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Quest for Bengali roots in Jhumpa Lahiri's Novel the Namesake

Madhabi Dey

Research Scholar, Department of ICL, Assam University, Silchar, Cachar, Aaasm, India

Abstract

Jhumpa Lahiri, the author of 'The Namesake' was born in London to Indian parents in 1967. She later moved to United States to pursue her studies and lived there for a period of time. Although her knowledge of India is extensive, she has made limited trip to her parents' land. 'The Namesake' Lahiri's first novel was published in 2003. It deals with the theme of immigrant experience identities and displacement and ties and clashed between generations. The research paper aims to discuss and question the quest for root in the lives of characters Gogol Ganguli. Moreover, antities like culture, nationalities and belonging which are main concerns of the characters in the novel.

The study of 'The Namesake' is based on the observation of contemporary experience. It is a new work about recent times. The question of 'identity' or identities as the most tangible theme in 'The Namesake' is no doubt a question of the 'self'. Cultural factors are very important in the quest of identity and self especially for immigrants.

Roots, origin, family bonds, induce expatriate, immigrants, non-resident Indian to return again and again to the point from where they move away; this emotional and spiritual bond gives form to Jhumpa Lahiri's stories and about such a state of expatriate existence. Jhumpa Lahiri, as a fictional creator, occupies this privileged space in between two countries, two continents, two cultures and this multiplicity of perspectives, a truly multi-national existence and multi-cultural experience make her one of the foremost spoke persons of the multitude of minute yet consequential incidents that constitute contemporary life.

"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 foreigner Ashima believes is something that elicit the same curiosity from strangers, the some combination of pity and respect." - (The Namesake, 49-50)

This is the story of an Indian family who moves to America for better opportunities,

focusing mainly on the only son, Gogol Ganguli. Although the whole family struggles to conform to the American way of life, it is Gogol who experiences the most difficulty, starting with the problem of his name which is changed in teens. Jhumpa Lahiri does a wonderful job getting the reader into this character's head and feeling for him as he grows up in a culture entirely new to his parents and their attempts to keep the Indian culture true to their children. The novel highlights the confusion, the homesickness and loneliness of the first generation Indians in a foreign country. Lahiri has written the novel providing sensitivity to both the parents' generations and children's towards both Americans and Indians.

The novel is about the Ganguly family and their story of assimilation into the foreign land. Ashoke Ganguly came into United States like many "professional Indians" and who "in the waves of the early sixties" went to United States, as part of the brain drain. Ashoke Ganguly too leaves his homeland and comes to America in pursuit of higher studies to do research in the field of fibre optics with a prospect of settling down "with security and respect". Ashoke Ganguly then after two years of settling down in the USA came back to home and married a nineteen years old girl Ashima and took her to Boston so far away from her native land. Ashima missed her homeland and finds it difficult to call Boston her home but when they have given birth to a son and a daughter there seemed to have a change in the life style. And as second generations' of immigrants the children gets themselves accustomed with life and culture of States rather than the ones their parents adheres. Throughout the novel we get to see the trauma of being torn between two worlds through the character of the protagonist Gogol Ganguly who basically is not proud of his origins. He tries harder to escape his root to the Bengali culture but in the end we get to see how beautifully portrays the changes in the minds of Gogol who eventually develops sensitivity towards his family, culture and mostly with his name.

Jhumpa Lahiri, the author of 'The Namesake' was born in London to Indian parents in 1967. She later moved to the United States to pursue her studies and lived there for a period of time. Although her knowledge of India is extensive, she has made limited trip to her parents' land. She travelled to India in her childhood as a tourist. She has never lived there. As a writer, her first short book was Interpreter of Maladies, a collection of short stories, the themes of which are connected with Indian-American identities and diasporas. 'The Namesake' Lahiri's first novel was published in 2003. It deals with the themes of immigrant experience identities and displacement and ties and clashes between the generations. Even her later work 'Unaccustomed Earth' which was published in 2008 is about immigration and its real and imaginary consequences for its characters.

This thesis aims to discuss and question the *quest for root* in the lives of characters in 'The Namesake' and especially its main character Gogol Ganguli. Moreover, identities like culture, nationalities and belonging which are main concerns of the characters in the novel.

The study of 'Namesake' is based on observation of contemporary experience. The

Namesake is a new work about recent times. The third person omniscient narrator with her present tense narration lets the reader accompany Gogol for period of three decades - from the late 1900's into the new millennium.

The question of *identity or identities* as the most tangible theme in 'The Namesake' is no doubt a question of the *'self'*. Cultural factors are very important in the quest of identity and self, especially for immigrants. As 'Jola Skulj' notes in her 'Comparative Literature and Cultural Identity' "*The problem of cultural identity involves the question of the 'self and of 'culture'. In other words, this means reflecting on the essence of culture itself and implication that there is a reasonable motive of self-questioning.*"

The existing of the self-inevitable of an opposing factor known as the "*other*", which also strengthens the comprehensibility of the self or as Michael Bakhtin says: *'The self is the gift of other'*. [qtd in Skulj 3-5] As Skulj writes "*No cultural identity can be identified or analyzed only on its national ground 'Otherness' is irrevocably, cultural reality. The other does not necessarily endanger its selfness its principles of identity'*". Regarding this, the Indian immigrants involved in 'The Namesake' have an internal dialogue and/or opposition between their ethnic culture and the culture of the country in which they abide: American for the children of the immigrants who were born in America, the site of the confusion in their house-hold or parental home in America where the Indian culture and customs still exist even if in a diluted form.

It is here that the protagonist and the other characters in 'The Namesake' are in the search of their identities and their roots, that is in-betweenness of cultures: one as the *'self'* and other as the *'other'*.

The smooth development or construction of the story does not easily let the reader realise that the main focus of the story will later be on Gogol and his namesake (the renowned Russian writer). It brings with Ashima and her pregnancy soon after her arrival in America. Ashima was missing her family members a lot. She took a *'Desh'* that she brought to read on her plane ride to Boston and still cannot bring herself to throw away. The printed pages of Bengali type, slightly rough to touch are a perpetual comfort to her. She has read each of the short stories and poems and articles a dozen times. In each and every step in America Ashima was missing her homeland. In this particular part of the story Lahiri has shown her keen inclination towards her Bengali root. There always pet names (*daknam*) to tide one over a practice of Bengali nomenclature grants to every single persons, two names. In Bengali the word for pet name is *'daknam'* meaning literally the name by which one is called by friends, family and other intimates at home and in other private unguarded moments. Every pet name is paired with a "*goodname*", a *'bhalonam'* for identification in the outside world. In case of Ashima's son Ashoke gave a pet name *'Gogol'*. Gogol Ganguli was registered in the hospital's file.

Being aware that his new-born son is an American, Ashoke decides to wait for the name to come from India. In this way he follows the Bengali tradition that the oldest in the family chooses the name of the new-born, the family extends from Boston to

Calcutta. Also according to their inside home rule which is to create a private India in the United States. Ashoke chooses a pet name 'Gogol' - a reminder of his savior in his big accident for their son while waiting for the good name to come in a letter from the grandmother in India.

The delivery of the letter never happens. Meanwhile the grandmother dies and the good name is never revealed. The juxtaposition of the cultures leads to the acceptance of the pet name as the good name, which remains with Gogol and causes the proceeding identity-related problems for Gogol and subsequently for the family. Later he gives the name Nikhil to his son by which he doubles his son's identity into a trans cultural identity that he himself has.

At the beginning of her *"Gogol's Namesake : Identity and Relationships in Jhumpa Lahiri's The Namesake"*, Judith Caesar explores the ties of 'The Namesake' and Nikolai V. Gogol and his short story *"The Overcoat"*. Doing this, she thinks gives important clues to understand the confusion of 'The Namesake's main character Gogol. Describing the problems of the first generation Asian-Americans and connecting them with Gogol's 'The Overcoat' she writes that for them the awareness of two culture's is a kind of curse which does not let them understand who they really are:

"Read with an understanding of the significance of the Gogol story, however, the novel is much more clearly an elucidation of the causes and meaning of that confusion, which comes not only from having a multiple cultural identity, but from some of the ways in which people in modern American society tend to view identity."

Akaky Akakyevitch, the protagonist of *"The Overcoat"* is a who copies other people's writing while he is unable or unwilling to write any thing of his own. When he buys a new overcoat, he becomes another person: he becomes his overcoat. Wearing his new overcoat, he goes to a party after which the overcoat is stolen on his way home. When Akaky catches a cold and dies. As Caesar suggests it is a story about the undesirability of having a fixed identity and *"the ending is deliberately ambiguous so as not to impose a meaning, an identity, on the story itself (105).*

Just as Akaky identities in writing numerous copies from other people or passively becomes the Overcoat he is wearing, Gogol Ganguli in *"The Namesake "* takes several identities in the course of the novel via his relationships and his name which one by one are rejected since none of them fit him properly. Caesaro writes that Gogol confuses his material and social selves for he is (his essential self) and

"because these outer selves are sequential rather than simultaneous, they provide him with no sense of continuity\ which is part of their function on the lives of more contented and secure people". (106)

Eventually, he changes his name to Nikhil officially at the court, a change which makes him a different person but also cuts him off from his cultural past, and his family.

There is no past to be identified by the new name. Still, he is called Gogol by his own family and people who know him from the past. He feels like an actor:

"At times he feels as he's cast himself in a play; acting the part of twins, indistinguishable to the naked eye yet fundamentally different" (The Namesake 105).

But it is after changing his name that he is disturbed by the knowledge of his namesake revealed to him only day by his father in the car. It is hard to imply how this knowledge affects Gogol but certainly he is not impervious to the news. He can't conceal his being ostensibly offended by being told about this after so many years but it is a sudden shock for him to contemplate more around his name and his affections for his family and especially for his father. This is what shows itself more clearly toward the end of the novel and particularly after his father's death. In fact the scene of the novel is when Gogol is sitting at his parents' home reading *"The Overcoat"* for the first time since he was given the book when he was fourteen. It was gift from his father with his handwriting on the front end paper. *"For Gogol Ganguli"* and then toward the upper right hand corner of the page. *"The man who gave you his name, from the man who gave you your name"*. (The Namesake 288) That is a reminder of the day his father gave him this book quoting Dostoyevsky's saying that *"We all came out of Gogol's Coat", and in the answer to Gogol who had asked him about the meaning of that phrase he had said, "It will make sense to you one day"* (The Namesake 78).

With an interview with Houghton Mifflin Company Lahiri admits that her growing up as a child of immigrants resembles that of her protagonist, Gogol in the novel. In the interview she says: In a sense, very little. The question of identity is always a difficult one, but especially so for those who are culturally displaced, as immigrants are, or those who grow up in two worlds simultaneously, as in the case for their children. The older I get, the more I am aware that I have somehow inherited a sense of exile from my parents, even though in many ways I am so much more American than they are. I think that for immigrants the challenges of exile, the loneliness, the constant sense of alienation, the knowledge of and longing for a lost world are more explicit and distressing than for their children. On the other hand, the problem for the children of immigrants - those with ties to their country of origin - is that they feel neither one thing nor the other. This has been my experience, in any case. For example, I never know how to answer the question *"Where are you from?"* If I say I'm from Rhode Island, people are seldom surprised. Alternatively, if I say I'm from India, a place where I was not born and have never lived, this is also inaccurate.

According to Lahiri everything is in a name. She herself also had two other names apart from her good name and eventually her pet name has become her good name as in the school Jhumpa was lot easier to pronounce than Nilanjana. Talking about the diasporic crisis of dual or hybrid identity Lahiri 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 or a good name distinction for a long time. Lahiri thinks that it is almost too perfect as a metaphor for the experience of growing up as the child of immigrants having divided identities and loyalties etc."

The Ganguli's wanted to raise their children both Gogol and Sonia with their ancestral cultures and values. But Gogol and Sonia mostly identify themselves with the cultures and traditions of the place they were born in and they failed to reconcile their ethnic background with American culture.

"Ashoke and Ashima created their own circle of immigrants Bengalis and they all came from Calcutta and for this reason only they are friends. The husbands are teachers, researchers, doctors, engineers. The wives homesick and bewildered turn to Ashima for recipes and advise". (The Namesake 22).

Bengali families celebrate these different customs and ceremonies like marriages, death, childbirth, festivals etc. together. They celebrate these as per Bengali customs, wearing their best traditional attire, thus trying to preserve their culture in a new land. Bengali rituals are practiced by the family like Annaprasana festival where Gogol was first introduced to eating rice as solid food after his birth. They follow the ritual of shaving head on the death of a parent along with marriage rituals and celebration of Durga Puja and other Bengali festivals. They converse in Bengali with in the house and with people of the native land. First generation immigrants created their own mini India in the host land.

Lahiri in her novel also shows how these immigrants are making efforts to preserve their 'home culture' in their 'new homes'. The first generation immigrants train their children in Bengali language, literature and history at home and through special Bengali classes and expose them in their own family language, religious customs, rites, beliefs, food tastes, habit and mannerisms. They also groom them to cope with the way of life in America Lahiri depicts that the immigrants in their enthusiasm to stick their own cultural belief and customs, gradually take in the cultural way of the host country too.

Ashima teaches Gogol to memorise a four line poem by Tagore, names of deities at the same time when she goes to sleep in the afternoon she switches the television to channel-2 and tells Gogol to watch 'sesame street' and the electronic company "in order to keep up with the English he uses at nursery school". (The Namesake, 54)

Bengali rituals and components of Bengali life are transferred by the parents to the children. They are more concerned about preserving their ethnicity. Ashima and Ashoke wanted their children understand the significance of the roots. Gogol was sent to learn Bengali lessons and every year they tried to visit Calcutta. But for the children it was not that easy to assimilate.

For the sake of Gogol and Sonia they celebrate, with progressively increasing fanfare, the birth of Christ, an event the children look towards too far more

than worship of Durga and Saraswati. It can't compare to Christmas, when they hang stoking on the fire place mantel and set out cookies and milk for Santa Claus. (The Namesake, 64)

Gogol Ganguli struggled more to accept the *dual identity*. He preferred to lead life as an American than a Bengali immigrant. From a very young age he has seen discrepancy in attitudes of the natives towards his parents. Neighbour kids making fun with the family title hanged in the house gate. People smile secretively at his parent's accent.

Though it his last name, too, something tells Gogol that the discrimination is intended for his parents more than Sonia and him. For by now he is aware, in stores, of cashiers smirking at his parents' accents, and of salesman who prefer to direct their conversation to Gogol, as though his parents were either incompetent or deaf.

Gogol and Sonia constantly challenge their native identity. They prefer turkey, pizzas and hamburgers over Bengali syrupy dishes their mother cooks. They dislike visiting Calcutta on vacations. They listened to American rock music over Bengali classical and showed less interest in attending Bengali parties.

Gogol does not have lasting relationships with girls. This is a typical American style of transitory relationships. But for Gogol they are not merely relationships. These relationships together with changing his name from Gogol to Nikhil were the beginning of a project in search of a self and an investment in constructing a new identity for him. But the inconsistency of these relationships deprives him of having a sense of continuity and thus a fixed and established self and identity. He passively seeks for a self in every emotional relationship. By the beginning and end of each relationship he is in and out of a new self. Each relationship which is part of his social self becomes a new overcoat for him and accordingly he mistakes it for his material self and consequently for his essential self.

The distorted relationship that the characters has gone through also gives us the sense of unhomeliness. We can see how the relationships between husband-wife, parents-children, and all other kinds of relationship get affected by the nature of the situation the characters under go. Gogol has less fondness for his family especially for his parents. He and Sonia both decided to live away from the parents which is very rare in a Bengali family.

The advent of his relationship with Mousumi is a passive response to his mother's will which is fortified by his own inclination to his past and family roots especially after his father's death. Beginning his relationship with Mousumi, Gogol is a spectator again. He enters Mousumi's life whom he is ready to adopt another identity and self for himself through a constructed personality that he sees in Mousumi especially her experience of living in France:

"Here Mousumi had reinvented herself, without misgivings, without guilt. He admires her... He realizes that this is what their parents had done in America. What he, in all likelihood, will never do ". (The Namesake, 233)

Mousumi is the only woman among Gogol's relationships who recognizes him by both of his names. Mousumi reveals his previous to her friends in a party. This offends him and it is simultaneous with the decline in their relationship. Even when she has an affair with her ex-boyfriend while she is still married to Gogol, she refers to Gogol only as "*her husband*". It is in this relationship that Gogol loses the effect of his name on himself to the verge of being indifferent and nameless:

"His time with her seems like a permanent part of him that no longer has any relevance, or currency. As if that time were a name he'd ceased to use" (The Namesake, 284).

Since he had changed his name to Nikhil, people who knew him by the new name called "*Nick*". *Knowing about his name- change, one of the people in the party pronounces Nikolai Gogol as Nick-oli-Gogol* (The Namesake, 244).

Changing the name has not relieved him of the Russian writer. He wishes that his name was never revealed to anybody and he could simply be referred to by pronouns (The Namesake, 245).

The main and primary reason for *Ashima's displacement in the American society is the distinction between two very different cultures: America and India*. Culturally, they have crucial differences. While women and men seem to be equally independent in America, there are certain cultural peculiarities in the Indian perspective as to the role of the sexes in society. Ashima is the most spiritual and Indian figure of the family. Where there is a reminder of India and Bengali customs, Ashima is at the heart of the matter. She establishes numerous parties with the invited Indian families in America- the circle of which grow larger each year- to maintain the Indian rather Bengali customs and create a surrogate India in America.

In "*The Namesake*", after spending all her married life in the USA, even after giving birth to her two children and bringing them up there, Ashima, the housewife retains completely Indian sentiments in such a way that the USA never feels like her home. With grown-up children living away from home, she continued to revisit Calcutta in nostalgia, rereading her long-dead parents' letters from Calcutta, her home. At forty-eight, she is still unable to operate a bank account all by herself and when she has cheques to deposit she hands them over to her husband. Ashoke and "*he deposits them for her at the bank into their account*" (The Namesake,

When her husband returns home every third weekend, he "does the things she still doesn't know how to do. He pays all the bills and rakes the leaves on the lawn, and puts gas from the self-service station into her car." (The Namesake, 163)

But in the situation the same for second generation members of the diaspora? Since she herself is a representative of this group of expatriate Indians, Jhumpa Lahiri knows the meaning of this type of life very well and therefore, she distinguishes between the experiences of different generations of the diaspora emphatically. As Brati Biswas had

quoted from her internet- interview, Lahiri discusses her own experience and points out its significance in a larger context of the rest of such expatriate Indians. She says:

"In fact, it is still very hard to think of myself as an American. For immigrants the challenges of exile, the loneliness, the constant sense of alienation, the knowledge of and longing for a lost world, are more explicit and distressing than for their children. On the other hand, the problem for the children of immigrants, those with strong ties to their country of origin, is that they feel neither one thing nor the other. The feeling that there was no single place to which I fully belonged bothered me growing up. It bothers me less now." (187-8)

This seems to be the story of not only Jhumpa Lahiri's life, but also of Gogol alias Nikhil Ganguly in 'The Namesake'. In contrast to both Ashoke and Ashima, the Indian born couple, Gogol is born in the USA and as a US citizen by birth, he feels a lot more confident about his position in his society than his parents would ever be, except possibly for the problem about the unusual appearance of his own name. Therefore, in his childhood, Ashoke and Ashima, eager to ensure that their son would imbibe and retain some essence of their Indian as well as Bengali background.

Gogol Ganguli's choice of this American way of life over the Indian and the Bengali had appeared to be quite natural for the greater part of the novel, at least to him. It is only after his marriage with Mousumi fails and his father dies that Gogol returns home dutifully to take care of his mother regularly as much as possible. It is in these changed circumstances where traditional Indian concepts of filial duty and responsibility are reasserted as values that Gogol understands his true position in the world. Along with the legacy left by his father, he finds a new love to cherish for the motherland far away. Not because the American had rejected Gogol (because they had accepted him as an American most of the time clearly), nor because he could not abide the American way of life but because he feels that now since Ashima, a widow, is to spend half the year in Calcutta and half in the States after selling off the house, he will find his home occupied by strangers henceforth, the new buyers of their house. Now that one peripatetic Gogol Ganguli loses the only fixed point, his 'home' containing his roots, he is able to understand the value of 'homeland'.

He wonders how his parents had done it, leaving their respective families behind, seeing them so seldom, dwelling unconnected in a perpetual state of expectation of longing. All those trips to Calcutta he'd once resented - how could they have been enough? Gogol knows now that his parents had lived their lives in America in spite of what was missing, with a stamina he fears he does not possess himself. (The Namesake, 281)

The realization of his inadequacy, the inability to be sustained by memories of a 'home land' to go on struggling to survive abroad, are skills that Gogol seeks because he feels that in the absence of a little India in the form of his home containing Ashima, he will not feel at home in the country where he was born. Now he understands the nature of the bond

that compelled his parents to make annual pilgrimages to the mother land.

He had spent years maintaining distance from his origins, his parents, in bridging that distance as best they could. And yet, for all his aloofness... he has always hovered close to this quiet, ordinary town that had remained, for his mother and father, stubbornly exotic... for most of adult life... he has never been more than a four-hour train ride away. And there was nothing, apart from his family, to draw him home, to make this train journey again and again. (The Namesake, 281)

Roots, origin, family bonds, induce expatriate, immigrant non-resident Indians to return again and again to the point from where they move away. This emotional and spiritual bond gives form to Jhumpa Lahiri's stories and about such a state of expatriate existence. Jhumpa Lahiri, as a fictional creator, occupies this privileged space in between two countries, two continents, two cultures and this multiplicity of perspectives, a truly multi-national existence and multi-cultural experience makes her one of the foremost spoke persons of the multitude of minute yet consequential incidents that constitute contemporary life.

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