



Dual Identity Crisis in Jhumpa Lahiri's "The Namesake"

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Abstract

The diasporic literatures of the twenty-first century are continuously enriched by the concerns of diaspora, transnationalism, multiculturalism, and identity crises in the age of globalisation. In the field of international migration, evolving topographies, cultural exchange, heterogeneity, and fluid identities come together to build a complex framework. Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, V. S. Naipaul, Kiran Desai, Bharti Mukherjee, Jhumpa Lahiri, and many more frequently address diasporic issues in their literature. Jhumpa Lahiri is a prominent figure of the Indian diaspora in America. She raises the subject of how immigration and expatriation affect the difficulties of living when weighed against diverse ethnic, religious, and cultural origins. Her debut novel, *The Namesake*, focuses on the lives of Asians and Indians who have immigrated to other countries. Her writing inform us of the challenges that first- and second-generation Indian immigrants to America face in adjusting to their new country. Her art beautifully highlights the conflict between preserving family tradition and believing in individual independence, as well as the understanding that one is an outsider even though one was born there. Normally, diaspora fiction dwells on issues of alienation, loneliness, dejection, homelessness, nostalgia, resistance, assertion, and the quest for identity.

Keywords: Diaspora, nostalgia, immigration, culture, identity crisis.

Introduction

Jhumpa Lahiri, an immigrant novelist, unquestionably belongs to the group of writers popularly known as the "Indian Diaspora" writers. The word "diaspora," which means "to disperse," is derived from Greek. Diaspora refers to the voluntary or forced migration of people from their ancestral places to other areas. [Griffiths, Tiffin, Ashcroft] Diaspora fiction concentrates primarily on themes such as cultural fusion or disintegration, discriminating margins of two different social milieus, internalising nostalgia, and enduring a forced amnesia. It also addresses issues such as alienation, loneliness, homelessness, existential rootlessness, nostalgia, questioning, protest, and the search for identity.

The term "Diaspora" referred to the Jewish Community, which lacked a state of its own and was subjected to prejudice and injustice on a global scale. The phrase did, however, become well-known and was applied to other nationalities as well who had been uprooted from their native homes for various reasons. Even though it's important to distinguish between people moving forcibly and voluntarily, the concept of diaspora inevitably entails a "structure of location followed by dislocation and relocation" (Paranjape 59).

Communities of individuals residing in a single nation are referred to as a diaspora. The diasporic experience is a well of tortured inspiration, multiple identities, new subjectivities, inventive memories, and new linguistic and existential views. Earlier immigrant works from the neo-colonial and post-colonial periods were frequently the result of people being forcibly transported as a result of persecution due to their religion or other political or social beliefs. However, many Indians who immigrated to America in the middle of the 1970s and afterwards did so in pursuit of a better life, as well as monetary success and riches.

Jhumpa Lahiri was influenced by both Indian and American history and culture. Many of her stories, which portray the isolation and loneliness of immigrants stuck between two radically different cultures, prominently include this multicultural way of life. Long-term residence away from one's place of origin causes dislocation and might evoke feelings of longing and melancholy. The attempt to relocate in an unfamiliar environment is then made through negotiation and adaptation. The Indian diaspora is made up of all of these Indians who have lived outside of India. Jhumpa Lahiri, who was raised in Rhodes Island (USA) and was born in London to educated middle-class Bengali parents, depicts the experiences of the diaspora in her first collection of short stories, *Interpreter of Maladies*, which won her the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 2000. She follows this up with her debut novel, *The Namesake*, which gained immediate recognition and became a part of cinematic history. It would be helpful to first include Lahiri's own comments before delving into the plot's specifics to examine the concept of diasporic dilemma of dual identity in *The Namesake*. Lahiri asserts in an interview published by Houghton Mifflin Company that the book is undoubtedly about them "who are culturally displaced or those who grow up in two worlds simultaneously."

There is no doubt that the book includes an autobiographical element as Lahiri's experience growing up as an immigrant child is similar to that of her protagonist Gogol in the book. In an interview with Mira Nair, she claims: "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, she unintentionally let her pet name become her legal name. On her birth certificate and passport, she goes by two other names. The teachers thought Jhumpa was the easiest of her names to pronounce when she first started school. In the same interview, Lahiri focuses on the diasporic issue of dual identity and says:

"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.”

Lahiri claims to Mira Nair in a conversation, “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.”

Names take on a lot of significance when identification becomes the central concern. From culture to culture, a name has a different expressive purpose. Bengali children are given two names: a good name that is used by the rest of society and a pet name that is exclusively used by family and close friends. Gogol's character does a fantastic job of capturing this exact sense of dual identity. Gogol is given a pet name at birth because his official name, which was written in a letter from his great-grandmother in India, got misplaced in the mail. In the Massachusetts hospital where he is born, his parents give him the surname of Russian author Nikolai Gogol as a first name. The name is chosen with the knowledge that it is only a formality and will eventually become just a pet name. The name of his father's favourite author, Gogol, appears on his birth certificate and sticks with him throughout his early academic years. Gogol's family informs him that Nikhil, a respectable name, will be used by the teachers and other students at school when he starts kindergarten. Gogol rejects his given name and prefers to be addressed simply as Gogol by both his family and society.

Years of suffering result from this choice he made on the first day of kindergarten, which was also his first attempt to reject a dual identity. He doesn't question his identity while he's young; instead, he “doesn’t mind his name. It seems perfectly normal.” (p 66) As he gets older, he starts to wonder who he is. The fact that Gogol, even as a young child, understood the value of identity is demonstrated by the field trip his class took to a cemetery where other kids found the graves of members of their clan who were identified by the surname mentioned in the epitaph. However, to his disappointment, he was unable to locate any 'Ganguli' buried there. (p 91) His first name, "Gogol," did not identify him with either the American or Indian communities, which depressed him. He devotes his youth and early adult years to attempting to figure out who he is. Gogol formally changes his name to Nikhil just before leaving for college, which is emblematic of his self-conscious attempts to entirely disown his own personality and try to metamorphosis himself into a different identity. Nevertheless, he discovers that he must get used to being named Nikhil, despite his desire to change his name. When his parents also address him by such name, he feels, “...in that instant that he is not related to them, not their child.”(p106)

Gogol spends his entire existence in the United States, where kids are frequently humiliated of their peculiarities from other kids. Gogol and his sister Sonali were both born and raised in the United States, yet despite this, they struggle with feeling unlike most of the youngsters they know. Some people make fun of their names, while others vandalise their mailboxes by hurling insults, and some people just find them funny. Gogol wants to fit in with American society and go unnoticed during his teens. But despite being a native-born citizen, he is never seen as an American by other people. For the diasporas, this state of "in-betweenness" is excruciatingly unpleasant and marginalising. Individuals and communities within the diaspora cannot be

classified solely in terms of the homeland to which they all yearn to return or the nation in which they choose to settle down. They unavoidably have a hybrid or dual identity problem, which makes their living even more challenging. All Indians living abroad have this experience, regardless of their caste, area, or religion (which they adhered to so fervently and vehemently while they were in India).

The topic of identity is challenging for the second generation. Indian culture and values are upheld at home, while the American code of behaviour is observed in public. This poses a double obstacle. The story skillfully captures this ongoing quest for identification as first generation immigrants and their offspring seek to establish roots in a new community. The Ganguli parents, especially Ashima, struggle to adjust to a culture that is different from their own, while their children, Gogol and Sonia, battle to strike an implausible balance between reverence for their ancestors' traditions and the allure of a more liberated American society.

The identities of Diaspora people and groups cannot be understood solely in terms of a homeland to which they all have a strong desire to return or just that one nation that they have adopted. They purposefully confront the difficulties posed by the crises of hybrid or dual identity in the pursuit of their methods and purposes, which makes their existence even more ambiguous.

Gogol begins an affair with Anglo-Saxon American Maxine, a member of a liberal and affluent Manhattan family, after breaking up with Ruth. He begins to reside with her family, growing closer to them while relocating away from his own. Despite their affection for one another, their relationship ends when Gogol returns after carrying out all the Bengali customs associated with his father's death. They argue over Gogol's difficulties with the psychological effects of losing his father. In an understated turn of events, Gogol's mother Ashima suggests that Gogol meet Moushumi, the daughter of one of her acquaintances who is related to another Bengali family, in part because of their common cultural heritage. Since his own youth, Gogol has known Moushumi. She had the regrettable experience of organising a wedding just to have the intended spouse decide against it at the last minute. For two reasons, Gogol was hesitant to meet Moushumi. First, for her Bengali cultural roots, and second, for her scandalous history. However, he hardly had a choice because, in order to please his mother, he had to meet her. They become close after meeting in a pub.

Despite the fact that their mothers arranged them up on a blind date, they end up adoring each other and are married. There is a talk about names at a party. The meaning of Moushumi's name is given "damp southwesterly breeze" (p 240). At this point, Moushumi reveals that Nikhil had changed his name. Gogol had not anticipated her to reveal the information so quickly. "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). Inevitably, this episode brings up his previous name, Gogol, and while another guest, Sally, can identify the name as belonging to the author of the short story "Overcoat," others, like Donald, think it is a queer name.

Gogol gradually loses faith in Moushumi. The stale smell of smoke left behind by her excessive smoking seems to have stifled the scent of her body that had previously intoxicated him. However, at the end of their first year together, Moushumi has started to feel restless and regrets getting married. When Moushumi

begins having a sexual relationship with one of her ex-boyfriends, Gogol becomes suspicious of something sinister, and their marriage is ended.

Gogol goes through a lot of distinct changes during the book. He made numerous attempts over the course of his life to discard his parents' un-American way of living, but in the end he gave in to his past and ancestry. Gogol's one and only goal in life has been to find a place where he can fully fit in, whether that be in his native society or the American one in which he currently resides. He looks around throughout his life to discover who he is and where he belongs. Even after a protracted stay and numerous trips to India, he was never able to fully integrate into Indian culture. Even though he was born and raised here, he could never fully identify as American due to his name and family's ideals. He had numerous unsuccessful romances with American women, and his marriage to an Indian woman was also an abject failure. He never becomes the person he likes because he is constantly torn about his identity.

Even though Gogol Ganguly struggled mightily in his teenage and early adult years to accept himself, he eventually turns the corner and learns who he is towards the end of the book. The denouement by Jhumpa Lahiri strikes a delicate balance. By the book's conclusion, Gogol finds solace in the fact that his father had previously explained the true reason behind selecting that name for him. Nikhil Gogol Ganguly eventually embraced his name and his fate at the age of thirty-two, feeling proud of his name and its origin. He understands how both cultures enrich his identity. He goes to the book his father had given 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)

Gogol's dual identity dilemma as a result of his diaspora is resolved once he understands that combining Indian and American culture instead of completely rejecting or trying to decrease either one is the best solution. He is not required to pick between the two; he may be either. Rather than eroding his pride, the fact that he is made up of both strengthens who he is. Gogol is able to stand up after his tumult and is no longer ashamed of himself. He feels proud of his name, Nikhil Gogol Ganguly, and everything it stands for while adapting into American culture and values while also preserving his parents' Indian heritage.

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<http://www.youtube.com/watch> (in conversation with Mira Nair about *The Namesake*)

