



THE NAMESAKE: TRACING IDENTITY TRAPPED BETWEEN ORIENT AND OCCIDENT CULTURE

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Abstract

Jhumpa Lahiri's novel The Namesake is about self-awareness and discovery of one's identity between the orthodox tradition of the east and independent lifestyle of the west. The narration is rich with ethnical subtext and reference, laid out in a coherent and crystal clear manner, depicting the events of Gogol's life at an uninterrupted pace, over a period of about forty years. The novel depicts the life of Gogol Ganguli from birth until middle age, recording his battle to discover his own self as a second-generation immigrant. Gogol initially struggles with his unusual name and later with the traditions his parents assert on upholding.

Keywords: name, identity, self, immigrant, generation, Indian, tradition, culture, American



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Gogol Ganguli is the protagonist of the novel 'The Namesake', who is a second generation immigrant in United States of America. The novel is all about his complexities with his identity, which delves between the orient and the occident. His quest for identity seems never-ending which is somewhere between an American and an Indian. Though he has was born and brought up in America, his parents always ensured that he imbibed all the values of an Indian but Gogol is an individual who wants to embrace American way of living in a full-fledged manner. There is a visible clash between the ideologies of two different cultures which does not let Gogol settle in peace. His mind's framework seems to be like any other American kid who has grown up in a similar surrounding but Gogol is a special case as he has been pressurized to embrace Indian culture an even his name. Name represents the identity of any individual but the name Gogol makes him feel alienated. The name is neither Indian nor American but is actually borrowed from a Great Russian novelist Nikolai Gogol. He has been named Gogol because his father Ashoke was a great fan of the novelist and gave him credit for giving him a new life after a narrow escape from a train accident.

Being a second generation immigrant he tries his best to bridge the two extremes of East and the West but fails eventually. Gogol wants to live as an American and seems not comfortable with the eastern way of living back home. In the essay *Names and Nicknames* by Mandira Sen reflecting on the power of names as markers of identity,” Jhumpa Lahiri takes the reader through the life of Gogol Ganguli, a second-generation male US immigrant from India. She delineates with insight and empathy how two generations of the Ganguli family come to terms with their very different lives and how, despite resistance and alienation, manages to build a bridge to each other. In a nation of immigrants, such stories are hardly unusual. Immigrants loosely grouped as "Asian" are beginning to write about their parents' homelands. In this novel, Lahiri introduces her Western readers to Bengali upper-caste, (Hindus of high ritual status), middle-class, well-educated immigrants who came to the US in the late 1960s to work in the medical and engineering professions or to teach in universities. Their middle-class status sets the Bengalis apart from many American immigrant communities, though the experience of cleaving to the ethnic community remains the same.”

His name seems to be one of the most complicated issues in his life. He does not understand the logic behind his name unless his father explains it to him. Ashoke has his own sentiments associated with the name, which does not reminds him of the almost fatal accident but the new journey he undertook the same day of the accident. It reminds him of a new beginning which was because of the single page of Nikolai Gogol's *The Overcoat* which stayed tightly fixed in his hand. These sentiments are quite clear by the conversation between Ashoke and Gogol which goes like “And suddenly the sound of his pet name, uttered by his father as he has been accustomed to hearing it all his life, means something completely new, bound up with a catastrophe he has unwittingly embodied for years. 'Is that what you think of when you think of me...Do I remind you of that night? 'Not at all,' his father says eventually...'You remind me of everything that followed.’”

The novel deals with issues of name as an identity and identity as an immigrant. It revolves around Gogol, Ashima and Ashoke. The non-relevance of pet name and good name in American also reflects a glimpse of the two different culture and its characteristics. “Living with a pet name and a good name, in a place where such distinctions do not exist – surely that was emblematic of the greatest confusion of all.” The confusion exists because of the existence of the two names which is quiet surprising and amusing for the Americans.

Ashima is another important character in the novel, which is protagonist's mother and is very particular about upholding her culture even in a surrounding which is completely different from her own. Her name itself means without any boundary but she is more comfortable in her own boundary and does not let anyone invade her values. Though she leaves her homeland and accepts America but ensures that his own values do not get lost in the process. Her name is quite symbolical of her sacrifices she gave in order to adapt herself in an alienated land and fulfilling all her duties as a loving wife and caring mother. Though she took some time to overcome her fear and anxieties about the alienated land and people around, but she never wanted to accept the fact that her children are now an American rather than an Indian. She was apprehensive about bringing up her child in an adopted homeland from the very beginning. She was not ready to let go her culture at any cost and wanted her children to uphold it in similar fashion. Things fall apart because there seems to be lack of empathy between them at some level. The two different generations has a certain gap between them and they head towards their own fate. Ashoke's demise was a sudden shock to the family and especially Gogol who now seems more in terms with his father and rather his parents.

The two generation of immigrants in the novel have two different mindset altogether. The first generation immigrants undoubtedly must have had faced issues getting used to a different surrounding altogether in order to settle. It is never easy adapting to changes of any sort in life but Ashoke and Ashima did try their best. They had a dream which was a better life and a lot of success but they were never a part of the so called American dream. Gogol was in certain aspect, an individual who may not have been a part of American dream directly but had the way of living and thinking as an American. Bridging the gap between Orient and Occident was never easy and it never happened in the novel. Gogol tried to bring them closer but never became successful in his endeavor. He had a few relationships in the novel with American girls Maxine and Ruth, but was not able to appease his own parents about his relationships. He eventually tries to make his mother happy by marrying a British Bengali girl of her choice but remained unsuccessful yet again in his efforts. He marries Moushumi a girl who shares a similar background as they both are second generation immigrants. I sense a dissatisfaction and discontent about one's existence among the second generation immigrants who were always disturbed by the two different ideologies and the way of lifestyle they have to follow. There is a popular proverb in Hindi, 'Jaisa Desh, Waisa Bhash' which means that one must adopt in accordance to the place you live. The first generation Ashoke and Ashima tried to follow it but not at the cost of their

traditions and customs. They still remained an Indian from within and wanted their child to follow them accordingly. This may have been an easy for Ashoke and Ashima but was not the same for Gogol, who belonged to America more than India. The first generation never understood that Gogol was no longer an Indian but an American by birth and his surroundings. We can understand the psychological state of Gogol who assumes himself as an American and not an India. I would like to quote a few lines from the text which reflects what Gogol thinks about his nationality.

“Teleologically speaking, ABCDs are unable to answer the question ‘Where are you from?’” the sociologist on the panel declares. Gogol has never heard the term ABCD. He eventually gathers that it stands for “American-born confused deshi.” In other words, him. He learns that the C could also stand for “conflicted.” He knows that deshi, a generic word for “countryman,” means “Indian,” knows that his parents and all other friends always refer to India simply as desh. But Gogol never thinks of India as desh. He thinks of it as America do, as India.”

It is quite evident from the second last line itself that Gogol never thought of India as his nation. He never tried to get in depth to his roots and never felt home on his trip to India. He followed his parent’s aspirations and wishes by visiting India because it was America which came to his mind when he thought of his nationality.

Ashoke leaves his country and sets for a journey in a land where he has no friends, no family and no acquaintances at all. He moves to a distant land but tries to uphold his values. Ashima tries to raise a family and build up her own world without distancing herself from her own customs and traditions. The immigrant couple tries to cope up with all the adverse circumstances. Leaving behind one’s family, friends and the land where one has been raised is by no means as easy as it seems. Settling in an unknown land is always a great hurdle for a first generation immigrant. But it does not even make life easy for the second generation to grow up in one environment and at the same time uphold values which is completely alien to them. The gap between two generations seems very evident. Ashoke on one hand has his own valid reasons and affinity for the name Gogol whereas Gogol himself never comes to terms with his name and never approves it. It is only by the fag end of the novel we can sense a bridging between the two generations. Gogol now understands the values and sentiments which has always been associated to his name.

In the novel we come across the complexities of marriage between Gogol and Moushumi. They eventually realize that they are not the right match for each other. Ever since his youth Gogol encounters a series of unsuccessful relationships in

the likes of Ruth, Maxine and Moushumi. Moushumi's being a Bengali proves not enough to sustain the relationship and eventually gets affected, leaving Gogol deserted. This event is embarrassing and shocking for Gogol, but it allows him to finally find an identity somewhere between the traditions of his parents and the culture of America. At the end Moushumi returns to Paris which she thinks is the only place she ever felt happy. Gogol returns to his mother's home and finds peace which he has been looking for all these years in the lax culture of America. He attains a certain sense of maturity and realizes that his parents are his true well-wishers.

Once home, Gogol discovers the book his father gave him of Nikolai Gogol's stories. He began to read it for the first time which is symbolical of his coming to terms with his name, with his identity. This brings a sense of satisfaction in his struggle to find himself, though his newly discovered identity is not distinct one or the other choice. Gogol has established a level footing somewhere between his family and the world where he lives, determining his identity in a place that live up to both parts of him.

Ramlal Agarwal in his review *The Namesake* by Jhumpa Lahiri sums up the immigrant experience, cultural clash and its assimilation in the following lines. "There are a large number of Indian novels in English that deal with the immigrant experience, the clash of cultures, and the conflicts of assimilation. Mostly these novels have an Indian setting and highlight the divisive nature of cultural differences. But, lately, the novels also take place in America, where Indians are a minuscule minority and the American culture holds for them a fatal attraction. Naturally, they struggle to assimilate it by going through love affairs, violence, and divorce. Jhumpa Lahiri writes about these social phenomena as necessary social rituals through which they must go though not as manifestations of lust and lasciviousness."

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