

Jhumpa Lahiri's Quest in *The Namesake*

M. Suguna
Assistant Professor
Department of English
Thanthai Hans Roever College (Autonomous)
Perambalur - 621 212

Abstract

Jhumpa Lahiri is an Indian American author. *The Namesake* is Jhumpa Lahiri's first novel. Jhumpa Lahiri was born Nilanjana Sudeshna Lahiri, but uses her nickname Jhumpa. She was born in London in 1967. The family moved to the US when she was three. She grew up in Kingston, Rhode Island. She herself was a bit unhappy over her name and chose to be known by her nickname, Jhumpa, as it was easier to pronounce. This was the inspiration for her novel, *The Namesake*. She has a master's degree in English, an M.F.A. in Creative Writing, and a Doctorate in Renaissance Studies. Her first published work, a collection of short stories titled *Interpreter of Maladies*, won a Pulitzer Prize. In this novel Lahiri's experiences of growing up as a child of immigrants resemble that of her protagonist, Gogol Ganguly. Lahiri belongs to the second generation whose ongoing quest for identity never seems to end. Lahiri finds herself quite a stranger to both of the countries -in India, she is an American and in America, she is an Indian. Through Gogol, Lahiri presents identity crisis which she herself has faced acutely. She contradicts the idiom "What's in a name?" Rather she is obsessed with 'it's everything that matters in a name.'

Introduction

Jhumpa Lahiri is an Indian American author. *The Namesake* is Jhumpa Lahiri's first novel. Name signifies the first identity. Jhumpa Lahiri was born as Nilanjana Sudeshna, but had one pet name, Jhumpa which was found easy to pronounce by her teacher and she became Jhumpa Lahiri. She felt embarrassed whenever she was called as Jhumpa. She struggled a lot to make herself feel an American but she found just a half-way feeling. The same feeling she puts into Gogol who never likes to be called by this name. The agony felt by Gogol is the agony of Jhumpa Lahiri. Lahiri's parents, were always isolated from mainstream American Culture. Despite the fact that they spoke English, they were betrayed by their accent. They feel alone and aloof there. Lahiri has shown all this through various conflicts presented in "*The Namesake*". Gogol's name is one of the chief causes which makes him feel alienated. His loneliness starts from the moment he enters the world. His mother thinks to herself -"She has never known a person entering the world so alone" (NS 24). After his birth, selecting a name becomes a problem for them. The difference between the naming process in Indian and American cultures pushes him into a chaos. Ashima wants her grandmother to suggest a name but the

name is not received, the letter having been lost in transit. The hospital authorities do not allow them to leave the hospital without naming the new born, in keeping with the rules. Ashoke names him Gogol after the name of his beloved Russian author, Nikolai Gogol, thinking of it as a pet name only, which is a common practice in Bengal.

Nikolai Gogol's book helps him save his life. So Ashoke has a great reverence for this author and his name. For him, Gogol signifies a beginning and a survival. The name fills him with joy and indicates a new life. But this very name, the first identity of their son, is the very first factor which contributes to the problem of identity crisis. When his parents take him to school to start his schooling, they have a new name 'Nikhil' for him. But this time it was Gogol himself who does not respond to 'Nikhil'. It was his first attempt to reject a dual identity. This rejection left him alone with his old name Gogol. Gradually, he starts knowing the uncommon nature of his name which problematizes his identity when he grows up. Gogol does not understand the emotional significance of the name. He does not like to be known by a name which is neither Indian, nor American, nor even first name. When he comes to know that his name is the name of, the Russian Author, he becomes desperate to get rid of his name. He does not feel like an American with this name. Lahiri displays her deft touch for the perfect detail -- the fleeting moment, the turn of phrase -- that opens whole worlds of emotion.

Jhumpa Lahiri's Quest in *The Namesake*

The Namesake takes the Ganguli family from their tradition-bound life in Calcutta through their fraught transformation into Americans. On the heels of their arranged wedding, Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli settle together in Cambridge, Massachusetts. An engineer by training, Ashoke adapts far less warily than his wife, who resists all things American and pines for her family. When their son is born, the task of naming him betrays the vexed results of bringing old ways to the new world. Named for a Russian writer by his Indian parents in memory of a catastrophe years before, Gogol Ganguli knows only that he suffers the burden of his heritage as well as his odd, antic name.

Lahiri brings great empathy to Gogol as he stumbles along the first-generation path, strewn with conflicting loyalties, comic detours, and wrenching love affairs. With penetrating insight, she reveals not only the defining power of the names and expectations bestowed upon us by our parents, but also the means by which we slowly, sometimes painfully, come to define ourselves. The New York Times has praised Lahiri as "a writer of uncommon elegance and poise." *The Namesake* is a fine-tuned, intimate, and deeply felt novel of identity. The narrative is simple and lucid, a lot of attention has been paid to the details. The novel manages to highlight the confusion, the homesickness and the loneliness of the first generation Indians in a foreign country. The triumph of the novel is when Ashima, who misses India all her life comes to think of Boston as home.

The narrator sums up this strangeness quite nicely: *Not only does Gogol Ganguli have a pet name turned good name, but a last name turned first name. And so it occurs to him that no one he knows*

in the world, in Russia or India or America or anywhere, shares his name. Not even the source of his namesake. (4.26)

At six months, Gogol is already refusing to participate in traditional Indian rituals. He's not ready to confront his destiny, and for much of the book, one wonders if he ever will be. That's how the wise author, Jhumpa Lahiri is talking about how her parents felt as Indian immigrants in the United States. But it could just as easily apply to Ashima and Ashoke, the Bengali couple who travel to the United States and raise a family in Lahiri's first novel, *The Namesake*.

In *The Namesake*, Lahiri explores this tug between the two worlds – the Indian world and the American one. That exploration is based in part on her own experiences growing up in America as the child of Indian immigrants. Her fictional counterpart is Gogol Ganguli, who comes of age over the course of the novel and comes to terms with his complicated, multicultural identity.

Gogol is a troubled kid, and the main thing that irks him is his rather wacky name. His father is a fan of the nineteenth-century Russian writer Nikolai Gogol, and slaps that name on a birth certificate for lack of a better one when his son is born. Growing up, Gogol absolutely despises it. He sees his name as both the cause and the symbol of the way he feels as an Indian-American, caught between the Bengali heritage of his parents and the American culture he lives in. In many ways, his odd name is the door through which Lahiri ushers one into the world of the Indian immigrant experience.

It's a subject she knows well. Lahiri gained widespread notice when her first book, a collection of short stories called *The Interpreter of Maladies*, won her the Pulitzer Prize in 2000. (No big deal.) The stories tackled similar themes to those in *The Namesake*, which she published in 2003 to instant success and acclaim. People loved it so much that *The Namesake* was adapted into a film starring Kal Penn in 2006.

But before one clicks over to Netflix, take a stab at reading the novel first. Its gorgeous prose and insightfully drawn characters will lure one into a world Lahiri knows like the back of her hand. One would leave the novel with a better understanding of the immigrant experience and Bengali culture, all because one has a trusty guide in Lahiri.

The Namesake speaks to anyone who's ever felt dissatisfied with his or her name. While it might be easy to brush off names as less important than, say, personality or parenting, it's not so far-fetched to say that a name is one's destiny.

So what's in a name? A lot, it turns out, and especially for Gogol. But it's important to remember that over the course of the novel, he learns that while his name is less-than-lovely, it's also a product of his heritage and upbringing, which is reason enough to love it *At times, as the laughter at Gerald and Lydia's table swells, and another bottle of wine is opened, and Gogol raises his glass to be filled yet again, he is conscious of the fact that his immersion in Maxine's family is a betrayal of his own. (6.54)*

Gogol loves hanging with the Ratliffs, because their fancy WASP lifestyle is a pretty sweet deal. But the Ratliffs clearly don't know him. They're merely "intrigued" by his roots, and then they brush them off entirely, saying he could pass as Italian. It's moments like these that help one understand why Gogol feels like he is betraying his own family by spending time with the Ratliffs. They don't know anything about Bengali culture, and, perhaps more significantly, Gogol doesn't bother trying to share it with them. He just tucks it away.

But the more time he spends with people like the Ratliffs, the farther away Gogol becomes from his own culture. The world of the Ratliffs is appealing, sure, but it's not *his* world. It's a white, rich, American world, and Gogol is none of those things.

No matter what happens with his identity crisis, Gogol is lucky in one way: he has an awesome family. And as it turns out, that very same family just might be the solution to his woes.

Gogol's father, Ashoke, seems to help him the most. It's only after his dad spills the story of Gogol's name (the horrifying train accident that almost ended his life) that Gogol begins to regret the whole Nikhil thing.

And it's only after his father's death (and after his divorce from Moushumi) that Gogol realizes something really important:

Without people in the world to call him Gogol, no matter how long he himself lives, Gogol Ganguli will, once and for all, vanish from the lips of loved ones, and so, cease to exist. Yet the thought of this eventual demise provides no sense of victory, no solace. It provides no solace at all. (12.24)

The name itself is not what matters. Gogol the name is not what makes Gogol the man who he is. It's his *family*. It's the people that call him Gogol that make him who he is, and if he allows his family to die off without allowing himself to truly be Gogol, well then he will simply "cease to exist." And really, no matter how torn up one is about one's cultural roots, who wants that?

So by the end of the novel, one feels pretty secure in her/his belief that Gogol will put the kibosh on the whole Nikhil thing and start to embrace the name his father gave him. At last, that's the conclusion one arrives at when Gogol began reading the stories of his namesake at the end of the novel

Conclusion

The Namesake convincingly illustrates the lives of both first generation and second generation Indian migrants in the USA. Alienation is a part of the experience of the Indian Diaspora and even if people are at home in any part of the world it does not mean that they will not become victims of the sense of alienation. The novel also shows how the immigrants face cultural dilemmas in the foreign system. She has tried to answer all these questions in her own poise through the quest of identity of her characters. The second generation Diaspora finds their roots only after undergoing cultural imbalance. Diaspora is all about the creation of new identities, spaces for growth, resolution of conflicts and a

new culture. Lahiri shows that the immigrants in their enthusiasm to stick to their own cultural belief and customs gradually imbibe the cultural ways of the host country too. Their own children groomed to be "bilingual" and "bicultural" face cultural dilemmas and displacement more. But at last Lahiri also shows that all immigrants carve their own "routes" in the course of time and it's not necessary that they should settle in the country of their own origin.

Reference

- Abrams, M.H. A Glossary of Literary Terms. 7th Bangalore: Prism, 2003.
- Barry, Peter. Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary And Cultural Theory. Second ed. Chennai: T. R. Publication, 2006.
- Bheda, P.D. Indian Women Novelties in English. New Delhi: Sarup and Sons, 2005.
- Chandra, N.D.R Contemporary Indian Writing in English: Critical perceptive. Vol-II. New Delhi: Sarup and sons, 2005.
- Lahiri, Jumpa. The Namesake. New Delhi: Harper Collins, 2003.
- Pathak, V. Dabir, Urmila and Mishra Shubha. Contemporary Fiction An Anthology of Female Writes. New Delhi :Sarup and sons, Ist ed. 2008.

