



# IDENTITY CRISIS IN JHUMBA LAHIRI'S NOVEL 'THE NAMESAKE'

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## Abstract

Jhumpa Lahiri's novel *'The Namesake'* discusses the life experience of a Bengali family who migrated to America for a better life which is entirely different from the life they lived in India. This novel deals with the problems of alienation, cultural conflict, identity crisis, rootlessness, loss and longing. All her fictions are dealing the problems of migration, lives of expatriates and especially about the Bengali families migrated to America. In all her fiction the readers can see that even though they are after their American dreams the memory of their past life and native land make them nostalgic. These memories and the current life make them shuttle in between two worlds. This article studies about the identity crisis experienced by the characters in the novel *'The Namesake'*. The article give space to analyses different perspectives of the first and second generation immigrants. This paper examines the difference between the American way of life and Indian tradition.

Key terms: Identity crisis, alienation, culture conflict and migration.

### CULTURE CONFLICT IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S NOVEL 'THE NAMESAKE'

Culture and Identity are interconnected but one cannot say that both are similar. Culture is an umbrella term that includes attitudes, customs, tradition, beliefs and rituals of a society. So it is a macro-pattern. All these influence the identity of a person. Identity can be considered as the micro-pattern which is influenced by the macro-pattern. It is the small version. Raymond Williams, the Sociologist, in his book, *Key Words: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, says: "culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in English language. This is partly so because of its intricate historical development in several European languages, but mainly because it has now come to be Used for important concepts in several distinct intellectual discipline and in several distinct and in compatible systems of thought". In the words of Stephen Greenblatt culture is a complex whole. It can be considered as the regulator as well as the guarantor of the movement. The culture remains changing over the time. Stuart Hall in his essay "Cultural Identity" gives a detailed discussion on culture. He says that identity is not that transparent and simple as people believe. Identity is not an already achieved one. But it is the product of our experience. So it is always in process and it is inside. According to Stuart Hall it is a matter of becoming or being. It has a link to the past as well as future. It is not something already existing. It is transcending place, time, culture and history.

Jhumpa Lahiri, the Pulitzer prize winner of 2000 can be considered as a Diasporic writer who could realistically portray the dilemma of the immigrants. She was born in 1967 in London in an Indian family. She showed the life expectations and tragedies of individuals and their families in the backdrop of America. She shows the cultural difference and religious backgrounds and their impact on the characters. She writes the wavering attitude of the characters towards English people and culture. The migration in her fiction is self-imposed one and to achieve the American dreams. When she was two years old they migrated to United States. She spends her childhood in the Rhode Island. She once confessed that throughout her life she felt neither American nor Indian. She felt like the other children of the immigrant families that she was confused in between the two. This was a common feeling for all the immigrant children. She felt short at both the ends. She was shuttling between two.

The novel "The Namesake" can be considered as an attempt to portray the issues related to culture conflict and identity crisis. One can say that Diasporas are continuously under formation. Sometimes one can see drastic change in their lives as a response to the tumultuous changes happen in the lives. "The Namesake" portrays one's identity at the backdrop of culture, society and religion. The main characters in this novel are trying to uncover their identity and its reasoning behind their lineage. In the beginning of the novel one can see Ashima is pregnant and there are only two weeks left to her due delivery. Her husband is a Doctoral candidate at MIT. She called him when the labor starts. In the beginning itself the novel reveals the difference

between the cultural habit of their native land this foreign land. Ashima never call her husband his name which is an Indian life style. 'because it is not the type of Bengali Wives' (Lahiri-2). When she was admitted in the hospital for child birth she was thinking 'it is strange that her child will be born in a place most of the people enter either to suffer or die' (Lahiri,4). In all her life it was the first time in her life that she slept in a strange place with strangers. In this scene itself the readers can see her struggle for identity in an alien land in which she fails to accustom to new culture. One can see her struggling with her conservative attitude and wished if she could have her first labor in Calcutta 'where women go home to their parents for child birth away from in-laws and husband (Lahiri,3). In their family tradition the elder member of the family usually gives name to their new born. It is Ashima's grandmother who is going to name the child. But as a matter of circumstance Ashoke named him Gogol, the name of a Russian author. At the time of joining the kindergarten they told him that they are going to call him Nikhil. But the teacher accepted his suggestion

In this novel, one can understand the fact that Ashok and Ashima are the two characters who undergoes identity crisis and culture conflict very dangerously. They were more attracted to their home land more than their host land which is America. Because the inherent nature, culture, character and nature of a person cannot be substituted with a new one. These characters constantly undergo the process of imitation, transportation and adaptation. They were struggling to balance Indian and western culture. This can be considered as the one hurdle in the lives of all the immigrant families. Ashima and Ashoke became victims of this dilemma since they spend their youth in India. They were really suffering to recreate a microcosm of India in their apartment by cooking and consuming Indian food, following Indian rituals and celebrating Indian festivals. But their children, being born and brought up in India they made friends with Americans and accustomed to their culture. But all the characters in this novel are neither too American nor too Indian. They were existing between two. The culture, life style, rituals and way of perception of a person is unique and cannot be compared and understood by others fully. So the customs of a person cannot be understood and substituted by the other. Naturally the characters in this novel are adopting a space in between the two. All the characters in the novel go the process of imitation then adaptation and transportation. The characters struggle to keep a balance between the two cultures. They are literally shuttling between two cultures. To adopt the new, they have to leave their Indian culture behind. The Ganguli family could translate into the new culture but at the cost of letting go the home culture.

The mother character Ashima was really scared of raising their children in the new culture because in the initial period of their expatriate life the host culture was too alien to her. 'she was even terrified to raise a child in a country where she is related to no one, where she knows too little, where life seems tentative and spare' (Lahiri, 6). She found comfort in reading some Desh Magazines. The Bengali language in the magazine could ease her loneliness. Because, cultural values, language and food habits unite people even in their plurality. She started eating beef and many other food items those were once forbidden to her. Her

transformation made her live in a pluralistic society. She was terribly affected by the loneliness at the age of forty-eight. But her children and husband were already accustomed with that.

Ashoke was also a victim of loneliness, culture conflict, identity crisis and alienation. His life is a typical example of loss and longing. Though the story develops through the character of Gogol the lives of his family members and the girls came into his life are also important. Because all these together depicts immigrant life. The story of his father, mother, sister and his girls Maxine and Moushumi also shows different faces in his life. Though Maxine is an American girl her life can be considered as a direct contrast to Gogol's life which is highly influenced by multiplicity. His wife Moushumi is an Indian and has some similarity with Gogol's life. But she is different from him because she can be considered as a typical Bohemian. All these difference and similarities of the characters give us perfect lenses visible of culture conflict. Gogol hated his name because it has nothing to do with his personality or home country or host country. For him it is totally absurd and doesn't represent him. Because as he says the name is neither Indian nor American. He could not admit the fact that his pet name turned to be his good name. Actually the cultural background in his life confused him in his identity. His parents selected the weirdest name for him. His decision to change his name didn't help him. He married Moushumi in the presumption that since she is another second generation immigrant and thus can understand him more. But it also ended nowhere. He then realized that he had been spending years away from his origin.

The life experience of all the characters in this novel shows the fact that cultural assimilation is a complex one rather than a simple one. Because these immigrants cannot fully comprehend the host culture and throw away the home culture. They even lose their heritage. The socioeconomic factors, foreign language acquisition and marriages do some chances for the assimilation. Diasporas are constantly under process of change. In this while trying to adopt the host culture, they lose their home culture. But the remaining will be settled in their minds. They would be engaged in assimilating the new culture and lifestyle of the land in which they are living. The first generation in the Ganguli family could find a balance between the two. but the second generation could not find one and failed to locate their identity. Gradually they could find a transnational space and culture beyond any nation. The first generation suffered identity crisis and had to undergo many pressures and compromises. Their cultural history they carried from their home land made them confused and they could not live with it as well as throw away. They tried to adapt the host culture but are their tactic to survive in a strange land. Thus in this novel Jhumpa Lahiri tells the fact how much struggle an immigrant put to survive in an alien land. The novel describes the Ganguli family's immigrant experience, their isolation and their loss of link from their family in India.

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