

## **Cultural Alienation and Loss of Identity in Jhumpa Lahiri's The Namesake**

**Dr. K. Mangayarkarasi**

*HOD, PG & Research department of English Arignar Anna College (Arts & Science), Krishnagiri,*

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**Abstract:** *Jhumpa Lahiri the Putlizer prize winner for the year 2000, is a significant writer of Indian diaspora who has enriched the corpus of international writing in English. Her novel The Name sake deals with the tribulations of the immigrants in an alien land, the yearnings of exile and the emotional bafflement of cross cultural dilemmas. The novel continues to develop further the themes of cultural alienation and loss of identity. She tries to incarcerate the experiences and cultural dilemmas of 30 year struggle for the Ganguli family, for their integration and assimilation into alien. Lahiri's protagonists are the continental immigrants but they endure cultural introspection. They have their conflict of consciousness between two selves- the native and the foreign. They have their journey towards home and identity, being recognized as unsettling race through alienation, cultural conflict and hybrid culture. By carefully delineating the selves of her tormented characters she has imparted universality to their themes. Thus her narratives are the real social documents on tormented souls not with the usual sound and fury but rather through imaginative reconstructions.*

**Key words:** *alienation, culture, identity, immigrant, self*

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### **I. Introduction**

Jhumpa Lahiri the Putlizer prize winner for the year 2000, is a significant writer of Indian diaspora who has enriched the corpus of international writing in English. Her novel *The Namesake* deals with the tribulations of the immigrants in an alien land, the yearnings of exile and the emotional bafflement of cross cultural dilemmas. The novel continues to develop further the themes of cultural alienation and loss of identity. She tries to incarcerate the experiences and cultural dilemmas of 30 year struggle for the Ganguli family, for their integration and assimilation into alien. Lahiri's protagonists are the continental immigrants but they endure cultural introspection. They have their conflict of consciousness between two selves- the native and the foreign. They have their journey towards home and identity, being recognized as unsettling race through alienation, cultural conflict and hybrid culture. By carefully delineating the selves of her tormented characters she has imparted universality to their themes. Thus her narratives are the real social documents on tormented souls not with the usual sound and fury but rather through imaginative reconstructions.

Jhumpa Lahiri, had received critical acclamation for her warm and intricate portrayal of family life and Indian immigrants trying to be on both sides of the two cultures- their Indian heritage and the American dream, Lahiri from her childhood had experienced the conflicts experienced by an immigrant who has to continuously struggle with her environment and herself in order to find her true identity in the world. In her novel "The Namesake" she portrays the themes of cultural alienation and loss of identity that the immigrant faces in making a new home in foreign country. "The Namesake" revolves around the life of an Indian immigrant couple Ashima & Ashok Ganguli who have come to create a new life for opportunities for themselves in the University of Suburbs in Boston. The novel opens with Ashima Ganguli trying to make a spicy Indian snack from African ingredients - Rice Krispies & Planters peanuts- but "as usual, there's something missing". Ashima, who is pregnant when taken to the hospital for delivery does not find anything customary in America - a country, where she is designed to spend her rest of life and even in labours she is petrified to elevate a child in country where "Life seems so tentative and spare".

The novel begins with the pathetic depiction of apprehension, clumsiness and an assortment of psycho-sociological problems such as longing, rootlessness, estrangement, schizophrenia experienced by Ashima, who at a young age has migrated to a country where "she is related to no one". Motherliness for Ashima does not bring only cheerfulness but also the menace of raising the child all alone in country of strangers. The child's birth was a lonesome celebration and the realization that his entry in the world was, "unaccompanied and deprived" laid the foundation of that predicament that small child had to experience throughout his life. Ashima's struggle to adjust in a foreign country, to become accustomed herself to the newly found atmosphere is the struggle of every immigrant to expose their self- identity in an alien land. Feeling lonely and displaced in a foreign land, Ashima begins to feel 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 on-going 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 elicit the same curiosity from strangers, the same combination of pity and respect (49-50).

Being an Indian woman Ashima, had learnt from the childhood to give up her own needs and cravings in order to gratify her husband and family. So for her, the pain, the longing for going back to her own country, own land has been bottled up in some secluded corner of her heart, to herself. She does not like to share her longing to her native country as it would hurt her husband Ashok or worry her parents. Ashima feels upset, homesick and sulks alone in their apartment that is too hot in summer and too cold in the winter far removed from the descriptions of houses in the English novels she has read. She feels completely dislocated from her comfortable home of her home to that of her foreign home. Most of the time, she used to think about the activities going on there. Ashimaprogressively adjusts herself to the new environs and devises a schedule for herself where she absolutely merges herself in looking after Gogol, her son, who demands her extremecommitment and "last ounce of strength".

She starts accepting the American ways of living but longing for her home country in her is kept intact by adhering to the Indian traditions and rituals. By the time Gogol is six months old, they know enough people to entertain on a proper scale on the occasion of Gogol's Annaprasan. The connection, the contact with Indian culture is kept integral by firmly following the rituals that are part of Indian culture. Ashok and Ashima create a sense of Indiannessfor themselves, by getting them familiar with all the Bengali families living around. She also maintains address books in which she has recorded the names and address of every Indian whom she comes across. She prides herself on each entry and feels fortunate to "have the fortune to share rice with them in a foreign land". Her discomfort with the life around her represents the incomprehensible world of American immigrants who are born in one country but squander their life either gracefully engrossed or completely drowning in the civilization of another people. The anxiety, the fear of losing one's identity in an entirely foreign land, is passed on to the next generation also. Ashok and Ashima's son Gogol, who emerges as the central figure in the novel is the typical example of this phenomenon.

The qualms, the nervousness, the agitation, which his mother had experienced, when he was in the womb; passes hereditarily to him. He inherits not only his parent's way of life or looks, but also inherits the same pain of being lost in the midst of an alien culture. Gogol is discontented with his name and hates it for lacking self-respect or enormity. A name is an introductory ID tag to the world but Gogol, when he inhis teens despises his name so much so that "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".

In fact, the title 'The Namesake' reflects the struggle of Gogol Ganguli goes through to identity with his unusual name. His struggle for establishing his individuality is twofold. The name that ultimately defines a person's individuality becomes a burden for him. It does not give him an identity but puts him in a dilemma, regarding his original identity. Secondly, as a child of immigrants in America, he persistently has to fight with conflicts arising due to his sense belongings and loss of identity.The novel is autobiographical in portraying the repercussions of what the children of immigrants have to experience when they are ordained to born in a country which does not belongs to their parents.

JhumpaLahiri, who herself is a child of an immigrant couple, had admitted in an interview, "I wanted to please my parents and meet their expectations; I also wanted to meet the expectations I placed on myself to fit into American society. It's a classic case of divided identity, but depending on the degree to which the immigrants in question are willing to assimilate, the conflict is more or less pronounced. As a young child, I felt that the Indian part of me was unacknowledged and therefore somehow negated, by my American environment and vice-versa; I felt that I led two separate lives.

Gogol who hates his name, for the first time in his life, takes an independent choice and decides to get it changed to Nikhl. It is as Nikhil, Gogol faces the predicament of establishing his real identity. He finds it complicated to acknowledge that Gogol and Nikhil are both a part of his own individual self and torn between this struggle he feels as 'If he's cast himself in a play acting the part of twins, indistinguishable to the naked eye, yet fundamentally different.'" He is having two aspects regarding his change of name – infactGogol, the son of Indian parents behave and act according to Indian culture and values; Nikhil on the other hand, is the free open-minded person, who has left his past behind and has nothing to do with Gogol. It is as Nikhil that Gogol forgets all the cultural restrictions imposed on him by his parents, who even after spending twenty years' in America cannot bring themselves to "refer to Pemberton Road as home"

His parents can never reject their old cultural ethics and one can sense the presence of deep-rooted reminiscence in their behavior, Gogol and Sonia view their multi-cultural life differently. Though there are required to sit in pujas and other religious ceremonies, Gogol and Sonia like the children to their Bengali families take pleasure in American food more than the Bengali dishes. The parents admit to their children's wishes. 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 colour 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).

After their visit to Calcutta once in a year, they crave to go back to their western ways. Gogol as compared to Sonia is the one who feels a lifelong disconnectedness to his family and culture. Gogol spends his immigrant life feeling as if he is on a river with a foot in two different boats. Each boat wants to pull him in separate direction and he is always torn between the two cultures. His parents expect him to adopt a life based on Indian culture and the moment he boards a train to Boston, his home, "Nikhil evaporates and Gogol claims him again."

He manages to have a dual existence - an existence having both Indian and American cultural values. Gogol represents the Indian part in him where as Nikhil is the embodiment of all the cultural values that America has given to Gogol. It is while living these two lives, that Gogol realizes the need of an identity, which is not based on his roots. The predicament that Gogol experiences is the symbol of that wretchedness which every immigrant experiences when he has to respond any query based on his identity. Though he is born and brought up in America yet to Americans he is still an Indian. And so when he comes back to the country of his native he is referred as an NRI. The feeling of sense of belongingness, the urge to be claimed by one's root is universal and perhaps it is the only reason that a person ultimately returns to the country of this birth. The pain, the torment, the lack of ability to adjust to foreign surrounding, compels the immigrants to long for their own country where their own people surround them. But in the "The Namesake", Lahiri had movingly portrayed the ache of the next generation, who has no land, to be called as their own. They are living in a land, which they 'own' by birth, but does not 'belong to the land' because of being an alien. Edward Said in his *Orientalism* comments regarding migrant's identity: Migrants history of their parents and grandparents. The Orientals continue to be looked down upon by the "Occidentals" (69).

Gogol's experiences, his dilemma cannot only be limited to Indian Diaspora, living in America. Even in India, people who are migrating from their native state to other states in order to earn their living face the same problem. We can take the example of the people migrating from hills to different parts of India in search of well-paid jobs. Immigration-takes place yet it is at a smaller scale, but the pain, the anguish that the people experience can be well compared to the agony experiences by Ashok and Ashima. This feeling of loss of identity is not only widespread in the Indian Diaspora but can also be felt in the hearts of those Indians who even though living in India, find themselves detached from the land of their birth. Gogol like a typical Indian-American makes conscious effort to be different from his parents. He wants to live in a world free from the Bengali culture from the traditions that lay him down to a country and culture. He does not want to be an outsider. He feels he is an American and he wants to distance himself from everything which is Indian or Bengali. He has seen throughout his life how the natives treat his parents and with distrust and contempt. The parents are embarrassed and segregated by the hosts. Gogol wants to keep away from such circumstances in his own life and to achieve a sense of belongingness and he is ready to disown what is his own and assimilate into a culture that he wants to make his own.

Like Gogol, Tara Banerjee, the protagonist of Bharathi Mukherjee's *The Tiger's Daughter* of the novel is hovering between two cultures. Whether she returns to America to have a peaceful life with her husband or start living happily with nostalgia thoughts of her land. Major critics and the writer herself find that Tara herself was entangled between two cultures. In an attempt to Americanize herself she loses her Indian identity. Thus she starts a life of duality and conflict since her childhood. Thus Tara Banerjee confronts perplexity when she visits India after a gap of seven years. This is because of her cultural heritage in India. She as a final point decides to get out of her solitude by moving out of that place and she waits inside the car silently with full of expectation to meet her husband. In the deepest core of her heart, she is an ordinary Indian but her re-routed self in America has made such cross cultural confrontation alien to her. With this thought deeply deep-rooted in her heart her ambition is to keep herself from India and go back to the protection of American heritage.

The immigrants experience portrayed by Lahiri in the novel forms the central theme of the novel. Throughout the novel through various characters, we get an elating and invigorating view of the Diasporic situations often experienced by the immigrants. Gogol wants to be liberated from his Indian backgrounds but after his father's death, the Indian values which he had inherited, from him, makes him move closer to his mother and his sister resulting in a strain with his relationship with his girlfriend Maxine. The

sudden death of his father makes him turn back towards his family and unknowingly he donned the responsibility of an elder son, as he would have done if he had lived in India. Gogol's quest for identity is a never-ending search; he cannot reject the Indian culture and cannot even fully accept the American values. This turns out to be an ongoing, draining and difficult process for him. He cannot reject the demands of tradition and cannot afford to accommodate to the temptations offered by a new culture. He belongs to a postmodern world which is defined as "the age of refuge" and modern man as "the new nomad" not being able to put down roots anywhere.

## **II. Conclusion**

To sum up the paper, "The Namesake" vividly portrays what Lahiri had expressed herself and she never allows her characters to be submerged under their problems, thus making "The Namesake" in welding the theme of immigration and displacement to that of human relationships.

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