAMESAKE***

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Abstract

Jhumpa Lahiri was born to an educated middle class Bengali parents in London and grown up in Rhodes Island, Lahiri authentically portrays her experiences of problematizing identity in her first novel *The Namesake*. In this novel Lahiri's experiences of growing up as a child of immigrants resemble that of 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. Through Gogol, Lahiri presents identity crisis which she herself has faced acutely. Gogol struggles throughout the novel with his dual identity - American and Bengali. He changes his name in an effort to do away with any negative connotation there is with the origin of his name. To Gogol, it is not connected to him or his Bengali heritage in any way and therefore he initially rejects it. *The Namesake* expands on the perplexities of the immigrants experience and the search for identity. Gogol is burdened with the seemingly absurd name of the long-dead writer, awkwardly struggles to define himself. Lahiri represents Gogol as someone who is confused about his identity, she also presents Gogol as a prototypical transnational agent who lives between two different worlds with the possibility of creating multiplicity of identities.

Keywords: Identity, Immigrant, Struggle, Crisis.

In the *Namesake*, Lahiri's experiences of growing up as a child of immigrants resemble that of her protagonist, Gogol Ganguly. In the *Namesake*, she reflects Indian Diaspora and creates a narrative that reveals the thought of cultural difference and identity. Names play an essential role for people to identify themselves and help to communicate with each other. As identity becomes the core issue. Indian custom follows different kinds of customs and ceremonies of naming a born baby. *Namesake* deals with the clash of cultures. Pet names are sometimes silly and meaningless. *The Namesake* reflects the struggle of Gogol Ganguli that goes through identity crises with his strange name. The novel moves around the community and couple of Bengali origin in the USA migrated for several reasons. They are the first and their children are second generation south Asian immigrants. Narrating the story of Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli, Lahiri emphasizes on the cultural displacements of a family, immigrants from Calcutta who settle in Boston to study, work and raise a family.

The main concern of novel is Gogol the symbolic of community without a name, who is himself misnamed Gogol. He struggles with his name. Gogol wants to identify himself as a born and brought up of USA rather than to be identified from his parent's Bengali culture. He deserts the name Gogol and tries to become someone else. The question of identity develops crucial when a person is culturally displaced in the two worlds in which he is living. Gogol is born after his father survives from a depressing train accident, his father sees the name Gogol as a pet name as a sign of his rebirth. Though, Gogol does not understand that how meaningful is his name in the beginning. Gradually, he starts realizing the significance of his name which creates difficulties with his identity when he grows up.

The main problem with Gogol is that he is a character who is living in two entirely different worlds. Gogol does not understand the emotional importance of the name. He does not like to be known by a name which is neither American, nor Indian American, nor even first name. The name becomes a problematic for Gogol, because he feels painful with the Russian name. It makes him to disconnect himself from his family members. Later on, Gogol grows

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hatred toward this name during youth and decides to use his legal name, Nikhil, as an overcoat to escape from Indian culture. Although the name Nikhil brings more confidence in him, Gogol is always there inside him. Soon he experiences a sense of discontent and futility about dodging his roots

“Without people in the world to call him Gogol, no matter how long he himself lives, Gogol Ganguli will, once and for all, vanish from the lips of loved ones, and so, cease to exist. Yet the thought of this eventual demise provides no sense of victory, no solace. It provides no solace at all” (Lahiri 289).

The Namesake begins with Ashoke’s migration to the USA, with his recently wed wife Ashima, to complete his Ph. D. in Boston. Ashima has to leave her original homeland, “the country in which she has grown to know and love her husband” (Lahiri 16), and she is now living in the host country, where there is “not a soul on the street” (Lahiri 30); where she bore her son, Gogol—grown up there and “takes the occasional pranks and pinpricks of some native chauvinistic classmates in his stride”(Lahiri 44). Ashima sees USA having “another culture” and “another history” which is entirely alien to her. Most of all, the ‘motherhood in a foreign land’ was a frightening experience for Ashima, and afterwards 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” was awfully haunting her all the time (The Namesake 5- 6). In the novel, Ashima’s constant burden and continuous anxiety of being a foreigner is revealed as:

...being a foreigner... is a sort of lifelong 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 that 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 Gogol dislikes this name and his abhorrence for his name has been enlightened in the novel as: "For by now, he's come to hate questions pertaining to his name, hates having

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constantly to explain. He hates that his name is both absurd and obscure, that it has nothing to do with who he is, that is neither Indian nor American but full of all things Russians" (Lahiri 72)

Gogol, Sonia and Moushumi Mazoomdar in the novel are the second generation Indian Americans, Lahiri, find it challenging to identify themselves either with the people at home or with the present society outside. The main character Gogol is the true child of cultural distortion who loses all his interest in his native culture. He is charmed by the American life and he wants to be different from his parents and wants to escape from the Bengali customs, culture, history and even his name (from Gogol to Nikhil) which is related with his father's past history. It is his father's unexpected and unfortunate death that brings him close to the family. This cultural disorientation is actually realized when Moushumi breaks off her relationship with the American Graham. Gogol and Moushumi resemble each other in many ways. In their personal life "they want to settle life like their parents but their conflicting identities interact with each other and put them dismantled." (Lahiri 234)

Gogol's name is one of the main causes which make him feel isolated. His loneliness starts from the moment when he enters the world. After his birth, choosing a name becomes a problematic thing for them. The difference between the naming process in American and Indian cultures drives them into a confusion. Ashima wants her grandmother to advise a name but the name is not received, the letter having been lost in transit. The hospital authorities do not permit 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 to save his life. But this very name that is the first identity of their son, is the very first reason which pays 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 who does not respond to the new name 'Nikhil'. It was his first attempt not to accept a dual identity. This refusal left him alone with his old name Gogol. Gradually, he starts knowing the rare nature of his name which problematizes his identity when he grows up then he becomes anxious to get rid of his name. He

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does not feel like an American with this name. His name Gogol “sounds ludicrous to his ears, lacking dignity of gravity.” (76) He does not want to read Nikolai Gogol because he thinks it “would mean paying tribute to his namesake, accepting it somehow” (92).

As name is considered an introductory ID to the world but Gogol "he came to hate question pertaining to his name, hates having constantly to explain. He hates having to tell people that it doesn't mean anything in Indian... he hates that his name is both silly and difficult to understand, that it has nothing to do with who he is, that he is neither Indian nor American but of all things Russian”.

The Ganguli's too incorporate the American way of living into their lives for their sake of children: “They learn to roast turkeys... thanksgiving, to nail a wreath to their door in December, to wrap woolen scarves around snowman, to color boiled eggs violet and pink at Easter for the sake of Gogol and Sonia they celebrate with progressively increasing fanfare the birth of Christ an event the children look forward to far more than the worship of Durga and Sarawati” (64).

At the end of the novel, Gogol is not so anti-Gogol anymore. He accepts the destiny of Indian-American Identity, accepts the Bengali culture and its customs without resenting the American ways of living. All his struggles pay him back with confusion about who he truly is. He sees himself as Nikhil, determined to be truly American, yet he fails to get rid of Gogol. In the end, he selects to stick with “Gogol,” that is Indian identity.

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