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IDENTITY AND CULTURAL CONFLICT IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S - THE NAMESAKE

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Abstract

The Namesake is essentially, a story about the struggles and hardships of a Bengali couple who immigrate to the United States to form a life outside of everything they know. The novel is a narrative about the assimilation of an Indian Bengali Family from Calcutta, the Ganguli's, into America, over thirty years (from 1968 - 2000); the cultural dilemmas experienced by them and their American born children in different ways, the spartial, cultural and emotional dislocations suffered by them in their effort to settle "home" in the new land. New York Times writes about this novel, "This is a novel as affecting in its Chekhovian exploration of fathers and sons, parents and children as it is resonant in its exploration of what is acquired and lost by immigrants and their children in pursuit of the American dream". In the postcolonial discourse, the question of identity plays a vital role. The problem of Gogol's name symbolizes the problem of his identity.

Key words: The Namesake, Jhumpa Lahiri, Identity and Cultural conflict.

1. Identity and cultural conflict in Jhumpa Lahiri's - The Namesake

Diasporic writing has been receiving increasing academic and disciplinary recognition. It has emerged as a distinct literary genre. A large number of people have migrated from India to various alien lands under "forced exiles" or 'self-imposed exiles'. Some of them have made a mark in the field of writing. These immigrant writers reflect, on one hand, their attachment to their motherland and on the other hand sandwiched between two cultures. The feelings of nostalgia, a sense of loss and anxiety to reinvent home obsess them, consciously or unconsciously. They all voice the anguish of the people, living far away from their native land and being discriminated on the grounds of race, colour or creed. Every immigrant experiences injustice, inequality, discrimination, biases, prejudices and a threat to cultural identity in the unfamiliar country.

Adjusting with the social, economic, political, psychological and environmental changes is also a challenge. The abrupt change in the lifestyle, culture, status, society causes emotional and psychological problems. Adjusting with the changing scenario of their lives is a challenge. The Indian Diaspora focuses on the varied aspects of life abroad. The Indian women Diaspora writers have created a niche for themselves in the literary world. Jhumpa Lahiri and many others have taken great pains to focus on the world of immigrants.

The present paper is an attempt to explore the identity and cultural conflict and second generation immigrants. It also focuses on universal dehumanization in the modern globalized world. Jhumpa Lahiri is one of the second generation immigrants in the USA, acknowledged as one of the women writers in Indian English Literature for her Indian themes is a recent new wave literary artist. She is the author



of two acclaimed books: *The Interpreter of Maladies*, her debut collection of short stories and a novel, *The Namesake*. She has received many awards and among them the most prestigious Pulitzer Prize for fiction. Born in 1967 in London, she was raised in Rhode Island. Her latest collection of short stories is *Unaccustomed Earth*, in which she handled personal problems, social conflicts and cultural dilemmas with great depth.

At the beginning of *The Namesake*, the issue of identity is presented. Culture of naming the baby is a practice in every society. Lahiri narrates this practice with bicultural implications with a style that leaves nothing untold. She captures best the essence of the lives of Bengali Indian in 20th Century America. However Lahiri's (2008), *The Namesake* is such a wonderfully apt description of a Bengali Indian family that it does not give her American nationality away and she is now acclaimed away. She is now acclaimed as the chronicles of the Bengali immigrant experience. She describes how ashoke abhors waste, even the extra water in a teapot- a common Indian middle class mindset. The Ganguli's are shown taking precaution for everything that can go wrong, a constant fear of disaster as another typical Indian preoccupation. At the same time, she takes care to describe the second generation Indian immigrants - the children who do not care for see-off and coming home for every festival. Gogol and Moushumi do not wish to keep up the appearance of their marriage and Sonia decides to marry Ben - a non Bengali, non Indian man who Ashima ultimately trusts will give more happiness to her daughter than Maushumi ever did to her son. This is because rooting, uprooting and rerooting the lives of Individuals leave them devastated. Barrenness results due to lack of fertilizers like love, emotions, feelings of care, bonding close relationship and intimacy among individuals. The differences in social station widen the gap between husband and wife. Lives decay instead of flourishing in the new, adopted soil. From generations together the roots lay deep in the worn-out soil, spoiling, rotting the young buds in the name of modernity and globalization. Longing for and belonging to a different homeland

creates a void which cannot be filled with any other nation. It is like leaving the inherited for adopting temporary, notorious, glamorous future. The homeland is a pious place of worship in the Diaspora imagination. Nostalgia for homeland, feeling of rootlessness, instability, insecurity and isolation cause intense pain and grief, as reclaiming the past is impossible. Bicultural life entraps the immigrants in a dilemma. The couples are unable to acclimatize completely into the foreign culture and society. The intermingling of the eastern and western ethics irks lives. Stability is the essentiality of the cultural transmission and cultural crisis, a part and parcel of their routine. Adopting the tradition of the native land and trying to learn new culture is a challenge.

In Jhumpa Lahiri's "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: Cultural Alienation and Loss of Identity in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* Socio-Cultural Redemption in Comparative Literature. 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.

In the United States, Ashima struggles through language and cultural barriers as well as her own fears as she delivers her first child. To add to their woes, the rule in America compels Ashoke and Ashima, to compromise with their custom and name the child before leaving the hospital. Due to the strange set of circumstances, the couple names their first-born 'Gogol' in remembrance of a Russian author Nikolai Gogol, whose book saved Ashoke's life years ago in an unfortunate train accident. Gogol, unaware about the fact for giving him this name, is unable to identify either with Americans or with the Indians. This name becomes the focal point of the life of the baby. He grows up and feels inferior a child, he refuses to change his official name to Nikhil in school because he feels no attachment for his name. As he grows up, he himself gets it changed to Nikhil although his parents stop him. However, problems do not end here. Gogol keeps on running away from his culture. The because of his name. In school, he feels embarrassed when learns that Nikolai Gogol was a frustrated man.

Gogol desires to blend in the American society. He wants to live unnoticed. But he is not viewed as an American by other Americans, even though he is a native born citizen. He tries to put a wall between his past and his present but it is not easy. The adoption of 'Nikhil' is a part to live only

in the present, but the ghost of Gogol clings to him that he signs his old name unconsciously, he does not respond immediately when he is addressed as Nikhil. He tries to become an entirely different person from what really he is. Gogol struggles to carry the burden of two names. Nikhil resembles American names, yet 'Gogol' and his past follow him everywhere. He experiences a feeling of being in-between. He is considered an 'ABCD' "America – Born Confused Desi" But, he considers himself an American. American society says, "But you're Indian".

Gogol is an outsider in American society whereas he does not feel intimacy with Indianness. So 'who he is' becomes a great problem. What determines identity? Is it the name, which can be the very first factor in the formation? Even after making all efforts to erase his past, his failure to assert his identity is seen in his relationship with women. He does not want Ruth or Maxine to meet his parents. Such efforts are made to escape his past identity and heritage.

The death of his father brings great change in him. He learns that he cannot abandon or diminish the importance of either culture but must learn to mesh the two together. He realizes that his identity is embellished by both cultures and comes to know "identity as a production, which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside representation" (Hall, 2010). He does not have to be one or the other; he does not have to choose. He is made up of both and it should strengthen his pride instead of weakening it. He feels no shame. He has assimilated himself in American culture and values, at the same time retaining his parents' Indian heritage and now proud of his name 'Nikhil Gogol Ganguly' and all it means. He tries to cope up with the situation to gain a new identity which does not need a particular nationality and hence different from the old one. So there starts a journey "to rediscover his roots, his self, his hyphenated identity and to revitalize the in betweenness of cultures, the alternate culture" (Fernandes, 2009) He actively participates in the formation of his new and ever-widening



identification. Thus it is not the name only which determines identity. Cultural hybridism is the other aspect which has a telling effect on his identity. He belongs to many cultures at once and identity may not be determined by national boundaries only. As locations change, identity can also change. One must not be excessively obsessed with one's cultural legacy, because it is not something meaningless; rather, it is deep rooted in one's collective psyche.

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.

2. Conclusion

Thus, Jhumpa Lahiri points out the second generations of immigrant prefer to use American culture because they were born in America. They also grow in American as American citizen, whereas physically they are Indian.

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