

The Dialectics of Identity: A study of Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*

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A major leitmotif of the diasporic discourse is its supposed complexities and ambivalences due to the tensions between localities and spatio-temporal dualities. For large groups of people around the world the concept of identity is precariously lodged within an episteme of real or imagined displacements and self-imposed sense of exile. In the late-modern celebratory argument on behalf of diasporas, diasporic communities are said to occupy a broader zone where the most vibrant kinds of interaction take place, and where ethnicity and nation are kept separate. In this argument, diasporas are fluid, ideal social formations happy to live wherever there is an international airport and stand for a longer, much admired historical process. Therefore, though the accounts of diaspora as a category of sociological and political thought understandably differ, there is a common shifting and unfinished history of diasporic displacement and settling. A further implication, however, was associated with their tendency to shed their ethnic identity and to assimilate local norms which can produce strong nostalgic as well as separatist tendencies. Already in its inevitable concern with the idea of homeland, the concept of diaspora has also been extended to refer to the mixed or hyphenated identities of persons or ethnic communities and of texts that express and explore this condition, sometimes themselves employing mixed written and visual discourse. Evidently, the term helps critiquing essentialist notion of identity which as Paul Gilroy writes "should be cherished for its ability to pose the relationship between ethnic sameness and differentiation: a changing same." (Gilroy, 1993: x-xi).

The Indian Diaspora can probably be traced to ancient times when Buddhist monks travelled to the remote corner of Asia. However, nineteenth and twentieth centuries are considered to be the periods of Indian Diaspora, when Indians in large numbers went to other countries in search of job opportunities. This migration of the Indians either as skilled and unskilled labourers to west Asia or as professionals and semi-professionals to industrially advanced countries, was strictly a personal choice. The Indians living in a host country continue to live in a sandwich world, refusing to give up his/her cultural roots, as they still hope for assimilation and acculturation in their

land. Living and writing in multi cultural societies, the Indian writers abroad are affected at multiple levels by both cultures. Some writers like Bharati Mukharjee discard their diasporic identity and get assimilated in the foreign land, while some others like Jhumpa Lahiri, Rohinton Mistry, Kiren Desai, Chitra Banarjee Divakaruni etc still write under diaspora label. These writers often feel that their entity in a foreign country is a social construct-an amalgamation of feelings, consciousness, memories, mythologies, longings, dreams and allegorical and virtual elements. As the questions of identity and the dynamics of relationships affect the writers, they are constantly in a state of flux. These writers reflect, analyze and criticize that particular environment and the world around them even when they do not become part of it, a kind of belonging and not belonging. Similarly, these expatriate writers lack a shared memory, which is often the basis of writing in one country, one nation. Mostly, these writers are afflicted with a feeling of cultural alienation. Hence, the term 'diaspora' literally and metaphorically refers both to the physical displacement as well as the shaping of a different sensibility. Therefore, slowly, the hyphenated identity of the diaspora writers has become an interesting topic in Indian writing in English.

As a popular young writer of Indian background, Jhumpa Lahiri is a sort of representative figure for the Diasporans who do not fully understand what it means to straddle the line between two cultures. Caught between two worlds with an ever increasing multiplicity of identities, Jhumpa Lahiri examines and defines the conditions of the Diasporic people. Her novel *The Namesake* as well as the short story collection *Interpreter of Maladies* provides the reader with pictures of the life of expatriates. Lahiri explores the ideas of cultural and personal isolations and identities through her various characters, whose cultural isolation result in the personal. Her stories draw upon different aspects of Lahiri's Indian background and project the life of second generation Indian Americans like Lahiri herself. Both *Interpreter of Maladies* and *The Namesake* contain themes of conflict in relationships between couples, families, and friends. Through these relationships she explores ide as of isolation and identity, both personal and cultural. The characters in both works frequently encounter crisis of identity, which are tied to their inabilities to reconcile their American identity with their Indian identity. As a result, her work gives us a rather bleak outlook on the future of her characters reflecting some of Lahiri's

concerns about their real-life analogues. She often correlates her characters' cultural isolation with extreme personal isolation, suggesting that the cultural isolation causes the personal. The instances in which this cultural isolation are resolved or avoided are generally accompanied by a similar resolution or avoidance of personal isolation. Jhumpa Lahiri did not belong to the first generation immigrants, and hence, she did not explicitly face with the challenges or loneliness of the exile and the longing for a lost world. But like many immigrant offsprings, she too felt intense pressure to be loyal to the old world and fluent in the new. She could very easily identify the feelings of the children of immigrants of being neither one thing nor the other. She was torn apart, between the hyphenated identities of Indian- American, which has become a part of vocabulary in the beginning of this century. The traditions on either side of the hyphen dwelled in her like siblings, one outshining the other depending on the circumstances. In her debut novel, *The Namesake*, one can see this hyphenated identity so closely intertwined and green, yet always trying to cancel each other out. The need to connect to one's origins and yet to be part of this new land is important to all the characters in the novel. It is quite evident even in the locale of the novel. Hence, though the story of *The Namesake* is set in United States, Calcutta hovers in the background. . It is out of her experiences of the bizarre identity crisis on the part of those who have remained as immigrants and those who were traumatized by homelessness, that the contents of the novel *The Namesake* were derived. Jhumpa Lahiri admits that as the novel conveys the experiences of alienation of the migrants from their roots, it is to some extent autobiographical.

Addressing the themes of immigration, collision of cultures and the importance of names the novel *The Namesake* portrays the struggle of immigration and the issues of identity. The protagonist of the novel *The Namesake* is constantly reminded of the uniqueness of his name, 'Gogol'. The oddness of this name strikes him time and again. Throughout the novel, Gogol is haunted by this strange name. Even when he changes it to Nikhil, he realizes that he cannot get away from it. And it is this predicament that gives the novel its title, *The Namesake*.

It is Nikolai Gogol is considered as the main influence in the development of the nineteenth century Russian Realism that inspires Ashoke Ganguli to christen his first-born son as Gogol. And Gogol grows up with a name that seems to make him stand apart from the rest of his classmates:

“Though substitute teachers at school always pause, looking apologetic when they arrive at his name on the roster, forcing Gogol to call out, before being summoned, ‘that’s me’, teachers in the school system know not to give it a second thought. After a year or two, the students no longer tease and say, ‘giggle’ or ‘gargle’.

(Lahiri, 1999: 66-67).

Though Gogol constantly wonders about the reason for having such an unusual name, his father harbours no doubts about the appropriateness of the name. To him, Gogol was his saviour because it was a volume of Gogol’s writings that he was reading when the terrible train accident took place. Two hundred and nine kilometers away from Calcutta, when seven bogies derailed at Two: Thirty in the morning, it was the book and a few pages that he clutched in his hands which saved him. People around him were dead and even he was almost left behind by the search party. And yet at the last moment he was saved. As he remembers it:

But the lantern lights lingered just long enough for Ashoke to raise his hand, a gesture that he believed would consume the small fragment of life left in him. He was still clutching a single page of *The Overcoat*, crumpled tightly in his fist, and when he raised his hand, the wad of paper drooped from his fingers. ‘Wait’ he heard a voice cry out. ‘The fellow by that book I saw him move.

(Lahiri, 1999:18) When it is time for Gogol to begin school, his unusual name which is only his ‘daaknam’ (pet name) and the need for ‘bhaalonaam’ (official name) disconcerts him:

There is a reason Gogol doesn’t want to go to kindergarten. His parents have told him that at school, instead of being called Gogol, he will be called by a new name, a good name, which his parents have finally decided on, just in time for him to begin his formal education.

The name, Nikhil, is artfully connected to the old. Not only is it a perfectly respectable Bengali good name, meaning he who is entire, encompassing all, but it also bears a satisfying resemblance to Nikolai, the first name of the Russian Gogol.

(Lahiri, 1999:56)

This unusualness confuses Mrs. Lapidus during the proceeding of the admission of the child. The father tries to

explain the idea of the good name and the pet name to the teacher. Cultural differences create confusion and Mrs. Lapidus cannot understand the idea. So Gogol continues to be his name, which fastens itself tightly to him, refusing to go. All through his early years, Gogol has this attitude towards his name. Lahiri describes various experiences of Gogol that are directly related to his name. Interestingly, "Gogol recognizes pieces of himself in road signs: GO LEFT, GO RIGHT, GO SLOW."(Lahiri, 1999: 66)

It was from his fourteenth birthday that Gogol senses the importance of his unique name. On his fourteenth birthday, he receives The short stories of Nikolai Gogol as a birthday gift from his father. He looks intently on the picture of the author searching for resemblances and is relieved to see no resemblance. But in his high school days, Gogol hears from Mr. Lawson about the writer Gogol's life. Mr. Lawson was the first teacher to know and care about Gogol the author. As Gogol listens the details of Nikolai Gogol's life, he is both surprised and shocked. Nikolai's friendship with Pushkin, his dismay at the reception, of his comic play The Government Inspector, his paranoid frustration, his morbidity, his melancholia, his depression, his steady decline into madness, his slow death by starvation- all these come as a surprise to Gogol. Gogol tells all these to his parents, but they comfort him saying that Gogol was also a genius. But strangely enough, like the writer Gogol, the protagonist Gogol turns out to be a loner. He cannot date with any one in the High School. He never attends any parties or dances. The single girl he kisses leaves him at once guilty or exhilarated. He always feels an existential fragmentation with his names, Nikhil and Gogol. When his friend exclaims, "I can't believe you kissed her Gogol"he nearly says, "it wasn't me" (Lahiri, 1999: 96)

Gogol is convinced that he has to change his name and his parents realize that there is no other way that he can escape his predicament. Therefore, Gogol changes his name to Nikhil, as he begins his freshman year at Yale. Surprisingly, he learns that Nikolai Gogol also renamed himself simplifying his surname at the age of twenty-two. As everything around him is new at Yale, going by a new name does not seem strange to him. Even his parents adjust to it by calling him Nikhil in front of his friends. But even the change of his name does not change the course of luck in his life. Like the life and characters of Nikolai

Gogol, his life too seems to be mingled with pathos and black humour.

Gogol's relationships with women are also doomed to failure. Passing attractions for Ruth whom he meets on a crowded train as well as the longish affair with Maxine leave him disappointed and alone. Separated by

cultural differences between them, Nikhil, steps out of Maxine's life a few months after his father's death. If cultural similarities can bind a couple together, Moushmi and Gogol should have fared better but the American way of life makes inroads into the marital life of this Indian couple. When he realizes that Moushmi was having an affair, "he felt the chill of her secrecy, numbing him like a poison spreading quickly through his veins... He felt only the anger the humiliation of having been deceived." (Lahiri, 1999: 282) All these experiences make Gogol a totally disheartened, yet matured individual. He is the representative of the identity crisis felt by most diaspora children who are born in foreign countries, but have the heavy distress and painful knowledge and longing for a lost world. Gogol's is a classical case of identity crisis, which they share and suffer from. Though the very Indian part of him was less recognized during his childhood, it became more and more evident during his youth like himself, others around were interested in his twin name, appearance and existence. In *The Namesake*, it is his life that becomes a reflection of the uncomfortable, bleak and existential way of life of the diasporans.

The case of Gogol can be likened to Jhumpa Lahiri herself. Even though both of them maintain ethnic identity, their self-identification as immigrants has faded. However, unlike Jhumpa Lahiri Gogol, with his strange name, feels insecurity both in his homeland and host land. As the novel ends, however, Gogol learns that the answer is not to fully abandon or attempt to diminish either culture, but to mesh the two together. Gogol is not fully in tune with his identity until he realizes that it is embellished by both cultures. He does not have to be one or the other; he does not have to choose. He is made up of both, and instead of weakening his pride is strengthened by this. Though the novel wraps up with more downfalls occurring in Gogol's life, he is able to stand on his feet. He is no longer ashamed of himself or the way he has lived. He is proud of who he is and where he

comes from. Most important, he is proud of his name and all that it means.

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