

DIASPORIC CRISIS OF DUAL IDENTITY IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S *THE NAMESAKE*

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ABSTRACT

In the age of globalization, the issues of diaspora, transnationalism, hybridity, cultural mongrelization, identity crisis continuously enrich the diasporic literatures of the twenty first century. Topographical shifting, cultural transaction, multiculturalism, and fluid identity form a complex framework in the field of global migration. The diasporic elements are recurrent themes in the writings of Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, V. S. Naipaul, Kiran Desai, Bharti Mukherjee, Jhumpa Lahiri and many others. Normally, diaspora fiction lingers over alienation, loneliness, rootlessness, homelessness, nostalgia, protest, assertions and the quest for identity. It also addresses issues related to amalgamation or disintegration of cultures, discriminating margins of two different social milieus, internalizing nostalgia and suffering a forced amnesia. Jhumpa Lahiri is a strong voice of Indian diaspora in America. She takes up the issue of the impact of expatriation and immigration on the complexities of life as pitched against divergent ethnic, religious and cultural backgrounds. In her debut novel, *The Namesake* (2003), she handles these complexities of the immigrants' experiences in a lucid manner.

Keywords: Diaspora, multiculturalism, nostalgia, immigration, divergent.

INTRODUCTION AND DISCUSSION

The word 'diaspora' has been taken from the Greek *dia* and *speirein*, meaning to scatter. It gives the sense of dispersal through space. The term 'Diaspora' referred to the Jewish Community, which was without a state of its own and faced discrimination and oppression all over the world. However, the term became popular and was used in the context of other nationalities also which had been displaced from the original homelands due to one reason or the other. Even though distinction has to be made between forced and willing movement of people, the phenomenon of diaspora necessarily involves a "structure of location followed by dislocation and relocation" (Paranjape 59). Moving away from one's homeland and setting elsewhere on long-term basis does mean dislocation that brings in a sense of loss and nostalgia. This is followed by a bid for relocation in an alien milieu through negotiation and adjustment. All such Indians who have been living outside India constitute the Indian diaspora. Having born of educated middle class Bengali parents in London and grown up in Rhodes Island (USA), Jhumpa Lahiri beautifully and authentically portrays the diaspora experiences in her first collection of short stories, *Interpreter of Maladies* (which won her the Pulitzer prize for fiction in 2000), again doing an encore in her first novel, *The Namesake*, grabbing instant recognition and also a piece of cinematic history. Before going into details of the plot to discuss the theme of diasporic conflict of dual identity in *The Namesake*, it would be helpful to mention Lahiri's own remarks. In an interview released by Houghton Mifflin Company Lahiri says that the novel is definitely about those "who are culturally displaced or those who grow up in two worlds simultaneously." Talking about the predicament of immigrants Jhumpa Lahiri says: "I think that for immigrants the challenges of exile, the loneliness, the constant sense of alienation, the knowledge of and longing for a lost world, are more explicit and distressing than for their children."

The novel definitely has an autobiographical streak as Lahiri's experience of growing up as a child of immigrants resembles that of her protagonist, Gogol in the novel. In an interview to Mira Nair, she says: "I wanted to please my parents and meet their expectations. I also wanted to meet the expectations of my American peers, and the expectations I put on myself to fit into American society. It's a classic case of divided identity." Like Gogol, her pet name inadvertently became her good name. She has two other names on her passport and her birth certificate. When she was enrolled in school the teachers decided that Jhumpa was the easiest of her names to pronounce. Talking about the diasporic crisis of dual identity Lahiri, in the same interview, reflects: "The original spark of the book was the fact that a friend of my cousin in India had a pet name Gogol. I wanted to write about a pet name/good name distinction for a long time. It is almost too perfect a metaphor for the experience of growing up as the child of immigrants, having a divided identity, divided loyalties etc." In a conversation with Mira Nair, Lahiri says, "The names we have, there is so much about them: who are we and they are the one world that exists that represents us. And yet we don't choose them. They are from our parents."

As identity becomes the core issue, names become quite significant. The expressive function of a name varies from culture to culture. Bengali children are given two names: one that is a pet name used only by family and close friends, and other that is good name, used by rest of the society. This very feeling of dual identity has been very well portrayed in the character of Gogol. At birth, Gogol is given a pet name as his official name sent in a letter from his great grandmother in India, gets lost in the mail. His parents give him the surname of the Russian writer Nikolai Gogol as first name in the Massachusetts hospital where he is born. The name is chosen with the understanding that it is merely a formality, and will in time become just a pet name. Gogol, the name of his father's favourite writer goes on the birth certificate and stays with him in his early school years. Upon entering Kindergarten, Gogol is told by his family that he is to be called Nikhil, a good name, by the teachers and other children at school. Gogol rejects his proper name and wants to be called Gogol by society as well as his family.

This decision made on the first day of Kindergarten causes him years of distress as it was also his first attempt to reject a dual identity. As a child, he does not question who he is; he "doesn't mind his name. It seems perfectly normal." (p 66) As he grows up, he begins to question who he is. The fact that Gogol, as a child was aware of the importance of identity is revealed by the field visit of his class to the graveyard where other children located the graves of the members of their clan as revealed by the surname mentioned in the epitaph, but to his dismay, he could not find any 'Ganguli' buried there (p 91). His first name 'Gogol' did not relate him to either the Indian Community or the American and so it dampened his spirits. He spends his teenage and young adult years trying to discover his identity. Prior to his departure for college, Gogol officially changes his name to Nikhil, which is symbolic of his self-conscious attempts to completely disown his real self and tries to metamorphose himself to a different persona. But even though he had longed to change his name, he finds that he has to get used to being called Nikhil. When his parents also refer to him as Nikhil; he feels, "...in that instant that he is not related to them, not their child." (p106)

However Gogol spends his life living in the United States where children are often ashamed of their differences from others. Though Gogol and his sister Sonali are born and raised in the U.S., they feel the frustration of being different from most of the kids they know. Some mock their names, some vandalize their mailbox with derogatory terms and some just find them

funny. During adolescence, Gogol desires to blend in the American society and to live unnoticed. Other Americans never view him an American, however, even though he is a native born citizen. This living 'in-between' condition is very painful and marginalizing for the diasporas. The identities of diaspora individuals and communities can neither be placed only in relation to some homeland to which they all long to return nor to that country alone where they settle down in. They, by all means, face the crisis of hybrid or dual identity, which makes their existence all the more difficult. This is an experience universal to all Indian diaspora, irrespective of their caste, region and religion (which they so strongly and fanatically clung to during their stay in India).

For the second generation the question of identity is a complicated issue. At home Indian culture and value system are adhered to, while in public the American code of conduct is followed. This becomes doubly problematic. When Gogol attends a panel discussion about Indian novels written in English, the discussion centers round the identity problem of ABCD:

*Teleologically speaking, ABCDs are unable
to answer the question 'where are you from?'
the sociologist on the panel declares.
(The Namesake 118)*

Gogol realizes that ABCD [American born Confused Desi] refers to him also. He ponders over the question of identity. Despite his parents' efforts to keep him "indianized" Gogol started mimicking his American friends in rustiness and aping them in every aspect. For example, his parents didn't know about him secretly smoking with his friends, or going to late night parties. However, he still manages to get good grades and gets into Yale University. There, to his horror and utter disdain, he learns about his namesake, Nikolai Gogol, that he was a mentally pariah and starts to hate his name. Because of this he changes it to Nikhil in order to distance himself from all the bindings of his family and shun all their expectations. He gets attached to a white American girl, Ruth but they soon separate after Ruth spends both spring and summer terms in England studying literature.

This constant struggle for finding out the identity is beautifully portrayed in the novel, as first generation immigrants and their children struggle to find their moorings in an adopted society. On one hand the Ganguli parents, especially Ashima, struggle with adapting to a different culture than they are used to, on the other hand their children (Gogol and Sonia) struggle to achieve an improbable synthesis between respect for their progenitor's roots and lure of a more liberating American society. The identities of Diaspora individuals and communities can not be placed only in solitary reference to some homeland to which they all passionately long to return nor to that country alone which they have made their own. They, in exercise of their means and ends, willfully face the challenges thrown by the crisis of hybrid or dual identity, which makes their existence all the more fluid.

After his break-up with Ruth, Gogol has an affair with Maxine, an Anglo-Saxon American ethnicity and a member of a liberal and very wealthy Manhattan family. He starts to live with her family and gets closer to her family and moves away from his own. Although they love each other, they eventually break up when Gogol returns after performing all the Bengali rituals on his father's death. They have a fight over Gogol's struggles regarding the emotional complications related to his father's death. In a subtle twist in the tale, Gogol's mother Ashima suggests Gogol to meet Moushumi, the daughter of one of her friends belonging to another Bengali family particularly due to their shared cultural background. Gogol knew

Moushumi from his own childhood. She had the unfortunate experience of having planned a wedding only to have her intended groom change his mind at the last minute. Gogol was reluctant to meet Moushumi for two reasons. Firstly, for common cultural roots i.e. being Bengali and then for her disgraced past. But he hardly had any choice as he had to meet her anyway, to please his mother. They meet at a bar and develop intimacy.

Although it was a blind date engineered by their mothers, they develop a liking for each other and eventually settle in matrimony. During a party there starts a discussion on names. Moushumi's name is explained as a "damp southwesterly breeze" (p 240). It is revealed at this point by Moushumi that Nikhil had changed his name. Gogol had not expected her to blurt out the secret. "He stares at her, stunned. He has never told her not to tell anyone. He simply assumed she never would. His expression is lost on her; she smiles back at him, unaware of what she's done. The dinner guests regard him, their mouths hanging open in confused smiles" (p 243). This episode inevitably leads to his former name Gogol and even though another guest Sally can place the name as belonging to the writer of short story 'Overcoat,' others including Donald consider it a queer name.

Gogol slowly gets disillusioned with Moushumi. The scent of her body which intoxicated him seems now suppressed by the stale smell of smoke left behind by her excessive smoking. However, by the end of their first year of marriage, Moushumi has grown restless and begins to regret her decision to marry. Gogol suspects something foul and their marriage comes to an end when Moushumi starts having a sexual affair with her old love interest.

Throughout the novel the character Gogol changes in many different ways. Throughout his life he tried to shed his parents' un-American lifestyle but in the end he succumbed to his past and ancestry. Ever since Gogol's childhood all he ever wanted was to find a place where he could truly fit in, whether it be in his own culture, or in the American one in which he lives. During his life, he searches everywhere to find out who he is and where he belongs. Even after his long stay and frequent visits to India, he could never be a part of Indian culture. He could never be Indian as he was born and brought up here, at the same time the name and the family values never let him be completely American. His multiple relationships with American girls were never successful, and his marriage with an Indian girl was also a disastrous failure. He always remains in dilemma about his identity and that is the reason he could never be the one he likes.

Although Gogol Ganguly had a harrowing time coming to terms with real self and accepting himself in his teenage and early adult years, he eventually turns the corner and discovers his identity at the end of the novel. Jhumpa Lahiri's denouement achieves a fine balance. By the end of the novel, Gogol feels comforted by one thing: before his father had died, he had revealed the real motif for choosing that name for him. At thirty-two, finally proud of his name and its meaning, Nikhil Gogol Ganguly accepted his name and his fate. He realizes that his identity is embellished by both cultures. He tries to find solace and a temporary reconciliation with his name and the heritage he had rejected, as he turns to the book his father had gifted him on his birthday, which Lahiri symbolically mentions:

As the hours of the evening pass he will grow distracted, anxious to return to his room, to be alone to read the book he had once forsaken, has abandoned until now. Until moments ago it was destined to disappear from his life altogether, but he has salvaged it by chance, as his father was pulled from a crushed train forty years ago. (p 290)

The diasporic crisis of dual identity faced by Gogol gets resolved when he realizes that the answer is not to fully abandon or attempt to diminish either Indian or American culture, but to enjoin the two together. He does not have to be one or the other; he does not have to choose. He is made up of both, and instead weakening his pride, his identity is strengthened by this. Coming out of his turmoil Gogol is able to stand on his feet and is no longer ashamed of him. By assimilating himself in American culture and values, at the same time retaining his parents' Indian heritage he feels proud of his name Nikhil Gogol Ganguly and all that it means.

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